

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11237-6 - The Crimean War in the British Imagination

Stefanie Markovits

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

I THE BLOSSOM OF WAR

For the long, long canker of peace is over and done
 And now by the side of the Black and the Baltic deep,
 And deathful-grinning mouths of the fortress, flames
 The blood-red blossom of war with a heart of fire.

Tennyson, *Maud* (1855)

In 1854, Britain entered into a full-fledged war for the first time in forty years. The nation had, in Matthew Arnold's words, been "[w]andering between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born."¹ The Crimean War served as midwife to the age. Led by an army composed of "the old men of the past," as *The Times* called survivors of the Napoleonic wars, Britain marched into an uncertain future.² Historic foes stood together, as Britain's imperial interests led it to ally itself with France, in defense of an "infidel" nation (Turkey), against a Christian enemy (Russia). The telegraph was used for the first time in British military operations, while trench warfare during the siege of Sebastopol prefigured the fighting conditions of World War I. The first war correspondents, both writers and photographers, reported the action for a news-hungry nation. And the businesslike idea of the management (and mismanagement) of war dictated public opinion, as initial popular support gave way to disillusionment and then outrage – enough to topple a government – when those same correspondents described the bureaucratic bungling at the front. This book examines responses in word and image to the two-year-long Crimean War. As the predominant topic of public and political discourse during the day, the war can be used to shed light on social questions. The Crimean War created and crystallized trends in cultural development, and contemporary reactions to it were guided by expectations shaped by literature and art. Representations of the war

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11237-6 - The Crimean War in the British Imagination

Stefanie Markovits

Excerpt

[More information](#)

show the strains of a nation negotiating ideas of heroism and patriotism during a campaign distinguished more by blunder than by glory.

When Karl Marx, writing for the New York *Tribune*, wanted to pinpoint what was typically British about the parliamentary debate leading up to the war, he turned to Shakespeare: “A singularity of English tragedy . . . is its peculiar mixture of the sublime and the base, the terrible and the ridiculous, the heroic and the burlesque.” Yet while the mix of high and low modes might have been characteristic, Marx proceeded to recognize the novelty of the current situation: “All great historical movements appear, to the superficial observer, finally to subside into farce, or at least the commonplace. But to commence with this is a feature peculiar alone to the tragedy entitled ‘War With Russia.’” Lamenting the Aberdeen government’s style of leadership, he noted that even Shakespeare never gave to “the Clown the task of speaking the prologue of a heroic drama. This invention was reserved for the Coalition Ministry.”³ Marx’s invocation of Englishness through literature suggests how culture enshrines national identity. He also brings up two key issues that Crimean War literature would have to negotiate: voice (who was “speaking” the drama, and in what tone?) and mode (how should one treat events that tragically combined “the heroic and the burlesque”?).

The fact that Marx’s comments were published in a newspaper makes them a particularly appropriate place to begin a study of the cultural impact of the war, for the press played a central role in creating this impact. Indeed, when the curtain finally came up on the tragic farce that was the Crimean War, it revealed a stage that was set with a newspaper every bit as prominent as one of Ibsen’s guns: Czar Nicholas first received the British ultimatum that led to the declaration of war by reading it in *The Times* (of London), which broke the story before the statement had traversed its official diplomatic path. And throughout its course, the war was processed by means of words and images appearing in the press and moving rapidly between the Eastern front and the home front. Thus the most famous cultural product of the war – Tennyson’s “The Charge of the Light Brigade” (1854) – was stimulated by a *Times* report from the Crimea (printed a mere three weeks after the disastrous events), and the poem itself was first published in a newspaper (the *Examiner*) a few weeks thereafter. Soon, the soldiers in the East were recorded to be “singing” it aloud and were requesting more copies of the verses (a request Tennyson rapidly granted). In a review of the war poetry written from the front for *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, E. B. Hamley commented on the odd consequences of such rapid transmission: “Fancy . . . the white-haired

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11237-6 - The Crimean War in the British Imagination

Stefanie Markovits

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

Nestor, and the sage Ulysses, reading, towards the close of the first year of their sojourn before Troy, the first book of the *Iliad*, to be continued in parts as a serial.”⁴ Hamley’s awareness of the strange effects on consumers, subjects, and producers of writing about the war must have been underpinned by his own triple role as critic, active officer, and author of an ongoing *Story of the Campaign* (then being published serially in *Blackwood’s*).

This was what we would now call a “media war”: a war that was experienced through cultural documentation not only after the fact but as events were transpiring. No doubt bureaucratic confusions during the Napoleonic wars had resulted in pointless deaths, too, but now the deaths were reported almost as soon as they occurred, and the reports were being read at home by an increasingly large and powerful British middle class. The back and forth of information between the East and Britain resulted in an imaginative interpenetration of home front and battlefield, heightened by the fact that most of the deaths in the Crimea occurred from the same disease (cholera) that was currently devastating British communities. Visual tributes to the war frequently point to the merger of East and West – and the role played by the media in this merger: the monument to the Coldstream Guards in St. Paul’s depicts on its front an image of a monument already constructed to them in the Crimea; J. D. Luard’s painting *A Welcome Arrival* (1857; figure 5) shows a Crimean officer’s hut plastered with engravings from British illustrated magazines of both domestic and Crimean scenes.⁵ The ascendancy of journalism (the subject of my first chapter) had consequences for practitioners of artistic representation in other modes (which I treat in subsequent chapters); what might be called the pressure of the press changed the shape of novels, poems, and paintings about the war, either through oppositional reaction to the dominant form, or by an attempt to accommodate its forces.⁶

Such a climate was bound to test conceptions of the heroic. Of course, writers always struggle with the question of what makes someone a worthy hero; this struggle was particularly evident in the early 1850s in Britain, when literary journals of the day were hotly debating the proper role for the heroic in literature and the relationship of this issue to concerns about genre. But war compels a reconsideration of ideas of heroism. And during the Crimean War, these ideas were undergoing significant alterations. Initial enthusiasm for engagement in the Crimea depended in part on the belief that it would unify a threateningly mercantilized nation, divided in the aftermath of the “hungry ’forties,” behind a new cadre of aristocratic and knightly heroes. Contemporary references to Carlyle’s *On Heroes*,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11237-6 - The Crimean War in the British Imagination

Stefanie Markovits

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History (1841) and to chivalry abound; indeed the renewed interest in the chivalric can be attributed in part to the war. As the heroic devolved into what Marx had characterized even from the start as burlesque, though, such a faith in heroes was replaced – or at least offset – by an ethos of middle-class practicality, as when governmental incompetence resulted in calls in Parliament for contracting out the war effort. Views of the military changed, too. Before the war, the stereotypical soldier was an aristocratic fop. After it, he was a brave private (eulogized in countless poems in *Punch* to “Private Smith” and his kin). These conflicting beliefs about heroism become manifest in responses to the charge of the Light Brigade, in which the traditionally aristocratic cavaliers appear both as reinvigorated figures of English chivalry and as proof of their own outmodedness, even their evolutionary unfitness.

But if the charge of the Light Brigade stands as one lasting reminder of the Crimean War, the other remaining cultural touchstone from the conflict must also be considered in relation to ideas of the heroic. While the abstract common soldier was newly lauded, the great and remembered individual hero of the war is instead a heroine: Florence Nightingale. Nightingale’s extraordinary rise to fame sits at the intersection of the “Woman Question” and the “Eastern Question.” In *Cassandra*, written a few years before the war, Nightingale had bewailed the opportunities for female action: “Why cannot we make use of the noble rising heroisms of our own day, instead of leaving them to rust?”⁷ She herself demonstrated what modern “[h]eroic womanhood” (as Longfellow called it in his paean, “Santa Filomena” [1856]) might look like.⁸ Indeed, images of Britannia were scattered throughout the illustrated newspapers of the day, sensational heroines pervade the war novels, and the war produced a much-lionized female military painter in Elizabeth Thompson, Lady Butler. Yet at the same time, Coventry Patmore was presenting the first two parts of his influential vision of domesticated womanhood in *The Angel in the House* (1854, 1856). Thus alongside heroism, what has come to be called “heroinism” became a topic of debate in the culture wars of the war years.

So this war can be considered as presenting a particularly revealing case study in the fate of epic action in the period, an example of a process I and others have described elsewhere whereby epic ambitions are caught up in the quagmire of nineteenth-century realities and become feminized and bureaucratized as a result.⁹ But it can also shed light on the role literature and art play in these developments, and in the process whereby a Nation revises its sense of self. Winston Churchill once remarked to Siegfried Sassoon that “War is the normal occupation of man,” before qualifying

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11237-6 - The Crimean War in the British Imagination

Stefanie Markovits

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

his claim slightly: “War – and gardening!”¹⁰ While he was thinking of one form of cultivation (or “blossom”), he could as easily have been thinking of another. And in fact, the occupations of war and art are connected: war forces a culture to memorialize itself, to see itself in the present as a historical artifact, as something that is set in stone – or in words on a page or paint on a canvas. Linda Colley has shown how the culture of war contributed in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to the creation of British national identity.¹¹ Even as early as Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, representative proto-Britons – English, Welsh, Irish, and Scottish – come together (albeit uneasily) in King Harry’s “band of brothers” in order to defeat the French at Agincourt. But as Richard Helgerson has pointed out in describing the cultural construction of Englishness in Elizabethan times, a “second great period of English national and imperial self assertion” arrived with “the reign of Queen Victoria.”¹² In *Westward Ho!* (1855), written in the midst and in support of the British efforts in the Crimean War, Charles Kingsley tried to use an Elizabethan setting to “rally the troops,” military and civilian, at home and abroad. As Kingsley’s pointed invocation of the past suggests, mid-nineteenth-century Britain was acutely aware of different models of historical change, and contemporary thinking about the conflict in the East was central to Victorians’ awareness of themselves as historical subjects. Yet if the Crimean War represents the first large-scale instance of British self-assertion in a reign that was to be defined by it, it also sets an ambiguous precedent. Current history indicates how war can highlight and exacerbate not only the things that bring a people together but also the things that divide us. Because the Crimean War was accessible to and unpopular with the public in a completely new way, it illuminates mid-Victorian attitudes about national identity.

By looking at the war literature and art, I track the presence of a more modern reaction to war, one in which a sense of general futility accompanies the recognition of valor, in which the heroic and the burlesque intermingle uneasily. In *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell has shown how irony is the determining mode of responses to World War I. Malvern Van Wyk Smith has argued that the poetry of the Boer War first introduced concepts of irony to British war poetry; he calls Tennyson’s “Charge” “the last great battle piece that could be written in English.”¹³ Yet while the Crimean War does represent a watershed moment, it cannot be so easily equated with the past. Mid-Victorian earnestness generally precluded irony in favor of outrage, but since various forms of “blunder” dominate the experience in the Crimea, imaginative

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11237-6 - The Crimean War in the British Imagination

Stefanie Markovits

Excerpt

[More information](#)

reactions to the war show nascent signs of ironic technique in a kind of bewilderment that registers both on the level of form and of content. Critics such as Fussell and James Chandler have demonstrated how rich a story can be told about a nation's cultural life by focusing on its response to a traumatic period, how much can be gained by identifying, in Chandler's words, "a moment in the history of a literary culture."¹⁴ The Crimean War, for all its brevity and blunder (actually, because of its blunder), provides fertile terrain for such investigation.

If the Crimean War plays a crucial role in mid-nineteenth-century cultural developments, it also foreshadows many concerns stemming from our present "stupid quarrel about great-power stewardship" (Christopher Hitchens's words, used in comparing the past Eastern Question to today's one¹⁵) – as an early example of "Grand Strategy" politics at work, as a window on to how public disillusionment over a war can create a climate for cultural production, as a study in the role played by the media in the process. There has been significant and ongoing historical interest in the war, and two excellent books have been published on the visual art of the conflict (by Ulrich Keller and Matthew Lalumia). But while recent attention to imperialism in literary studies has spawned books on responses to the so-called Indian Mutiny and to the Boer War,¹⁶ because the Crimean War has fewer obvious connections to imperial discourse, it has garnered less sustained consideration in the field.¹⁷ *The Crimean War in the British Imagination*, the first book to be devoted to the wider cultural effects of the conflict, seeks to offer a more comprehensive view of these effects than can be gleaned from attending to the war's impact on a single writer or through a single generic lens. Literary critics of the 1850s often concentrate on the implications of the Great Exhibition of 1851 (again, an important moment of imperial culture). But if Alexander Smith and Sidney Dobell opened their *Sonnets on the War* (1855) with a poem called "The Crystal Palace" (the site of the Exhibition), they did so only to recognize that the transparency promised by this clear edifice had given way to a far murkier atmosphere, in which the disembodied voices of the war poems that follow also appear as through the fog of war. I will delve into this fog to trace its consequences for the shape of the British imagination.

II A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE WAR

In addition to the fog of war, though, we face the fog of memory. An odd assortment of names and objects emerge from this fog: Nightingale and

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11237-6 - The Crimean War in the British Imagination

Stefanie Markovits

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

the charge of the Light Brigade, of course, but also the idea of the thin red line and a few bits and pieces of clothing (the cardigan, named after the earl who led the charge; the balaclava, worn to protect the soldiers' faces against the bitter Crimean cold). These remnants are significant; as a character remarks in Brian Friel's *Translations*, "it is not the literal past, the 'facts' of history, that shape us, but images of the past embodied in language."¹⁸ Yet while what follows is predicated on belief in Friel's observation, it nevertheless helps to have some sense of the "facts" – especially those facts to which writers and artists of the day were responding – when trying to come to grips with how "images of the past" become "embodied" not only in language itself but in more concrete cultural productions.

As a gauge of what has remained of the war, we can turn to W. C. Sellar and R. J. Yeatman's 1930 comic history, *1066 and All That*, which might be called a cousin of Frielian history in its basic premise that "History is not what you thought. *It is what you can remember.*" Yet *1066 and All That* recognizes that the difficulty in remembering how Britain got into the "exceptionally inevitable" Crimean War is paradoxically the first of its memorable aspects (perhaps a less surprising fact if one recalls the muddle Marx described even at the time).¹⁹ In fact, the war grew out of what was known as the Eastern Question: the problems connected with the long, slow withdrawal of the Ottoman Empire.²⁰ The immediate spark was given when a squabble broke out between Catholic (French) and Orthodox (Greek and Russian) Christians over possession of the keys to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem; the disagreement fueled an ongoing debate about who had sovereignty over Christians living within the Ottoman Empire. But for the British, the most significant reason for war was the fear of Russian imperial expansion. It was this fear that led Britain to put historic prejudice to the side and take up arms with the French after Russia encroached on Turkish territory in July of 1853.

By then, the nation was eager to go to war to save the beleaguered Turks from being absorbed under Czar Nicholas's authoritarian rule. Yet the Prime Minister, Lord Aberdeen – head of a coalition government that included the strongly anti-Russian Palmerston – was less excited by the prospect. The slow diplomatic shuffle up to war was wittily characterized by the secretary of the British ambassador in Constantinople: "When everyone else is dead I intend to write an Oriental romance to be called *Les mille et une notes*."²¹ His comments hinted forward to the bureaucratic red-tape that would scar the Crimean campaign even while acknowledging an exotic backdrop that should have offered a contrasting form of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11237-6 - The Crimean War in the British Imagination

Stefanie Markovits

Excerpt

[More information](#)

excitement. Nevertheless, war was eventually declared, on March 28, 1854, creating allegiances that resonate strongly with the global politics of the twentieth century. Indeed, the Crimean War stands almost midway between the great conflicts of what is called the long nineteenth century: as more than one commentator has noted, 1815–1854–1914 suggests a satisfyingly symmetrical view of historical development.

The chronology of the war can be divided roughly into five major phases. The initial phase saw a buildup of troops in the East throughout the spring and summer of 1854, first at Constantinople, and then at Varna (in modern Bulgaria), where significant losses to cholera began to be reported. (At the same time, naval conflict erupted in the Baltic. This was to continue throughout the war, with the Allies even threatening to bombard Kronstadt – a strategy that would have left St. Petersburg defenseless.²²) After much deliberation, the decision was made to attack Sebastopol, Russia's great Black Sea naval port, and troops departed to the Crimea.

Hereupon followed the second major phase of the war: a rapid series of relatively traditional battles. First came the Battle of the Alma (a river crossed by Allied armies on their approach to Sebastopol) on September 20. The Battle of Balaklava (named for the nearby port town, used by the British to transport men and goods during the siege of Sebastopol) soon followed on October 25; it was here that the charge of the Light Brigade occurred. Finally, on the already historically burdened 5th of November, Russians attacked British and French siege positions before Sebastopol at what was called the Battle of Inkerman.²³ While these battles all contained their portions of blunder (including, of course, that leading to the famous cavalry charge at Balaklava), they could be construed as Allied victories, and the war was generally popular throughout this period.

Nevertheless, of the three engagements, only two figure in the short list of memorable events of the war compiled in *1066 and All That*: Inkerman is recalled for the fog in which it was fought (thus becoming an emblem of the age in line with Matthew Arnold's "ignorant armies clash[ing] by night"²⁴), and Balaklava is remembered entirely through the lens of Tennyson's ballad's vision of the charge, ignoring the more successful British effort on the day (the charge of the Heavy Brigade). Alma, the clearest British military victory of the war, does not receive mention. One can see how the Crimean War has been made to fit neatly – and indeed helped create – what James Morris has called "the British mystique of splendour in misfortune."²⁵

Yet the greatest source of misfortune came not from the Russians but from the weather. While these battles were fought, winter descended on

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11237-6 - The Crimean War in the British Imagination

Stefanie Markovits

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

the Crimea. Phase three of the war began on November 14, 1854, when a severe storm hit Balaklava, sinking twenty-one British transport ships (including the *Prince*, carrying 40,000 winter uniforms and 150 men, only six of whom were saved). The losses both presaged and contributed to the disasters of the season, as British soldiers found themselves without adequate housing, clothing, provisions, or medical care. Enter item four in Sellar and Yeatman's list of memorable "facts" of the war: Florence Nightingale, who arrived in Constantinople on November 4 to help administer the military hospital at nearby Scutari. In spite of efforts by Nightingale and others to contain the organizational chaos that had sent an army to war with little thought of a winter campaign – it was all supposed to have been over by then – thousands succumbed to cold and disease. Indeed, by the end of the war, only 10 percent of the almost 20,000 British servicemen who died in the East had died in action, the vast majority of the deaths occurring during the winter of 1854–55.²⁶ This disaster – reported on by journalists at the front – led to the public outrage that caused the fall of the Aberdeen Government at the end of January 1855 (Aberdeen was replaced by Palmerston after protracted negotiations). The perception of governmental incompetence also fueled the creation of entities like the so-called Roebuck Committee in Parliament, formed to investigate the state of the army before Sebastopol, and the Administrative Reform Association (with which the likes of Dickens and Thackeray were connected), with its mission "To bring up the public management to the level of private management in this country."²⁷

But while conditions for the troops improved throughout the spring, and while the much-maligned Commissariat Department initiated a series of reforms that ensured that the winter troubles would not be repeated the following year, these changes for the better did not translate into glory on the battlefield. In fact, the nature of warfare had shifted over the course of the season, as the fortifications of Sebastopol, engineered by the brilliant Todleben, discouraged any rapid attempts to take the town. Instead, the Allies put their energies into the construction of a system of trenches from which they could bombard the defenses, hoping to weaken them in advance of an attack. Tolstoy, who was with the Russian army in Sebastopol, captures wonderfully the discomfort, dreadful anticipation, and sheer monotony that characterized such warfare in his *Sebastopol Sketches*, written at the time. (While it was and is customary to speak of the "siege" of Sebastopol, technically this is a misnomer since open supply routes to the north were maintained throughout.)

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11237-6 - The Crimean War in the British Imagination

Stefanie Markovits

Excerpt

[More information](#)

A slow and anticlimactic summer of attempts to take Sebastopol ensued, with a major bombardment taking place in April, and then three times in June. These bombardments, however, failed adequately to prepare the ground for the infantry attack that was to bring the fall of the town. While the French made some headway in early June, capturing the advance Russian defenses, the next assault, on June 17, was disastrous for both the British and the French; the death soon thereafter of the much-maligned British Commander-in-Chief of the Forces in the East, Lord Raglan, was attributed to a heart broken by repeated disappointments. Compounding their frustrations, the British were conscious of their increasingly minor role in the proceedings, as the absence of forced conscription (although they did turn to mercenaries) prevented the replenishment of depleted troop numbers, even as the French army gained in size. The result was malaise in the camps and war-weariness at home. And when Sebastopol finally fell on September 9, 1855, reports made clear that the victory was French; British troops botched their part of the effort (the goal had been to take the fortification known as the Great Redan), the troops succumbing to ignominious “confusion, panic and terror.”²⁸ Indeed, so tainted was the victory that Palmerston refused to allow the usual celebratory ringing of the church bells throughout the land; the Queen exclaimed how she could not “bear the thought that ‘the failure on the Redan’ should be our last *fait d’Armes*.”²⁹

Not surprisingly, *1066 and All That* distorts the memory of this event almost beyond recognition: while the entry for “*Flora MacNightshade*” crowns the chapter on the war, “*The Siege of Sir Pastobol* (the memorable Russian General)” must relinquish its climactic position not only to her, but also to the relatively extensive account of the Tennysonian-inflected Balaklava, which in this version of history, comes last of the battles. In contrast, Sir Pastobol (we are concisely informed) “was quite besieged, and the English were very victorious.” This is not a place where national memory would be disposed to linger.

Officially, the campaign was not yet over, although the armies in the Crimea ceased to play a significant role. In its final phase, the war again became a matter of diplomacy (the combatant nations had talked even as the bombs fell during the “Vienna Conference” of 1855), accompanied by some military baring of teeth as Britain amassed her strongest force yet in anticipation of a possible naval attack on Kronstadt. Negotiations – and Sweden’s threatened entrance for the Alliance – led eventually to the declaration of an armistice on February 28 and the signing of the Peace in Paris on March 30, 1856. The war ended in what has been described as