To What Extent Might the Crimean War be Regarded as a Foretaste of Modern War?

https://www.e-ir.info/2007/12/03/to-what-extent-might-the-crimean-war-be-regarded-as-a-foretaste-of-modern-war/

OLIVER LEWIS, DEC 3 2007

'For whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap' took on a Dickensian invocation in *Hard Times*, Tennyson published his *Maud* as a portrayal of the widely-held belief that war could act as a rejuvenating force in corruptible industrial nations, and an alliance of Britain, France, the Ottoman Empire and Sardinia declared war against Russia in 1853; hastily preparing an expeditionary force for the Crimea. The *cause célèbre* of the war has been held as opportunistic Russian expansionism into the fragmenting territories of the Ottoman Empire, which antagonised Great Britain[1], causing anxiety toward continued British naval superiority.

Delving into diplomatic preliminaries of the Crimea, historians and strategists vary widely as to the importance attached to this and other causes of the Crimean War, indeed, as Schmitt asserts, "*the most diverse views are still held as to the responsibility for a war which is frequently considered to have been unnecessary* "[2]: Agitation between Catholic France and Orthodox Russia over guardianship of shared Holy sites; the strong personality of the British Cabinet's First Lord of the Admiralty, Sir James Graham; Napoleon III's devious strategy to augment personal and French national power in an imperial Bonapartist revival; Italian statesmen's belief that support for military action would make Italian unification viable; and, as a far more immediate cause, strong public sentiment in favour of war as a response to the ruthless Russian destruction of the Turkish naval squadron at Sinope in November 1853. Thus, as Gooch comments "*like World War I, 'the web of this vast tragedy was in fact woven from various and many-coloured strands'"**[3]**.

Whatever may have unleashed the 'dogs of war' onto a seemingly peaceable Europe, as Strachen establishes, "*diplomats, soldiers, politicians and economists have taken [the Crimean War] as a dividing line* "[4] in the application of warfare. The Crimea appears as an obstinate *mélange* of old and new, at once continuing the traditional warfare of Wellingtonian and Frederickian campaigns but blending with it "*an array of technological novelties*" into a grotesque and highly ambiguous type of warfare. With outmoded cavalry charges, Enfield rifles,

trenches and blind artillery bombardment, the Crimean War is the delineation of modern warfare, a foretaste. 'The first modern war' it is not. But to its participants the Crimean War gave partial knowledge of the future shape of warfare, it presaged the barbaric experience of troops in the First World War and anticipated the scale of casualties caused by deadly artillery fire.

Military commanders in the Crimea, and their political masters at home, are popularly heralded as ineffectual, incompetent, unfit for field command and wildly out-of-touch with the implications of new military technologies. In many ways they were, just as for decades general officers and the Earl Haig were held in widespread disregard for their part in the First World War. Nevertheless, poor leadership need not detract from the extent to which the Crimean War was a foretaste of modern warfare; below-par commanders are a staple of every armed force since time immemorial. However, the antiquated and disjointed decision-making structure of the British Army during the Crimean War harked back to Napoleonic-era organisation and was wholly unsuitable to cope with the flavour of a modern campaign.

As Strachen argues, the "*evils of divided administration in the British war machine*" are best played out in the war's "*total division of strategic objectives*"[5]. The wartime organisation of the British Army was heavily disjointed, with strategic command resting with an array of independent individuals spread across different government departments and institutions. Following Waterloo, the British Army had resisted calls for reform[6] and without a suitable crisis to highlight the failings of peace-time reductions and stagnant decision-making structures; there were few forceful arguments in its favour. The Secretary at War, the Board of Ordinance, the Commissariat and the Home Office all had responsibilities directly relating to the conduct of the British Army, its supplies, logistics, finance and recruitment, while ultimate strategic authority resided with the Cabinet. While in the field, Lord Raglan crucially relied on the representatives of these officers but could not command them[7]. The Commander-in-Chief at Horse Guards, who one would expect to be the *"repository of strategic wisdom, had no authority over troops in colonial stations, or expeditionary forces*"[8]. Occupying this position prior to the Crimean War, Strachen comments that the Duke of Wellington claimed he relied on the newspaper for information on overseas campaigns, and his successor Lord Hardinge echoed him during the Crimean[9]. The government made little effort to communicate with Horse Guards, and unless explicitly consulted by the Cabinet, the Commander-in-Chief – Britain's senior and arguably most experienced military officer – had nothing to say on the conduct of the Crimean expedition once it had set sail; and the Cabinet itself had no obvious internal source of professional military advice. The Secretary of State responsible for most of the executive direction of the Crimean War, the Duke of Newcastle had little actual interest in military matters prior to the outbreak of hostilities. Similarly, debates within the Cabinet were wholly unsuited to strategic command, as Anderson and Lord Russell support; *"A Cabinet is a cumbrous and unwieldy instrument for carrying*

on war… the moving spirit of the whole machine must be either the Prime Minister or the minister of war "[10]. Consequently, it is apparent that Britain (as did its allies) lacked a modern decision-making apparatus that could have prepared it more effectively for the new experiences the war brought. Further, by recognising that the traditional hierarchical structure was still present, the degree to which the Crimea could be argued to be a 'truly' modern war is diminished.

Perhaps the most memorable literary product of the Crimean War – Tennyson's *Charge of the Light Brigade* – fixed the charge and the negative perception of the war and its military leadership (similarly for the positive image of the men who *fought*) in the public mind to an unprecedented degree. The published word was establishing itself as a powerful legitimising tool for public sentiment; one equally adept at forming such sentiment as it was at expressing it. As Adams recognises, strategically the charge was *"no more memorable than many similar failures, particularly as it in no way influenced the outcome of the war"*[11]. The outcry that the publication of the poem caused proved that individuals with the ear of the masses can heavily influence the public pressure placed on policy-makers. Tennyson, who had "*donated ten pounds to a rifle fund for equipping volunteers and wrote poetry urging military preparation*"[12], embodied the outspoken conservative reactionary force to industrialisation and the 'commercial mire' within which the "*filthy worm of Mammon, how / O'er council boards thou creepest* " and harms the basic moral fabric of society. Echoes of the words expressed by a young Rupert Brooke going off to fight a 'noble' and 'rejuvenating war' in 1914 can be heard in Tennyson's verse, while the scathing works of a Sassoon or Owen further indicate the growing power of published literature begun in the Crimean War; albeit taking a thoroughly different conception of *dulce in decorum est pro patria mori* than Horace or Tennyson would have espoused.

Moreover, Blanco asserts that only after severe public criticism – driven by the popular media and leading activists for change – did the British Army "*initiate improvements that were characteristic of the age of reform* "[13] including widespread and successful programs to improve the literacy of the enlisted man. Some speculate that the Crimean War is the subject of such sizable scholarship because it is the first war from which one has detailed day-to-day accounts of the actualities of fighting a bloody war; a very modern phenomenon. *"This was the first overseas campaign*", Warner remarks, "*where fairly large numbers of those involved were able to read and write* "[14]. Moreover, the material available to scholars is from the widest possible audience; from the journals of Field Marshal Lord Raglan to the diaries of subalterns, sergeants, soldiers and the many civilians that followed the expeditionary force: There are five published journals from officers of the 46th Regiment of Foot alone. The sporadic accounts of battles prior to the Crimea scarcely suggest that they were more humane, however, *"when the Crimea came there was an entirely different situation: War correspondents, observers, and even wives were able to… record the astonishing fact that when wars came men died, were killed, were wounded and suffered"**[15]***.

As Sweetman contends, the Crimea was a new type of war because *"the public and politicians at home quickly learnt its graphic details*"[16] which was made possible by the *"extension of an electric telegraph cable right up to the Allied positions before Sevastopol and its regular use by newspaper reporters* "[17]. William Howard Russell's war reports were telegraphed almost 'live' to the London offices of The Times, while other newspapers within Britain and France also mobilised public opinion throughout the war. Furthermore, the Crimea saw the first effective war photographers, notably the work of Roger Fenton, which while sensitive to not capturing horrific battlefield scenes, nevertheless was a pioneering step forward.

Crucially, the part played by a ready flow of information from the Crimea, 'exposing shortcomings', undermined the reputations of British general officers, "*highlighted inconsistencies in the archaic structure of military administration* ", brought about the resignation and fall of the government of the Earl of Aberdeen and *"created a favourable climate of opinion for fundamental change in the organisation of the army"* ***[18]***.

A revolution for the newspaper reporter, the benefits of the electric telegraph for Lord Raglan and his staff are considerably dubious. Such instantaneous communication between the commanders in the field and the policy-makers at home had never before been seen, was undoubtedly a foretaste of modern war, and yet severely limited the operational freedom permitted to British generals, leading Anderson to remark that *"for England the Crimean War was decidedly a politicians' and not a generals' war* "[19]. Indeed, the Crimean War provided British officers with an experience of direct political control that closely mirrors the political involvement of the First World War. Anderson argues that Newcastle and Aberdeen led the country to war, specifically to the ill-advised siege of Sevastopol, explicitly against the wishes and advice of their military advisors[20]. Strachen further acknowledges this trend, citing how:

[Raglan asserted that] 'the descent on the Crimea is decided upon more in deference to the views of the British government than to any information in the possession of the naval and military authorities'[21]

Sir John Burgoyne, the aging engineering advisor highlighted that *"it is impossible to overlook the great difficulties with which [the expedition] will have to contend"* ***[22]*** and three of Raglan's five divisional commanders were all opposed to the expedition and the siege of Sevastopol. Consequently, it is easy to speculate that without the conditions of modern warfare, the electric telegraph and highly mobilised public opinion, the Crimean War could have been successful in far shorter a period of time, or not have occurred altogether.

"*This was a desperate ordeal, day after day, of trench warfare* "[23] accurately claims Robins. The siege of

Sevastopol, its lengthy reliance on trench warfare and the staggeringly unprecedented use of artillery bombardment on fixed enemy positions in a period of extensive privation on both armies is a microcosm of the warfare of the First World War, and is perhaps the most readily apparent and forceful argument that the Crimean War did provide its participants with a foretaste of modern combat. In his Crimean campaign journal, Captain Dunscombe describes daily the rigours of the trenches and the incessant shell-fire as if he were at the Somme; "*In the trenches all day… narrow escape of being blown to pieces, as a shell burst within about five yards of me* "[24], further they were often "*up to our knees in water in the trenches* "[25]. Artillery fire and the slow war of attrition continues unabated day after day, with the Russians often launching attacks into Allied trenches only to be beaten back in deadly hand-to-hand combat. Frequently, "*the Russians fired nothing but shell today*"[26] and "*the Russians pitched shot and shell right amongst [the French], but it is no new thing, as they do the same every day* "[27]. So astonishing is the relation to similar journals from the First World War that one barely recalls there lay more than a half-century between the two. As the war progresses, Dunscombe cites the increase in heavy Allied and Russian night time bombardment, and the subsequent day spent under arms in the trenches in preparation for launching or repulsing an attack. But these attacks met with the same ineffectual results as those in 1916: Dunscombe recalls how a Royal Artillery staff officer told him that "*After eight days' incessant firing with some of the heaviest guns and mortars ever used in a siege… we had failed either to silence the enemy's fire or to destroy his works*"[28].

A further claimant toward modern warfare in the Crimea was the extensive use of the rifle by British, French and Russian troops. While the *Minié* rifle had a range of about 1,000 yards it was not very accurate, however, as the Russians continued to "*keep their men in close formation the effect of the Minié was greatly increased*"[29], thus an unfortunate example of continuity and change in conflict. Indeed, Captain Dunscombe relates how "*we all go to Balaklava tomorrow to change our arms; we get the new Enfield rifle instead of the Minié rifle and common musket*"[30] and how upon receiving the new rifle, "*the Enfield rifle is a beautiful weapon about 4lbs lighter than the musket which is a good deal of service to the soldier on a days march* "[31]. The Enfield that saw service in the Crimea changed very little in the proceeding decades leading to the outbreak of hostilities in 1914, and is clearly an instrument of industrialised modern warfare, facilitating the slaughter of soldiers on a mass scale.

"No organisation for supplying troops in the field, and medical support was rudimentary" at the beginning of the war because the "Commissariat which had served Wellington well had been disbanded"[32] and, as Dunscombe notes, "*we have got a very bad Commissariat… I am convinced that our men die of hunger as well as anything else* "[33]. Disease, medical ineptitude and logistical incompetence added to the desperate conditions suffered by the wounded and dying throughout most of the campaign. So scandalous was the treatment of wounded soldiers, that public outcry following Russell's dispatches and similar letters from servicemen resulted in the evolution of new medical

techniques; more effective field hospitals were established, modern nursing methods were introduced under the guidance of the influential Florence Nightingale and a veritable army of nuns, and early attempts at disease management were pioneered. Prior to Nightingale's efforts and the dramatic increase in funds and regular supplies to the Crimea following the public condemnation of the government there were frequently a disproportionately high number of deaths from disease; far more than actually died from enemy action. As one nurse comments, *[in] this immense hospital in which are now 1,600 sick… especially for men with cholera and fever* "[34]. Dunscombe notes one of these minor innovations in his journal that "*bandages are to be carried by each man in future* "[35]; the first field dressing.

Further, the Crimean War saw the British first use of the railway as an effective method of troop and supply transportation surrounding the siege of Sebastopol. According to railway historians, the narrow-gauge 'Grand Crimean Central Railway' was the "railway that won the war"[36]. Arguably, however, one must not place too much significance on the actual usefulness of some technological innovations (such as the railway) as, according to Sweetman, most of these logistical support services were "temporary, ill-planned and largely unsuccessful"[37]. Even with the railway, supplies had to be unloaded beyond the range of the Russian guns and then manually transported in the traditional fashion to the frontline trenches, resulting in *'the road [being] very heavy as usual; the French and English were employed the whole day carrying shot and shell up to the front*"[38].

The Crimean War was a campaign of vivid continuity and change, it combined the staple ingredients of traditional warfare – the picturesque but unserviceable uniforms and the gallant cavalry charge – with the privation of what war was to become – static trench warfare with staggeringly high deaths from artillery and industrial weaponry. Echoing the massive cost of future warfare, the Crimea was then the most expensive war Britain had hitherto fought[39]. Neither truly modern nor truly antiquarian, the Crimea combines the two in a confusingly distorted theatre of suffering, where "everything is just great for parades, and just terrible for war"[40].

Bibliography

- Adams, Michael C. C. (1979) 'Tennyson's Crimean War Poetry: A Cross-Cultural Approach'.*Journal of the History of Ideas* 40 (3). pp. 405-422
- Anderson, Olive (1963) 'Loans versus Taxes: British Financial Policy in the Crimean War'.*The Economic History Review* 16 (2). pp. 314-327
- Anderson, Olive (1964) 'Cabinet Government and the Crimean War'. *The English Historical Review* 79 (312). pp. 548-551
- Anderson, Olive (1967) 'Early Experiences of Manpower Problems in an Industrial Society at War: Great Britain 1854-6'. *Political Science Quarterly* 82 (4). pp. 536-545
- Blanco, Richard L. (1966) 'Educational Reforms for the Enlisted Man in the Army of Victorian England'. *History of Education Quarterly* 6 (2). pp. 61-72
- Bill, Valentine Tschebotarioff (1956) 'The Early Days of the Russian Railway'. *Russian Review* 15 (1). pp. 14-28

- Brooks, E. Willis (1984) 'Reform in the Russian Army, 1856-1861'. *Slavic Review* 43 (1). pp. 63-82
- Cooke, Brian (1997) *Grand Crimean Central Railway*. London: Cavalier House
- Freedman, Lawrence (ed) (1994) *War (Oxford Readers)*. Oxford: OUP
- Gallagher, Thomas F. (1975) 'British Military Thinking and the Coming of the Franco-Prussian War'.*Military Affairs* 39 (1). pp. 19-22
- Gooch, Brison D. (1956) 'A Century of Historiography on the Origins of the Crimean War'.*The American Historical Review* 62 (1). pp. 33-58
- Kunzle, David (1983) 'Gustave Dore's History of Holy Russia: Anti-Russian Propaganda from the Crimean War to the Cold War'. *Russian Review* 42 (3). pp. 271-299
- Puryear, Vernon J. (1931) 'New Light on the Origins of the Crimean War'. *The Journal of Modern History* 3 (2). pp. 219-234
- Robins, Major Colin (2003) *Captain Dunscombe's Diary: The Real Crimean War*. Cheshire: Withycut House
- Schmitt, Bernadotte E. (1919) 'Diplomatic Preliminaries of the Crimean War'. *The American Historical Review* 25 (1). pp. 36-67
- Stephan, John J. (1969) 'The Crimean War in the Far East'. *Modern Asian Studies* 3 (3). pp. 257-277
- Strachen, Hew (1978) 'Soldiers, Strategy and Sebastopol'. *The Historical Journal* 21 (2). pp. 303-325
- Sweetman, John (1988) ''Ad hoc' Support Services during the Crimean War, 1854-6: Temporary, Ill-Planned and Largely Unsuccessful'. Military Affairs 52 (3). pp. 135-140
- Sweetman, John (2001) *The Crimean War (Essential Histories)*. London: Osprey
- Townshed, Charles (2000) *The Oxford History of Modern War*. Oxford: OUP
- Warner, Philip (1972) *The Crimean War: A Reappraisal*. Birkenhead: Willmer Brothers
- 'Extracts from Letters from the Crimea' (1932). *The American Journal of Nursing* 32 (5). pp. 537-538

[1]Puryear, Vernon J. (1931) 'New Light on the Origins of the Crimean War'. *The Journal of Modern History* 3 (2), p. 228

[2]Schmitt, Bernadotte E. (1919) 'Diplomatic Preliminaries of the Crimean War'. *The American Historical Review* 25 (1), p. 36

[3]Gooch, Brison D. (1956) 'A Century of Historiography on the Origins of the Crimean War'.*The American Historical Review* 62 (1), p. 58

[4]Strachen, Hew (1978) 'Soldiers, Strategy and Sebastopol'. *The Historical Journal* 21 (2), p. 303

[5]ibid., p. 326

[6]Blanco, Richard L. (1966) 'Educational Reforms for the Enlisted Man in the Army of Victorian England'.*History of Education Quarterly* 6 (2), p. 61

[7]Strachen, op. cit., p. 315

[8]ibid., p. 310

[9]ibid.

[10]Anderson, Olive (1964) 'Cabinet Government and the Crimean War'. *The English Historical Review* 79 (312), p. 549

[11]Adams, Michael C. C. (1979) 'Tennyson's Crimean War Poetry: A Cross-Cultural Approach'. *Journal of the History of Ideas* 40 (3), p. 420

[12]ibid., p. 414

[13]Blanco, op. cit., p. 61

[14]Warner, Philip (1972) *The Crimean War: A Reappraisal*. Birkenhead: Willmer Brothers, p. 2

[15]ibid., p. 3

[16]Sweetman, John (2001) *The Crimean War (Essential Histories)*. London: Osprey, p. 14

[17]ibid., p. 15

[18]ibid., p. 14

[19]Anderson, Olive (1967) 'Early Experiences of Manpower Problems in an Industrial Society at War: Great Britain 1854-6'. *Political Science Quarterly* 82 (4), p. 528

[20]ibid., p. 538

[21]Strachen, op. cit., p. 315

[22]ibid., p. 319

[23]Robins, Major Colin (2003) *Captain Dunscombe's Diary: The Real Crimean War*. Cheshire: Withycut House, p. 2

[24]ibid., p. 42

[25]ibid., p. 48

[26]ibid., p. 102

[27]ibid., p. 51

[28]ibid., p. 100

[29]ibid., p. 25

[30]ibid., p. 80

[31]ibid., p. 81

[32]ibid., p. 15

[33]ibid., p. 45

[34]ibid., p. 538

[35]ibid., p. 136

[36]Cooke, Brian (1997) *Grand Crimean Central Railway*. London: Cavalier House, p. 5

[37]Sweetman, John (1988) ‘’Ad hoc’ Support Services during the Crimean War, 1854-6: Temporary, Ill-Planned and Largely Unsuccessful’. Military Affairs 52 (3), p. 135

[38]Robins, op. cit., p. 61

[39]Anderson, Olive (1963) ‘Loans versus Taxes: British Financial Policy in the Crimean War’.*The Economic History Review* 16 (2), p. 315

[40]Brooks, E. Willis (1984) ‘Reform in the Russian Army, 1856-1861’. *Slavic Review* 43 (1), p. 65

—

Written by: Oliver Lewis
Written at: Aberystwyth University

About the author:

Oliver Lewis is an academic advisor to the Ministry of Defence and completing a PhD in International Studies at the University of Cambridge, where he researches on the culture(s) and education of elite transnational groups.