

Review article

The Crimean War and its lessons for today

DAVID WEDGWOOD BENN

The Crimean War: a history. By Orlando Figes. New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt. 2011. 575pp. \$35.00. Index. ISBN 978 0 80507 460 4.

The Crimean War of 1854–6 has been described in many books. Nevertheless, the present book, written by a professor of history at the University of London, does in important ways supply a new dimension to the subject. It provides a wealth of new colour and detail, mentioning for instance that France bore the brunt of the fighting and that 40 American doctors volunteered their services on the Russian side. Above all, it places the war in its historical context, relying not just on English but on French, Russian and Turkish sources. The subject is of obvious importance to diplomatic historians—and also to military historians, if only because it seems to provide a textbook example of how not to conduct a war.

The most important fact about this conflict, as Orlando Figes demonstrates, is that it was not a minor episode: it was, in several ways, a landmark event. For one thing, it was the only time in history when Britain and Russia went to war (the Allied intervention after the Bolshevik Revolution was in fact an intervention in a civil war). Casualties were enormous: some 750,000 soldiers died, two-thirds of them Russian, along with countless civilians. It was also a landmark event in other ways—for example, in medical history, since most of the casualties occurred not on the battlefield but as a result of disease. In Britain it marked an important stage in the history of the press, which played a major part in fuelling anti-Russian sentiment. Many aspects of the conflict have contemporary echoes—for example, in respect of an anti-Russian rebellion in Chechnya. Moreover, then as now, the conflict was to a considerable extent fuelled by both religion and nationalism.

One of the greatest problems for historians is to clarify exactly why the conflict broke out. On one view, it originated in a violent dispute, sometimes leading to physical fighting, between Catholics and Greek Orthodox clergy over who had the right to the keys of the Holy Places in Jerusalem, then part of the Ottoman Empire. A more convincing explanation of the conflict concerned the fate of the Ottoman Empire itself. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, this empire (predominantly Muslim, although not predominantly Turkish) had embraced North Africa, together with most of the Middle East and the Balkans. It was, nevertheless an empire in decline. Its large Christian minority was disaffected.

Already by the early 1830s, Greece (with British support) had won its independence, while Algeria was in the process of being colonized by France. There were expectations in both Russia and the West that the breakup of this empire would create a power vacuum—and consequent power rivalry.

European peace had since 1815 been based on the Congress of Vienna and the 'Holy Alliance' of the victorious powers, dedicated to stamping out the legacy of the French Revolution. Nevertheless, the Great Powers each had their own self-interested agendas and never fully trusted each other. (America, although never a belligerent, also distrusted Britain, fearing a British attack from Canada—which largely explains its pro-Russian sympathies.) The Russian tsar sought to establish a protectorate over the Ottoman Empire's Orthodox subjects. France's prime objective was to restore its international status, following its defeat in 1815. Britain still distrusted France but feared above all that Russia would fill the vacuum created by the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and threaten British India.

The momentum towards war had, as Figes demonstrates, been building up ever since the 1830s. It was, however, building in slow motion, because none of the rival powers felt confident of being able to win an all-out conflict. Hence a confusing sequence of threats of force alternating with efforts at diplomacy. The Russian tsar, Nicholas I, had at one time believed that Russian interests would be best served by weakening the Ottoman Empire, rather than by promoting its collapse; but he subsequently changed his mind. In 1844 he travelled incognito to London, and in talks with Queen Victoria and British ministers proposed a joint plan for the partition of this empire. Apparently he left with the impression that the British would acquiesce.

Given the lack of enthusiasm for a European war, the Great Powers preferred to pursue their aims by lesser means. The British sought to prop up the Ottoman Empire as an anti-Russian buffer state; they also supplied arms to the Chechen and other Caucasian rebels and undertook an ill-fated invasion of Afghanistan in 1839. In the 1820s the tsar sought to weaken the Ottoman Empire by supporting the Orthodox populations in the Balkans. Not only did Russia assist the cause of Greek independence, it used this as a pretext for occupying the Danubian principalities (broadly, the territory of present-day Romania), and in 1829 forced the Turks to accept their autonomy under a Russian protectorate. Later, in 1848, the 'year of revolutions' in Europe, the tsar again sent troops to occupy the principalities—for the purpose of suppressing a popular uprising in Romania.

Nicholas I was beyond doubt one of the most despotic and reactionary Russian rulers, even by the standards of the time. In 1831, he ruthlessly suppressed a Polish uprising against Russian rule, and in 1849 (in the interests of the Holy Alliance) he sent troops to crush a Hungarian uprising against Austrian rule. All this understandably fuelled anti-Russian sentiment in Britain—but did not fully explain British attitudes. As Figes points out with reference to an abundance of source material, 'Russophobia (even more than Francophobia) was arguably the most important element in Britain's outlook on the world' in the years preceding the Crimean War. Already in 1829 a pamphlet had appeared on 'The practicalities of

a [Russian] invasion of India' (p. 49). A magazine article of 1835 claimed that 'the ignorance of the Russian people separates them from all community with the feelings of other nations' (p. 75). The obsessive (and groundless) fear began to take hold that Russian expansion threatened British rule in India. Some of the Russophobic literature went even further: a document entitled 'The Testament of Peter the Great' which appeared in a French translation in 1812 suggested that Russia aimed not merely to conquer Europe but to dominate the world (pp. 70–72). The document was later shown to be an eighteenth-century forgery, but literature in both Britain and France regularly depicted Russians as barbarians and exerted a powerful influence.

Probably the most influential anti-Russian figure of the time was Viscount Palmerston, who became prime minister in 1855 after the outbreak of war. He revealed his Russophobic sentiments when he described a Russian diplomat as 'civil and courteous externally' but with 'all the cunning of a half-civilised savage' (p. 413). As early as 1833 he wrote that there was 'no reasonable doubt' of Russia's intentions to expand to the south, and that it was therefore of vital importance for Britain to consider 'how Russia can be prevented from pushing her advantage further' (p. 45). He eventually concluded that the Russian threat could be countered only by the dismemberment of the Russian Empire, including the liberation of Poland from Russian rule. A robust Whig imperialist, Palmerston was arguably the pioneer of 'liberal interventionism', claiming that Britain should, subject to the rules of prudence, be ready to intervene abroad against injustice. Another factor tipping the balance towards war was the newly emerging power of the British press. Newspaper distribution had expanded largely because of the development of the railways; and anti-Russian stories gained increasing prominence, because they boosted sales. The result, as the then Prime Minister Lord Aberdeen (1852–55) noted, was that governments had to please the press; and it was in 1855 that a *Times* editor first used the now familiar phrase 'the fourth estate'.

Turkey declared war on Russia in 1853, after rejecting Russian demands for extended rights over the Danubian principalities. In retaliation, Russia destroyed the Turkish fleet, which in turn provoked outrage in Britain. Russian troops, however, evacuated the principalities following the arrival there of British and French troops. At that stage, as Figes points out, it might have been possible to offer the tsar a face-saving way out—by merely insisting that Russia permanently leave the principalities. That might have been enough to deter a Russian attack on the Ottoman Empire. But the British rejected this solution, since they were by then committed to the goal of effectively bringing Russia to its knees.

The British declaration of war on 27 March 1854 was only the beginning of the problem, for the allies were unable to agree on either the war's aims or its tactics. The French, as the book reminds us, bore the brunt of the fighting, having supplied three times as many troops as the British. But there was strong distrust between the allies. As recently as 1853, the British, alarmed by the reappearance of a Bonapartist dynasty in France, had made preparations against a French invasion.

The 'Crimean War' was not in fact confined to the Crimea: it involved an abortive naval expedition to Kronstadt, the gateway to Saint Petersburg, as well as a British-backed Chechen rebellion. But even when the Crimean port of Sevastopol, which housed the Russian Black Sea fleet, was chosen as the main focus of attack, there were still disagreements over tactics. A swift assault on the city, following the allied landings on the peninsula, might have produced a quick victory. But the French opted for a lengthy siege, prolonging the ordeal for the armies on both sides. Sevastopol had to endure an extended bombardment, although it had time to prepare its defences. Meanwhile British troops were exposed to the full severity of the Crimean winter.

It was the failure to plan for the war which, above all, exposed British incompetence. The French, with recent experience of war in Algeria, were professionally far better prepared. By contrast, Lord Raglan, the British commander, had had no combat experience since the Battle of Waterloo, where he had lost an arm. British planners were apparently unaware of winter conditions in the Crimea: they had equipped their troops only with summer uniforms. Hence the disastrous incidence of sickness due to frostbite (as well as cholera, whose causes were not at that time understood). Medical preparations were virtually absent: British wounded were taken to a hospital in Turkey where even toilet facilities and bandages for the wounded were lacking.

Against this background, the British press asserted its newly found authority. War correspondents and photographers for the first time brought home the horrors of the war. Newspaper pressure forced the resignation of the Prime Minister Lord Aberdeen and his replacement by Lord Palmerston, the most determined advocate for continuing the war.

From a military point of view, Russia was at all times inferior to its adversaries. Tsar Alexander II, who succeeded his father on the latter's death in 1855, was eventually forced, under pressure from his military advisers, to ask for peace. This was brokered by Napoleon III, who compelled a reluctant Palmerston to agree and who hosted the peace conference in Paris in 1856. Under its terms, Russia lost its claim to a protectorate over the Sultan's Orthodox subjects; it was forced to cede territory to Turkey; and, most important of all, it was forced to accept the demilitarization of the Black Sea, which deprived it of an important defensive weapon. This defeat became a source of long-lasting resentment—although the defence of Sevastopol became a matter of great national pride: it was here that Leo Tolstoy, who witnessed the siege, first made his national reputation.

By and large, none of the aims of the belligerents were achieved. Russia failed to establish its protectorate; Britain failed in the end either to preserve the Ottoman Empire or to dismember the Russian. Nor did it achieve its ostensible aim of independence for the Poles and Chechens. The Chechen revolt collapsed following the loss of British support; and even Palmerston eventually decided that a war over Poland would be too risky. Perhaps the main beneficiary of the war—in terms of prestige—was Napoleon III. But it was a short-lived success, since Napoleon was soon to be overthrown following the Franco-Prussian war of 1870.

After that war, Russia was able to annul the provision for the demilitarization of the Black Sea.

The Crimean War did have some beneficial side-effects. It stimulated advances in medicine. Anaesthetics were pioneered, especially by the Russian surgeon Nikolai Pirogov, when carrying out amputations; British doctors also used them, although divided about their value, apparently regarding them as incompatible with the British 'stiff upper lip'. Florence Nightingale drew attention to the importance of elementary medical hygiene, although the death rate in her hospital was much higher than on the battlefield, since the hospital was built above a sewer. Probably the main, indirect, benefit of the war was that it was followed, in 1861, by the emancipation of the serfs in Russia.

Figes (p. xxxi) rejects the view that this was an 'unnecessary' war—and this is the one criticism which might be made of this book. In the opinion of Henry Kissinger, which is not quoted, the war was 'senseless and utterly avoidable'.¹ The aim of thwarting Russian expansion could, one feels, have been much more effectively prevented without war by Kissinger-style diplomacy.

Today, however, the Crimean War is important because of its contemporary significance. For one thing, as Figes emphasizes, it was to a large extent fuelled by both religion and nationalism. Then as now, these can be potent forces—and are not always benign. Xenophobic nationalism is certainly not benign, but is far from universal. As for religion, the very idea of Catholics and Orthodox fighting over their rights in the Holy Places of Jerusalem now seems absurd.

But there is a further reason for the continuing relevance of the Crimean War. The collapse of communism has not put an end to antagonism between Russia and the West; and this has created at least a potential risk of anti-Russian sentiment in the West. It has a certain plausibility, because it can be argued that the brutality of Soviet rule was a Russian as much as a communist feature, and that the Russian 'bear' remains a despotic power with expansionist tendencies. This, incidentally, is something which both the political right and left in the outside world can agree on. On this, both Palmerston and Karl Marx were of one mind.

But such an approach, in the opinion of this reviewer, is dangerously destructive. Russian nationalism, unlike the German nationalism of the last century, was never militaristic, nor was it based on the idea of a 'master race'. Russian rule was sometimes barbaric, but the Russian people were the victims of barbarism rather than its perpetrators. In Russia—as in the Arab world—the path to democracy has been difficult; this does not mean that democracy is unattainable.

This is not a defence of the Russian nationalism of today; and it is disturbing to learn from the book that in 2008 a historians' conference, with presidential approval, effectively rehabilitated Nicholas I. It is, however, an argument for re-examining western attitudes to Russia, which, as this book shows, were often driven by fantasy, half-truths and false information.

This book offers abundant food for thought to historians both here and in Russia. One hopes that a Russian translation will in due course appear.

¹ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York and London: Simon & Schuster, 1994), pp. 92–3.