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978-1-108-04468-4 - General Todleben's History of the Defence of Sebastopol, 1854-5: A Review

William Howard Russell

Excerpt

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THE DEFENCE OF SEBASTOPOL.

THE ancient Romans were almost as much interested about the site of Troy and the history of the great siege as were the German and English professors of the last century. The scientific New Zealander who may have completed his sketches of St. Paul's, and have wandered over the ruins of that modern Babylon which sent out General Cameron to conquer his Maori forefathers, will probably be driven by his thirst for knowledge to extend his explorations, and to visit scenes made famous by the people who civilized his race. In his rambles the Maori *savant* may be shot out of a pneumatic tube, or descend, by his private parachute, on a little angle of the world whereupon just ten years ago was turned in breathless expectancy the gaze of the great English people. What he will then see there we cannot pretend even to conjecture.

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The traveller would now behold a widespread solitude and the calm which succeeds the tempest of battle. Great ruins never die. The Tartar araba and the official drosky roll over the plateau where the fresh springing vines rise up amid a rude necropolis. Stately forts still frown over the deep calm fiord in which, as if waiting for its resurrection, lie the bones of a navy, and crumbling quays, shattered towers, and broken shells of houses mark the margin of waters on which once floated the armaments of a giant aggressive Power. A few grey-coated soldiers clamber over the heaps of broken masonry, and creep in and out of the dilapidated barracks and shot-riven dwellings. Listless citizens, flat-capped and booted, saunter slowly about the city of the past. A group of boats in the centre of the harbour is engaged in endeavours to raise to the surface the hull of some rotted ship. Encircling this scene of desolation and violent decay, rounded knoll and deep ravine, and undulating plain, all seamed and dented with grass-grown earthworks, spread from the sea to the great cleft in the plateau, through which rolls the stream of the Tchernaya. Within that narrow front, once white with the tents of the Western Powers, where the thunder of the cannon never ceased day after day, and the lightning of

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OUR FIRST VICTORIES.

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battle flashed from cloud to cloud, and leapt from hill to hill for long, long months, the herdsman now peacefully tends the flocks which browse fatly in the enriched ravines, and all that strikes the ear is the plover's whistle mingled with the lowing of the kine.

It is but ten years since this nation suddenly found itself adrift in the raging sea of a great European war. It will soon be ten years from the time when the news came that the old mettle had not failed us, and when the hearts of the people swelled with pride at the words "Alma," "Balaklava," "Inkerman." Then swiftly came the terrible winter, and ere the pæans of triumph had died away, a grievous solicitude and an anxiety beyond expression fell upon us concerning the fate of those in whose glorious deeds we had just been exulting. The spot where so many were suffering seemed so near and was yet so distant. Letters but fourteen days old appeared as though they had travelled from some *inferno* to tell us of misery beyond all human aid. With all her boundless devotion, her vast wealth, her unequalled resources, her noble heart, England could not save her perishing children.—At last the plague was stayed.

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Reinforcements arrived, supplies poured in,—the army revelled in abundance. All went well in the spring and early summer till the time came for the assault. Then we heard, with unaccustomed ears, that British soldiers had recoiled from the face of an enemy. It was hard to bear. But our allies had failed also. Next time we hoped for better fortune and the siege went on. The joy diffused by the fall of Sebastopol soon afterwards was mingled with feelings of mortification and shame caused by our second repulse from the Redan, and the news of peace was received without gratification by a nation anxious to wipe off the dust which obscured the lustre of its arms. Great controversies and important changes sprang out of the incidents of the struggle. The discussion of questions which arose at the moment when the intelligence of events was spread among the people, by what Mr. Kinglake characterizes as means before unknown, continued long after the war was over. Angry debates, the fall of Ministries, commissions of inquiry, argumentative pamphlets, and even, at a very recent period, suits at law, cropped out of the disasters and confusion at Balaklava, like the wild flowers which now bloom over the mud that had nigh swallowed up the remnants of our army in that disastrous winter. A

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THE EARLY AND LATE HISTORIANS.

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Staff was organized; the Commissariat was amended; a Transport Train was organized; and serious alterations were made in the administration of the War Department. The Muse of History at length took up her pen. M. Le Baron de Bazancourt wrote an account of the war, in which the English army was made to appear very much as the single Highlander is represented in the picture of the Battle of the Alma, among the friendly and victorious Zouaves. The English were always late, and always needing help from their magnificent allies. Then Mr. Kinglake presented the world with his notable description of the English commander at the Alma, where the French troops, "who had perpetrated an extensive massacre of their unarmed fellow-countrymen" in the streets of Paris, made painful and laborious efforts to climb the steep, and failed because "the Russians were armed," and because it was not France which fought, but the French Empire. The Frenchman was first in the field after the letters of the correspondents of the English press. The Englishman came next, but his story is not yet told, for he still halts on the banks of the Alma. The Russian is the last, and he takes us in his first volume, the only one yet translated into French, down to the spring of 1855. We had, to be sure, many

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other publications in French, and English, and German, relating to the war, and the Russians had their controversies in high places as well as ourselves, but we mention these histories because they have an official character. M. de Bazancourt was a literary gentleman specially commissioned by the Emperor to record what he saw before Sebastopol, and to write an authoritative account of the expedition to the Crimea. Mr. Kinglake was a literary gentleman who went out as an amateur, and returned to England with so great an admiration for Lord Raglan, that he was intrusted with his lordship's papers, and may be considered as the historical executor of the English Commander-in-Chief. Lieut.-General E. de Todleben is—but what need is there to tell the world who he is? His name will live as long as that of Sebastopol itself. The man who laboured so successfully in that immortal siege, whose genius sheltered the beaten army, and covered the cowering fleet of Russia, now gives us his version of the wondrous tale.

Can we wonder if General Todleben has written a thoroughly Russian account of the Crimean war? At the very outset, in rendering every justice to the immense amount of information contained in his

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THE RUSSIAN HISTORY.

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book, we must protest against many of his statements, and declare that his narrative is, in many parts relating to the British army and its operations, careless, inexact, and untrue. In all that relates to the Russian army, to its labours, and to the work of the siege, and of the battle, we presume General Todleben to be an unimpeachable authority. His account of the gradual increase of the trenches and the arming of the batteries may be classed with the arid journal of our own engineers. In the description of battles, he seems to have consulted few authorities on the French and English side, and to have been easily misled; but his statements with respect to the Russian troops, founded on the best information, are incontrovertible—at least we are acquainted with no authority to oppose to his. General Todleben, soon after the evacuation of the south side, having collected, in his capacity of chief engineer, all the necessary documents, instructed Lieut.-Colonel Khlebinkoff to edit the journal of the defence, which was finished in the autumn of 1856. His wound—as he modestly says, “*ma santé affaiblie*”—compelled him to go abroad for two years, and he carried on the description of the defence, with the aid of several officers, till the intervention of the Grand Duke Nicholas

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enabled him to execute the project he had formed of enlarging the original scope of the work, and, instead of a mere engineer's report, to make it a history of the war in the Crimea. The special works published in France and England, he says, related mainly to the attack, and the statements which they contained concerning the defence were for the most part erroneous. He found the French and English plans not only opposed to each other, but full of discrepancies in themselves, and he therefore caused a new survey to be made of the ground by horizontal sections, which he verified in order to correct the errors in those plans, and in the drawings of the Russian engineers. At last, in 1861, he began in earnest. "To raise a literary monument to be worthy of the immortal defence, I could not give to my work," he says in his Dedication to the Emperor, "more solid foundations than truth and impartiality." A modern Pilate might ask, indeed, "What is truth?" after reading Mr. Kinglake's first volume and General Todleben's opening chapter. The Russian declares that England made the question of the Holy Places, in which she had no earthly or heavenly interest, a pretext for the war she so much desired in consequence of the increasing influence of Russia in the East. Up to the time of

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THE MARCH OF RUSSIA.

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Peter the Great, the policy and ambition of Russia had been Oriental, but from that period she became at once of the East and of the West. Peter gave her the dominion of the Baltic, and Catherine II. secured her supremacy in the Black Sea. Never losing sight of the suffering Christians in the East, who seemed specially confided to her guardianship, she pushed her way till the partition of Poland established her influence in Europe, which culminated when her glorious efforts against Napoleon placed her at the head of the Holy Alliance at the Congress of Vienna.

The Russian view of the causes which led to the war is very unlike those of the English or French historians. Indeed, if the views agreed, there would have been no war. But M. de Todleben unconsciously affords good grounds for concurring with those who have never ceased to regard Russia with mistrust, and have always denounced her as a persistent, unscrupulous aggressor. In a few pages he draws a picture of the means by which she has achieved the greatness she possesses, which justifies the assertions of her worst enemies. What do we see on his canvas? The incessant march of an army, first towards the east and south of Asia, then towards the north, then

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towards eastern Europe, till the Czars of Moscow, at the end of the sixteenth century, had established themselves in Central Asia, in northern Asia, on the shores of the Caspian, and at the foot of the Caucasus. From the east the Czars crept on, sword in hand, slow, but sure, and by degrees Livonia and Poland felt their power, and Sweden in vain endeavoured to stem their massive hordes. The Russians exercised all the force of a barbarian invasion, with a fixed principle and a base of operations behind it. The successors of Peter—the rock of the empire—made war and religion work harmoniously together. “Each victory over the Turks, each advantage obtained by her, became an additional motive for Russia,” says M. de Todleben, “to insert in the treaties of peace some clause intended either to improve the condition of the Christians in Turkey, or to stipulate for the creation of new rights in their favour.” By such means Russia became the *natural* protectress of the Christians under the rule of the Sublime Porte. It will be seen at once that no such claim could be admitted without putting an end to the integrity of Turkey, but the Russian of to-day is as ready to make it as was the Russian of 1853. Destroying every trace of national life in her path, the power