

## Charting the Crimean War: Contexts, Nationhood, Afterlives

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The Crimean War (1853–56) most often comes into view via a patchwork of mythologies and controversies: The Charge of the Light Brigade, Mary Seacole, the Lady with the Lamp, British ‘blunder’ and ‘stiff upper lip’, French ‘foppery’, and Russian ‘bears’. Almost equidistant chronologically between Waterloo (1815) and Mons (1914), the Crimean War is a pivotal moment in the history of modern warfare seen as both the last of the old wars and the first of the new. Orlando Figes describes it as ‘the first “total war”’, a conflict which killed an estimated three-quarters of a million combatants and an inestimable number of civilians, and inaugurated new forms of weaponry, tactics, communication, war reporting, military medicine, and new attitudes towards soldiers.<sup>1</sup>

A conference, organized by the National Army Museum and the University of Leicester in 2013, sought to look beyond the fragmentary British mythologies of the Crimean War, interrogating their stubborn persistence and considering competing cultural narratives of the other nations involved.<sup>2</sup> This issue of *19* builds on that event, examining the conflict’s wide-ranging significance, placing it in the context of earlier and later nineteenth-century warfare, and considering its varied cultural afterlives. The collection opens with a range of perspectives on nationhood, looking at how perceptions and mythologies of this war vary between Britain, France, and Russia. It then charts imaginative engagements with the conflict — in literature, history, visual art, and the media — from the nineteenth century to the present.

Today, the Crimea is almost as much in the spotlight as it was 160 years ago. To the wider world it appeared inconceivable that in 2014 any power should seek to change international boundaries in Europe by force, as Russia had done with its seizure of the Crimean peninsula from the Ukraine. American Secretary of State John Kerry, in condemning Russian actions, remarked that ‘it’s really 19th century behavior in the 21st century’, words which (to historians of the period, at least) could be

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<sup>1</sup> Orlando Figes, *Crimea: The Last Crusade* (London: Penguin, 2010), p. xix.

<sup>2</sup> We are grateful to NAM for generous support with the conference and collection, including their permission for contributors to use visual material from their rich Crimean War collection.

read as inadvertent acknowledgement of the continuing significance of the Crimea to the Russians, as great today as it was in 1854 and 1855, when they had so doggedly defended it against the British and French.<sup>3</sup>

Conquered in 1783, the Crimea had given the Russia of Catherine the Great access to the Black Sea and the potential for it to project naval power on a worldwide basis, assuming that Russia could ultimately possess itself of the straits at Constantinople from the Turks and sail its fleet into the Mediterranean. This, however, remained an unwelcome prospect for the western powers, and when the Russians went to war with the Turkish Empire in 1853 and invaded the Danubian provinces, apparently in an attempt to realize the dream of reaching Constantinople, Britain and France went to war with Russia in support of the Turks. The strategy of the British and French ultimately resolved itself into mounting a smash-and-grab grand raid on the Russian Crimean naval base at Sebastopol. The facilities at the base would be destroyed and the Russian Black Sea fleet eliminated. Because the Crimea was at the periphery of the Russian Empire and communication with its heartlands was difficult, this in theory was a sensible strategy: it constituted the classic indirect approach that would catch the Russian bear and its ostensibly intimidating 850,000-strong army off balance. Unfortunately for Britain and France, however, this was not how things turned out. The allies landed safely enough in the Crimea, won the Battle of the Alma (20 September 1854) and invested Sebastopol. But they did not seize the opportunity to make a quick assault and the Russians launched counter-offensives leading in quick succession to the battles of Balaklava (25 October) and Inkerman (5 November). Although these battles failed in the Russian objective of driving their enemies into the sea, they were sufficient to act as spoilers, meaning an attack could not be made on Sebastopol before the onset of the Crimean winter. A prolonged campaign ensued for which the British army, in particular, was ill-prepared. Lurid stories appeared in the press and in soldiers' letters home of the shortcomings of official provision. Critics seized on evidence of medical negligence and a catastrophic failure of supply. The government of Lord Aberdeen fell. While the difficulties of fighting a war in the remote Crimea were as bad if not worse for the Russians, as far as many Britons were concerned the point of comparison was the French army, which (at the outset) appeared to have the systems in place that the British army lacked. Numerous official inquiries were set up to discover where fault lay and to promote remedies. Yet, while it was acceptable to castigate the authorities responsible for managing the war — this was part of the game of politics, after all — it became

<sup>3</sup> Jaime Fuller, 'Kerry says "Russia is going to lose" if Putin's troops continue to advance in Ukraine', *Washington Post*, 2 March 2014 <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/wp/2014/03/02/kerry-says-russia-is-going-to-lose-if-putins-troops-continue-to-advance-in-ukraine/>> [accessed 31 March 2015].

almost de rigueur among commentators to extol the ordinary soldiery, who became noble objects of compassion, both heroic and virtuous. Aspects of this phenomenon will emerge in the articles that follow.

When Sebastopol did eventually fall (8 September 1855), there was a sense of anticlimax. The war petered out with the Russians brought to the negotiating table by the threat of Austrian intervention. For Russia the war had been a humiliating experience even if a large measure of pride was salvaged by the epic resistance of nearly a year at Sebastopol. The Emperor Napoleon III of France, meanwhile, wanted peace for domestic reasons: the French war machine was beginning to feel the strain. This left Britain which, exhibiting the usual characteristics of ‘a liberal state at war’, had only by 1856 finally mobilized its vast resources.<sup>4</sup> It had an immense naval armament ready to set sail to the Baltic, but the arrival of peace frustrated Britain’s hopes of striking a blow at the Russian capital, St Petersburg. This merely reinforced a pervading impression in Britain (which has persisted ever since) of the Crimean War as an unsatisfying experience, one that could scarcely be recognized as a victory. Be that as it may, the articles that follow serve to show just how truly multifaceted the afterlife of the Crimean War has proved to be.

In the first of a series of historical assessments of medical treatment during the war, Mike Hinton re-evaluates medical reporting, the nature of the problems affecting the health of the British army, and the maligned figure of Dr John Hall. He shows how statistical analysis during the war was flawed and argues that there was a correlation between improved living standards at the front and lower mortality rates at Scutari. By highlighting the importance of improvements in the Crimea in 1855, Hinton complicates the prevailing view that Florence Nightingale and the Royal Sanitary Commission alone relieved the pressures faced by British military hospitals in Turkey.

The Russian army also faced severe medical insufficiencies as Yulia Naumova’s work details. She argues that the Russian medical service, which had developed along European lines, broke down in the Crimea owing to geographical challenges, the Russian Commissariat’s preoccupation with Russian forces bordering Poland, Prussia, and Austria, and the Russian commander-in-chief’s failure to prepare adequately for the supply issues.

Continuing to explore the supply systems governing rival nations, Anthony Dawson’s article provides new insight into the French army during the war and re-examines the promotion of French logistical superiority by British reformers. Drawing upon differences in newspaper reporting between the two nations and contemporary French assessments of its

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<sup>4</sup> See Olive Anderson’s influential study *A Liberal State at War: English Politics and Economics during the Crimean War* (London: Macmillan, 1967).

army, Dawson shows the problems with overly positive British projections of the French system.

Turning to broader cultural representations of the war, Rachel Bates explores how royal interventions supported a media campaign to present the monarchy as the ultimate champion and carer for the British soldier. Beyond the charged sentiment expressed in relation to the ordinary soldier, via a ‘leaked’ royal letter in the press and unifying images of the Queen distributing Crimean Medals to the war wounded, Bates points to the Crown’s hidden struggle to assert its authority over the army and therefore to preserve its privileges.

Also reflecting on the charged media presence of the war-broken soldier, Tai-Chun Ho reveals the significance of Thomas Campbell’s poem ‘The Soldier’s Dream’ (1804), which was resurrected in *Punch* and other media to highlight ethical issues pertaining to the welfare of the soldier and his family. Ho argues that these representations reconfigured Campbell’s ‘weary’ soldier to ease anxiety about the soldier’s aftercare, but that Tennyson’s ‘Maud’, when read as an ironic rewriting of Campbell’s poem, challenged unifying constructs of the soldier.

Lara Kriegel’s article builds upon patriotic constructs of the British soldier by exploring public fascination with the so-called ‘Balaklava Bugle’ and rival claims to having sounded the fateful action of the Charge of the Light Brigade. Situating this relic in the realm of family, military, and national lore, and drawing upon the secularization of the sacred, Kriegel shows how the bugle has helped to carve out a singular celebrity for the brigade’s survivors. She considers the instrument’s economic value and more abstract investments in its battlefield presence.

Continuing the themes of Victorian celebrity, the commercial and sacred, and the British soldier’s welfare, Trev Broughton looks at the renown of Captain Hedley Vicars as the archetypal Christian soldier. Focusing on the mediating effects of Catherine Marsh’s best-selling biography, *Memorials of Captain Hedley Vicars*, she explores its commemorative features, and situates Marsh’s projection of Vicars’s evangelism alongside other attempts to improve the image of the army. Broughton also argues that via Marsh’s mediations, which distance Vicars from aggressive combat, he emerges as a complexly gendered figure.

Finally, the contradictions of the war and its rhetoric are summed up in Trudi Tate’s article on mid-Victorian representations of the fall of Sebastopol. Using newspaper reports and the work of artists and photographers, Tate explores ambivalent feeling in contemporary responses to the longed-for capture of the Russian naval town, showing how the destruction of the town was presented as both a sublime event and as a troubling, desolate affair.

A. L. Berridge’s Afterword also reflects on the dramatic appeal of the fall of Sebastopol, the differing emphases placed upon the event in the

British and Russian national psyche, and its far-reaching implications for recent events in the Crimea. Berridge draws upon a variety of sources to explore numerous legacies of the conflict: its fictional treatments and publishing trends, its difficult reputation offset against the emergence of more modest heroes of war, and the role of public memorials in Britain and in the Crimea. Her work draws together many of the themes of this issue, surrounding the role of myth, cultural perception and mediation, national rivalries and contested claims, and public investment in the British soldier.