

THE RESULTS OF THE CRIMEAN WAR

Robert Pearce asks whether Britain benefited from the 1853-56 contest.

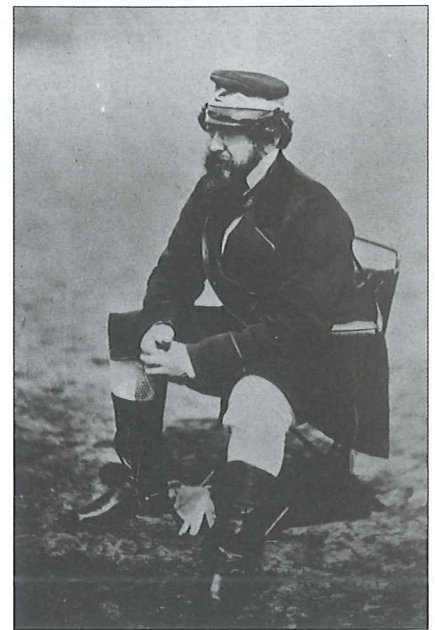
According to Sellar and Yeatman, in 1066 *And All That*, the Crimean War, as well as being caused by a number of causes, was 'exceptionally inevitable'. The muddled thinking here nicely matches the muddle that was the war – though the first was humorous, the second horrendous. In fact, the war should never have happened. No one wanted it or knew exactly what it was about. In considering its results therefore, although we should ask the obvious question – what were Britain's aims in entering the war and how far were they achieved? – a more fruitful area of study focuses on its unsought effects, its by-products, in terms of journalism, political change, medicine and army reforms.

War Aims and Results

The Crimean war, one of the bloodiest and most mismanaged contests of the 19th century, was, ostensibly, a holy war. The conflict began with a dispute over the 'Holy Christian Places' in the Ottoman province of Palestine. In 1852 France had won special rights for the Roman Catholics,

including control of the keys to churches in Bethlehem and Jerusalem, much to the dismay of Greek Orthodox monks. The Russian Tsar then made demands of the Muslim Sultan on behalf of the Orthodox Church. That this quarrel was not the real cause of the war is shown by the way that, once the fighting had started, the issue ceased to be of real significance – so that many textbooks fail even to mention that, in the 1856 Treaty of Paris, the rights and privileges of the Christians in the Ottoman Empire were to be guaranteed by the Sultan.

The real cause of the war was a show of strength between Napoleon III of France and Nicholas I of Russia. Each wanted to dominate the weak Ottoman Empire, and each was flexing his muscles. But they wanted prestige not war. What produced war was the reaction of the Turks to their posturing. When the Tsar invaded the Danubian Provinces of Moldavia and Wallachia, it was widely assumed that the Sultan would bend to this pressure. When, instead, he responded with a declaration of war on 23 October 1853, everyone was taken by surprise. Yet still there was



Above: W.H. Russell, as photographed in the Crimea by Roger Fenton. A corporal of the Black Watch later said to him: 'You were the true soldier's friend, Mr Russell.'

no cause for undue alarm. Certainly the British Prime Minister had no wish to join a war.

Lord Aberdeen was said to hate war. He had seen it at first-hand during the Napoleonic Wars: at Leipzig he had seen 'wounded men unable to crawl, crying for water'. Yet it was hard to maintain peace when, in November 1853, the Russians sank most of the Turkish fleet at Sinope, an action branded a massacre in Britain. British and French fleets entered the Black Sea, putting pressure on the Russians to make concessions, and an Anglo-French ultimatum called on them to evacuate the Danubian provinces. Aberdeen wrote to his Foreign Secretary in February: 'I still say that war is not inevitable,' adding equivocally and perhaps frivolously, 'unless, indeed, we are determined to have it; which, for all I know, may be the case'. When the Russians did not

“ Insofar as Britain had entered the war for fear of the Russian ‘Bear’ taking over Constantinople and then menacing the Indian Empire, these fears were allayed ”



Above: Roger Fenton's photograph entitled 'Entente Cordiale'. He depicts the NCOs and men of the 4th Dragoon Guards as clearly well dressed and well fed. One of them is offering a glass of wine to a visiting French soldier: What do you think explains the slight fuzziness of the photo?

comply, Britain and France declared war in March 1854.

Neither the British army nor the British navy was ready, and it was still possible that real warfare could be avoided. After the declarations of war, the Russians left the disputed Danubian provinces, which were then occupied by neutral Austria. But instead of a peace being negotiated, the war assumed proportions no one had intended.

Given the imprecision of British war aims, it is difficult to see whether they were fulfilled. Certainly a Liberal MP insisted gloomily, after Russia had capitulated, that 'We are going to close a discreditable war by an inglorious peace'. Even so, Britain was on the winning side, and the Peace of Paris laid down conditions that the defeated Russians had to accept: Russia lost some land (so that Danubian provinces were removed from her control and Southern Bessarabia was restored to Turkey) and was forbidden to station battleships on the Black Sea. Insofar as Britain had entered the war for fear of the Russian 'Bear' taking over Constantinople and then menacing the Indian Empire, these fears were allayed. Yet Britain's interests were served only in the short term.

In the longer term there would be problems. Admittedly Russia had become more inward-looking, and its catastrophic defeat prompted Alexander II's emancipation of the serfs of 1861. Yet this effective diplomatic withdrawal destroyed the Concert of Europe, which had acted as a bulwark of the status quo. In 1848 Russia had lent its weight to suppressing uprisings in the Hapsburg Empire; but henceforth the Austrians, who had not stood by their traditional Russian ally, would have to fight their own battles. The Crimean War thus prepared the way for German unification; and the creation of an over-mighty Germany in the centre of Europe was not in Britain's interests. In addition, the Crimean conflict helped to preserve the Ottoman Empire – but how long could the 'Sick Man of Europe' survive, especially as the war had boosted nationalism in its provinces, so that it was internally sicker than ever? The Crimean war and its aftermath made everyone familiar with the 'Eastern Question', though no one knew how to answer it. Soon, in 1877, Russia and Turkey would go to war again, and by this time Russia had already repudiated the Black Sea

clauses. The Treaty of Paris was no more than a holding operation, and the Crimean War would take its place in the long sorry narrative that constitutes the origins of the First World War.

Would other results of the Crimean War be more long-lasting?

“The Treaty of Paris was no more than a holding operation, and the Crimean War would take its place in the long sorry narrative that constitutes the origins of the First World War”

The War

The British expected a short victorious war, and such a contest would probably have had few significant results at home. But little went according to plan. There were allied successes in the White Sea and Pacific theatres of war, and also in the Baltic, where even the Russian capital of St Petersburg was threatened. Ironclad ships proved far superior to the wooden Russian vessels. But the main war effort was centred on the Crimean peninsula.

It was confidently assumed that British forces would destroy the Russian naval base of Sebastopol within 12 weeks. After all, Britain and France had obvious technological advantages, including the latest artillery and the new percussion rifles with the accurate Minie bullet, while the Russians, though superior in numbers, had far inferior weapons, mainly smoothbore muskets. Yet in fact the siege of Sebastopol lasted for 12 months. There were three especially bloody battles in 1854 (Alma on 20 September; Balaclava on 25 October; and Inkerman on 5 November). All three were Russian defeats, but none was conclusive, and they revealed a good deal of allied incompetence, most famously during the Charge of the Light Brigade, part of the battle of

Balaclava. Unclear orders led to a near-suicidal cavalry charge against artillery. Only on 11 September 1855 was Sebastopol finally taken.

Yet if the Crimea saw military incompetence, it also witnessed administrative chaos. Once the winter set in after Inkerman, it was all too clear how incompetent British army organisation really was. The troops suffered due to the cold and inadequate clothing and equipment, and also from lack of food. Men died from dysentery, cholera, malaria and scurvy, and medicines were in short supply – and just a few miles away from warehouses stocked with provisions. Men who were themselves ill had to struggle for ten hours to fetch supplies. Not surprisingly, three out of every four British deaths in the Crimea were due to disease.

The Media

Before the Crimea, there were no British war reporters. Wars were the king's wars, not the people's. The government issued official statements, and these were used by the press, who had nothing else to go by. All that changed in the 1850s. There was now a growing literate middle class, and the telegraph, invented in 1842, could via its electromagnetic pulses provide them with news from the other side of the world within hours rather than weeks. All that was lacking were the reporters, a deficiency the editor of *The Times*, John Thadeus Delane, was determined to remedy.

The Times was the most important newspaper in Britain. Indeed with a circulation of over 40,000 it sold more copies than any other paper in the whole of Europe. Delane wanted to boost circulation. Hence in 1854, he asked the 34-year-old William Howard Russell to travel with the departing British expeditionary force and report on the approaching conflict with Russia.

Russell's bust in the crypt of St Paul's Cathedral reads: 'The first and greatest of war correspondents'. Yet in the Crimea he had no official standing. He was ignored by Field-Marshal Lord Raglan, whose suspicions that he was out to make trouble soon seemed justified. Immediately Russell filed scathing reports about the inadequate clothing, bedding and medical facilities of the British. Having had no previous experience of large-scale military operations, he did not realise that British troops had always suffered privations abroad. He



Above: Sebastopol in Flames, 1856. It had taken a year, rather than the expected three months, for the British and French to take the Russian naval base. Paintings like this were still popular, especially given the limitations of photographic techniques.

was almost incredulous that the miserable beggar who wandered the streets of London 'led the life of a prince compared with the British soldiers who were fighting for their country'. The army's aristocratic officers came in for sustained invective.

Russell's very lack of experience gave a freshness to his accounts, and he wrote some very effectively dramatic prose. He described the 93rd Highlanders as 'that thin red streak tipped with a line of steel' (soon transformed into 'the thin red line'). Readers at home lapped up his vivid description of the battle of Alma and, even more so, of the Charge of the Light Brigade. It was a 'hideous blunder', he wrote, but was redeemed by the gallantry and courage of the cavalry. Now, for the first time, comfortable British citizens could experience the vicarious thrills of battle. For them it was an armchair war: they could seethe with indignation at bungling errors but also glory in the heroism of British soldiers.

A *Punch* cartoon depicted a man reading Russell's despatch in *The Times* and then positively leaping about waving a poker in his enthusiasm, while his son was similarly excited and his wife and daughter were in tears. The poet laureate since 1850, Alfred Lord Tennyson, based

“ For them it was an armchair war: they could seethe with indignation at bungling errors but also glory in the heroism of British soldiers ”

his famous poem 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' on Russell's despatch. Here too was praise for the bravery of the British troops, while the military metre of the poem quickened the heartbeat of his readers. Tennyson captured the martial atmosphere brilliantly, transforming a disaster into an epic of heroism. The cavalry's glory would never fade, he insisted, and his readers should 'honour' the 'noble six hundred'. (How right he was to use poetic licence and have 600 not 664 riding into the 'valley of Death!') Nevertheless, he later denied that he had glorified the war, and certainly the poem contains lines – for instance 'Theirs not to reason why/Theirs but to do and die' and 'Some one had blundered' – that convey the misfortune and the stupidity

of this particular engagement and perhaps of war in general.

Russell was a brilliant journalist, and part of his skill lay in telling his readers what they wanted to hear. 'Our' soldiers were the salt of the earth. But not so the other combatants. He showed typical prejudices against non-Britons. He stereotyped the Russians, as might be expected: after all, they were the enemy. But he also gave very unappealing depictions of the Turks (cowardly and grubby), and he was loath to give much praise to the French – and at times his readers could be forgiven for forgetting that the French army was in the war at all.

The authorities deplored this upstart journalist. Prince Albert called Russell 'that miserable scribbler' and a former Secretary of the Army urged the army to lynch him. It was said that he was endangering the lives of the soldiers whose battles he was reporting. Henceforth governments would seek to exercise some measure of wartime censorship over the press. In the short term, Prince Albert wanted a corrective. He encouraged Roger Fenton, a fashionable society photographer, to go to the Crimea to provide a truthful record: the camera, unlike the correspondent, surely could not lie.

“How right he was to use poetic licence and have 600 not 664 riding into the ‘valley of Death!’”

Fenton’s first impression, on arrival in March 1855, was that ‘everything seems in much better order than *The Times* led me to believe’. He was given every possible help by the military authorities, and many of his photos showed the war effort at its best, as in ‘Entente Cordiale’ (see the illustration). He also refused to show the dead and wounded in the aftermath of battles, or any scene – e.g. Balaclava harbour – that might suggest British mismanagement. Clearly such self-censorship meant that the camera did lie.

Most of Fenton’s photos were portraits. It was difficult, given the state of photographic science, to produce anything else. He and other photographers at this time used ‘wet-plate solution’: a glass plate, sensitised with silver nitrate, had to be exposed through a camera lens for 20–30 seconds and then taken to a dark room – hence Fenton used a special mobile cart, in fact a wine merchant’s van. By these means, Fenton ‘froze’ moments of the past, so that there is a stillness about his photos, as people stared fixedly at the camera. In all, his photographs added a new dimension to reporting, but his work did not give the lie to Russell’s journalism. He had arrived too late to undo the effects of Russell’s reportage.

Political Changes

The war was popular at first and unleashed a wave of nationalism in Britain. Many agreed with Lord Clarendon: it was a ‘battle of civilization against barbarism’. There was clearly no need for a change of government. Nor did the financial cost of the war seem excessive. William Gladstone at the Exchequer had raised income tax in 1853 to almost 3 per cent on incomes over £100 a year; and now, the following year, to just under 4.5 per cent. The remaining costs came from an increased national debt. But after the events of 1854, as reported by Russell, the mood changed.

The Annual Register reported, at the start of 1855, that the war ‘engrossed the

attention of all classes to the exclusion of every other topic’ and that ‘public sympathy and indignation were raised to the utmost by the conviction that the soldiers of the finest army Great Britain had ever sent forth were ingloriously perishing of disease, overtaken and underfed, from the absence of the most ordinary foresight’. It was clear that the war was being mismanaged. The title of a radical pamphlet, *Whom Shall We Hang?*, came close to capturing the public’s mood of anger and frustration. Even Prince Albert was demanding changes:

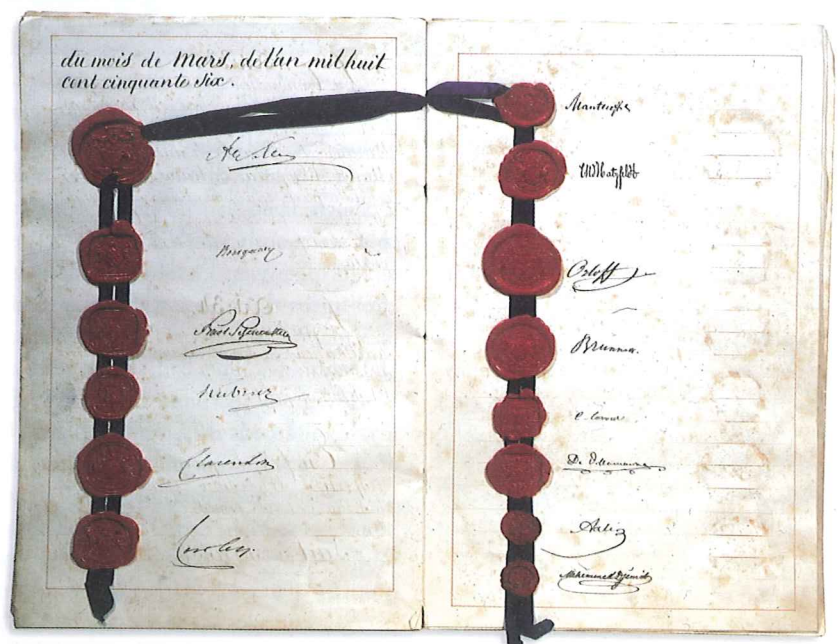
We have no generals trained and practised in the duties of that rank; no general staff or corps; no field commissariat; no field army department; no ambulance corps; no baggage train; no corps of drivers; no corps of artisans; no practice, or possibility of acquiring it, in the combined use of the three arms – cavalry, infantry, and artillery; no general qualified to handle more than one of those arms; and the artillery kept as distinct from the army as if it were a separate profession.’

Could the government of the day survive this barrage of criticism? It was a coalition, composed mainly Peelites and Whigs, and when formed in 1852 had not been expected to last for more than a few months. When in January 1855 an independent MP, John Arthur

Roebuck, called for the appointment of a select committee to inquire into conditions in the army, the Whig leader, Lord John Russell, soon resigned as Leader of the House of Commons, and it seemed that the whole cabinet might follow. Queen Victoria urged them to reconsider, but when Roebuck’s proposal for a select committee was passed by a huge majority, 305 to 148, this was considered a complete humiliation. The government might well have fallen had not the Prime Minister, Lord Aberdeen, taken responsibility and resigned. He had never been able to project himself to the political nation, and as a wartime leader he had been too equivocal.

There was no new general election, just a shifting of the various groups in the Commons. The key question was whether a new effective administration could be formed. It seemed not, as first the Conservative leader Derby and then Russell failed to muster sufficient

“The title of a radical pamphlet, *Whom Shall We Hang?*, came close to capturing the public’s mood of anger and frustration”



Above: The Treaty of Paris, signed on 30 March 1865, which formally ended the Crimean War.



Left: Mary Seacole (c. 1815-81). Racial prejudice in London denied her the official position of nurse, but she did sterling work in the Crimea. W.H. Russell praised her as 'a kind and successful physician' who 'doctors and cures all manner of men with extraordinary success'.

support. Finally the mantle fell on Lord Palmerston. But he was over 70, and according to Disraeli was 'very deaf, very blind, and with false teeth, which would fall out of his mouth when speaking, if he did not hesitate so in his talk': ginger beer rather than champagne. Could he survive? Everything depended on the war. The news that Sebastopol had fallen in September cemented his position, and he won the next election, in 1857. The political change wrought by the war was therefore muted.

Medicine

Russell's reports in May 1854 from the British hospital at Varna, where soldiers were ravaged by cholera, created a storm

of disapproval at home. No longer was it possible for the authorities to ignore the plight of ordinary soldiers, whom Wellington had once dismissed as expendable 'scum of the earth'. Further alarming reports followed in October. The casualties after the battle of Alma were being treated in a manner 'worthy only of the savages of Dahomey'. The British Secretary of War promptly recruited Florence Nightingale to remedy the situation. The story of her work is well known (and readers are recommended to consult R.E. Foster's article in the March 2010 edition of *History Review*). The 'Lady with the Lamp' was not quite the paragon of virtue of legend, and controversy rages about the precise nature of her achievement, but she certainly had a significantly beneficial effect on the

hospital at Scutari, in Turkey, and, in the longer term, she helped make nursing into a proper profession. Her achievement should not lead us to ignore the work of others, but fortunately the contribution of the Jamaican Mary Seacole, the sutler who sold goods to the soldiers as well as nursing them, is becoming widely recognised.

Historians now judge that the horrors of the Crimea marked a new beginning for military medicine. Governments could no longer neglect the health of servicemen, and henceforth there was systematic training for all medical officers, while hospitals were improved and much greater attention was paid to sanitation and personal cleanliness. The death rate in garrisons in Britain fell from 17.5 per thousand in 1857 to 9.3 in 1875 and 4.3 in 1899; and

there were similar falls in mortality rates in overseas stations. The findings from the Crimean war also gave a great boost to those who saw the desperate need to improve sanitation at home. Average life expectancy in Britain rose from 39 years in 1856 to 55 in 1910 – a highly significant increase that was due, above all, to better food and improved sanitation. Nightingale and others deserve credit for playing a part in this transformation. The sacrifices in the Crimea had not been entirely in vain.

Army Reforms

The Crimean conflict revealed the failures of the British military machine and of the officers in charge of the fiasco. The flaws were patently obvious. Above all, the army was amateurish. Commissions were purchased, few officers were actually trained for war, and notions of warfare were hopelessly out of date in an increasingly mechanised age. The men in charge were too old, too inexperienced – and some were eccentric, if not positively imbecilic. There was no special medical corps, and intelligence was poor – for example, the British knew very little of the topography or weather of the Crimea. Clearly major reforms were needed.

It was Gladstone's Secretary of State for War between 1868 and 1874, Edward Cardwell, who introduced key changes. In brief, these included shorter terms of enlistment; the creation of a reserve; an improvement in regimental administration; a new War Office to coordinate action; and the abolition of the purchase of commissions, promotion in future being on merit. These constituted significant improvements, the army becoming less amateurish and aristocratic, even though standards were still below those of some European armies, in particular Prussia.

Would some such reforms have occurred sooner or later even if the Crimean war had not? Perhaps. There was certainly an established trend towards democratisation, seen as far back as the Great Reform Act of 1832 if not earlier. In 1870, for instance, competitive examinations were introduced for most civil service positions. Yet the war had undoubtedly speeded up change for the army and to some extent in society as a whole. In fact it was the wave of criticism unleashed by the Crimean that had helped produce civil service reform.

“The American Nathaniel Hawthorne said the war gave Britain ‘a vast impulse towards democracy’ ”

Conclusion

The Crimean War lasted for almost 18 months and caused massive suffering (probably around 300,000 British and French casualties, alongside half a million Russian and 400,000 Turkish deaths). Was it therefore bound to produce major changes? Not necessarily, as it took place 3,000 miles from Britain; but the racy journalism of William Howard Russell, combined with the power of the telegraph and of photographs, meant that the British public knew more about this than any previous conflict.

War is a Pandora's Box: until it's opened, one never knows what will emerge. Some of the changes it wrought were predictable. Balaclava helmets became popular at home, for instance, and streets were named after the famous battles. Others were unpredictable, as with the effects of the war on British smoking habits. A Scot, Robert Peacock Gloag, saw Turks and Russians smoking not pipes but straws of paper containing tobacco; and soon he, and several others, were selling cigarettes in Britain. The war was also a boon for photography, giving an impetus to the improvement of techniques. Also journalism was changed, with newspapers becoming more professional and more populist. Weaponry too developed. William Armstrong, after the war, decided it was time that 'military engineering was brought up to the level of current engineering practice'. He switched from making cranes and bridges to producing large rifled cannon for the army and bigger guns for the navy. Joseph Whitworth made a similar transition. Henceforth warfare would be even more mechanised, and even more destructive.

Governments too had to react. Ministers had to take more account of what the people wanted, even in the realm of foreign policy, hitherto the area most immune from public opinion. The American Nathaniel Hawthorne said the war gave Britain 'a

vast impulse towards democracy'. There were even calls for efficient businessmen to take over from effete amateurish politicians, and to run the country properly. Certainly politicians recognised that public opinion mattered, and that it might have to be manipulated.

The war certainly had beneficial spin-offs, particularly in the medical field. But was it really worthwhile? The simple answer, in view of the suffering of so many, is No. This obvious fact was partially obscured by the heroism of the Charge of the Light Brigade and the self-sacrifice of Florence Nightingale, by the propaganda of war. The fact that most wars are futile – and that war should be joined only as a last resort, when all other means to settle problems have been exhausted – was a lesson that Britons had to relearn again and again.

Issues to Debate

- Did Britain fulfil her aims in going to war?
- How influential was the journalism of William Russell?
- What, if any, beneficial effects did the war have?

Further Reading

Joëlle Bolloch, *War Photography* (5 Continents, 2004)

Orlando Figes, *Crimea: The Last Crusade* (Allen Lane, 2010)

Ian Fletcher and Natalia Ishchenko, *The Crimean War: A Clash of Empires* (Spellmount, 2004)

M. Lerner, J. Peto and N. Monem, *War and Medicine* (Black Dog Publishing, 2008)

Clive Ponting, *The Crimean War* (Chatto & Windus, 2004)

Helen Rappaport, 'The Invitation that Never Came: Mary Seacole after the Crimea', *History Today*, February 2005, pp. 9-15

Rosemary Rees and Geoff Stewart, *The Experience of Warfare in Britain 1854-1929* (Heinemann, 2008)

Neil Stewart, *The Changing Nature of Warfare 1700-1945* (Hodder, 2001)

Robert Pearce is the editor of *History Review*.