

Trudi Tate, *A Short History of the Crimean War* (I. B. Tauris, 2019)

The Crimean War (1854-56) was the first war to be photographed; the first to be reported by eye-witness journalists; the first to be depicted by commissioned war artists. It was the first to make use of the telegraph. In short, it was the first war to make use of modern methods of representation. These representations played a vital role in shaping the cultural memories of the conflict.

The Crimean War profoundly affected the domestic politics of the main combatant nations. It was also important to the other great powers, Austria and Prussia, as well as Sardinia, which joined the war in 1855. And it was felt in places far away – Australia, Jamaica, and India, at least as story, or fantasy. The war was important to the United States, which at this time was a rival to Britain and on good terms with Russia. Had the war continued into 1856, it might well have developed into a world war, setting Britain against the US and drawing in other European powers. As it was, it helped to sow the seeds of the catastrophe of the First World War, 1914-18.

The conflict we now call the Crimean War was known at the time as the Russian War, or the War in the East, and it was fought across a wide geographical area, not just in the Crimea. Important parts of the struggle took place by the Danube, in the Sea of Azov, the Caucasus, the White Sea, the Pacific, and above all in the Baltic. Indeed, the outcome of the war was decided largely in the Baltic, where the British navy blockaded Russian trade and threatened St Petersburg, then the capital of the vast Russian empire. British history and cultural memory tend to focus on the courage and the suffering witnessed in the Crimea, where approximately half a million soldiers died, the majority of disease and neglect rather than in active combat. These experiences were real, but in the end, they counted for little in terms of the peace settlement. What we remember as the 'Crimean War' is only part of the full history. Indeed, the Crimean War of popular memory is, in certain ways, a fiction. How that fiction was formed in historical and cultural memory is part of the story I tell here.

The Crimean War has attracted less interest from historians than other European wars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For a long time it was remembered as a land war, with the naval actions in the Baltic regarded as unimportant. In fact, we now know that the navy achieved the most effective actions of the war, but these were not reported in much detail at the time, and were not seriously researched by historians until the late twentieth century.

The war and the press

For more than a century, historians drew a lot of their information about the war from the newspapers. While Russell's reports were generally accurate – unlike much reporting from later wars – our reliance upon the press means that the interests of the newspapers have shaped the historical narrative. In particular, because the journalists were at the Crimea, and not much elsewhere during the war, it was the Crimea that was represented in most detail, most discussed, and seen by civilians at the time as most important. But this is a distortion of the military and historical reality. We need a more cautious attitude towards the press. It is hugely valuable as one of the voices at the time, but its significance is too often over-stated. The newspapers' attitudes (particularly those of *The Times*) have been allowed to dominate cultural memory, and that has hindered our understanding of the full history.

The Times

The Times frequently presented itself as the voice of 'public opinion' and the spokesman for the middle classes. Many people took this claim seriously, including within government, and it has been repeated frequently in histories of the war. In fact, we have very limited knowledge of public opinion in the 1850s. At the time, 'Public opinion' was frequently invoked, even blamed, for many decisions made about the war. This was partly true, as the franchise had been extended in 1832, so that about 20% of men could now vote, and more people were able to engage with

the events of the day through the press. But it was also a myth and needs to be treated with some scepticism.

A Short History of the Crimean War takes a fresh look at Britain's involvement in the war, describing the familiar military history alongside the lesser-known but crucial naval history. These narratives are interwoven with discussions of representations of the war, in the newspapers, memoirs, poetry, and photography, as well as eye-witness reports in letters and diaries of serving soldiers and medical officers. Read together, the representations can give us some understanding of how the war was experienced – as grim reality by those present – and how it was perceived or imagined by those watching on the spot, and by others far away. The book explores how the Crimean War affected Britain's sense of itself, its armed forces, and the very idea of warfare.

The Crimean War has something to teach us now, not least about how we can be persuaded into war, when it might not be in our best interests; and how we remember and misremember warfare, especially when we are observing it from a distance. Today, this history should remind us how hard-won and precious is peace in Europe.

Trudi Tate, *A Short History of the Crimean War* (I. B. Tauris, 2019). ISBN: 9781848858619.