**Directions:** Read, Annotate, and Answer the Questions that follow on a separate piece of paper, and be ready to Discuss.

# The Crimean War

*By Andrew Lambert*
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The Crimean War, famed for the 'Charge of the Light Brigade', would fundamentally alter the balance of power in Europe and set the stage for World War One.

## The Vienna Settlement

At the end of the Napoleonic wars, the Great Powers assembled in Vienna to restore the European state system – a delicate balance between the various major and minor powers that restrained aggression by the mighty, and upheld the rights of the weak.

They hoped to build a permanent peace by suppressing revolutionary republics and upholding stable, orderly monarchies. Despite the divergent aims and ambitions of Russia, Prussia, Austria, Britain and France, a compromise was created, following the brief interruption of Napoleon's 'Hundred Days' and the Battle of Waterloo.

**Nicholas decided to settle the 'sick man of Europe' by carving up the European part of Turkey.**

After the Treaty of Vienna the great powers enjoyed three decades of peace, years in which industrial, political, economic, social and nationalist pressures were suppressed or deflected. But eventually the Vienna system broke down. The initial problem was the weakness of the Ottoman-Turkish empire, and the opportunities this provided for European interference in support of the Christian populations.

The new president of France, Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, exploited Turkish weakness to secure concessions for the Catholic church in Palestine, hoping to gain conservative support for his planned *coup d'etat*. When Tsar Nicholas I of Russia retaliated, sending a mission to recover Greek Orthodox rights, the Turks simply gave way to both parties, and hoped the issue would go away.

Having established the Second Empire, (Louis) Napoleon III lost interest, but Nicholas decided to settle the 'sick man of Europe' once and for all. Expecting support from Prussia, Austria and Britain, he planned to carve up the European part of Turkey.

He was mistaken, neither Britain nor Austria wanted to see Russia controlling the Dardanelles. Sensing an opening for a useful diplomatic success France joined Britain in support of Turkey, which rejected the Tsar's outrageous terms.

## Road to war

In July 1853, Russia occupied the Danubian Principalities (Moldavia and Walachia) to pressure Istanbul, but this threatened Austria's economic lifeline - the Danube. For a 'sick man', Turkey proved remarkably dextrous and aggressive. Outwitting Austria, Britain and France, who still favoured a diplomatic settlement, they declared war in October 1853 and attacked the Russians.


Istanbul at sunset ©

In late November, the Russian Black Sea fleet annihilated a Turkish squadron at Sinope. Britain, anxious to secure her trade with Turkey and access to India by maintaining the Ottoman regime, saw this as an insult and popular opinion made a vigorous response inevitable.

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The arriviste French empire, for its part, was desperate for military glory and revenge for its defeat at the hands of Russia in 1812. For them, the Ottoman-Turkish empire was incidental.

Britain and France demanded that Russia evacuate the Danubian Principalities, setting their ultimatum to expire in late March 1854 - the timing determined by the break up of the Baltic ice fields off Reval where the British hoped to annihilate part of the Russian Baltic fleet.

Britain always saw its main instrument for the coercion of Russia to be naval force in the north. After all, Russia's capital was on the Baltic littoral, close to her other great security concern, Poland.

The ultimatum expired and although the harbour at Reval was empty, the powerful Anglo-French fleet nonetheless took command of the Baltic, destroying the key fortress of Bomarsund in August 1854.

## Outbreak of war

At the outbreak of war, an allied army of 60,000 was already in Turkey to defend Istanbul. Austria then joined French and British demands that Russia evacuate the Danubian Principalities, whereupon Nicholas I actually agreed, thereby calling the allies' bluff.


British troops are cheered as they set off for the Crimea ©

This forced the allied army, which had moved up to Varna on the Bulgarian coast, to change its strategy. By early August Austrian troops had created a neutral buffer between the combatants. With a powerful force in position, but ravaged by a cholera epidemic, the allies adopted a British plan to land in the Crimea, assault the naval base at Sevastopol and destroy the fleet and dockyard.

**The Russians were so frightened by the cold courage of the British troopers, they never again dared face them in the open field.**

They expected this would take 12 weeks. In the event in took twelve months, three major land battles and countless actions between two large and well equipped armies deeply entrenched just outside the city.

The battle of the Alma on 20 September 1854 was the first in which new rifled muskets were used, although only by the British and French. This advantage, in concert with superior skill, initiative and numbers, enabled the allies to drive the Russians out of a strong position north of Sevastopol.

They failed to follow up the blow by attacking Sevastopol directly, largely to avoid a rupture in allied command system, and marched around the city to begin a regular siege from the south. This allowed the Russians time to fortify the city, and stage two flank attacks from their field army, based in the central Crimea.

The first, the Battle of Balaclava on 24 October, ended with the legendary British 'Charge of the Light Brigade', which was, although misguided, an astonishingly successful operation of war, with relatively light casualties - only 118 killed out of 620. The Russians were so frightened by the cold courage of the British troopers, they never again dared face them in the open field.

On 5 November, a major Russian attack at the Inkerman was beaten back with massive losses by isolated British infantry units. A week later the weather broke, sinking transport ships, ruining vital roads and bringing the campaign to a standstill. Over the winter, the allies were joined by the Italian kingdom of Sardinia, which sent a useful army to secure British and French support for the expulsion of Austria from Italy.

## Treaty of Paris

In the spring of 1855, the allies, heavily reinforced with French troops and employing improved logistics, began to batter their way into Sevastopol, and British gunboats cut Russian supply lines across the Sea of Azov.



The 'Valley of the Shadow of Death', near the location of the Charge of the Light Brigade ©

After a last despairing counter attack in August, the Russians were resigned to defeat and evacuated the city following the storming of the vital Malakhov bastion by French troops on 9 September 1855. With that, the allies settled down to destroy the docks and tinker at the margins of the Russian empire. The Russians, for their part, took the Turkish city of Kars and held off Circassian Shi'ite rebels.

**The Baltic, where so many key events took place, was ignored, because the casualties were minimal.**

In the Baltic, the allies had demolished the fortress and arsenal of Sweaborg, outside Helsinki, in August, and threatened Cronstadt and St Petersburg. With France anxious to end the war and harvest the prestige of victory, Britain needed a strategy to ensure he Russians accepted the demilitarisation of the Black Sea and the European settlement of the Turkish question.

The massing of naval forces for an attack on Cronstadt-St Petersburg backed up allied demands, and in early 1856 Russia accepted an Austro-French initiative.

Further afield, the allies had also attacked Russia in the White Sea and the Pacific, but it was the heroism and blunders of the Crimea, along with the pioneering nursing work of Florence Nightingale and others, that came to dominate the literature. The Baltic, where so many key events took place, was ignored, because the casualties were minimal.

At the Treaty of Paris, signed on March 30, 1856, Russia returned southern Bessarabia and the mouth of the Danube to Turkey; Moldavia, Walachia and Serbia were placed under an international rather than a Russian guarantee; the Sultan promised to respect the rights of his Christian subjects; and the Russians were forbidden to maintain a navy on the Black Sea, or refortify Bomarsund.

## Human cost

In military terms, the war was a midway point between Waterloo and World War One. The armies employed Napoleonic uniforms and tactics, but improved weapons. It emphasised the overriding importance of logistics, entrenchments and firepower, anticipating the experience of the American Civil War (1861-1865).

In addition it saw the first military use of many innovations, such as armoured warships, the intercontinental electric telegraph, submarine mines and war photography. American experts were quick to visit the Crimean, and published a full report on 'The Art of War in Europe' in 1861, just in time to shape their own conflict.

**The human aspect of the conflict was recognised in Britain by the introduction of the Victoria Cross.**


The Victoria Cross ©

The human cost was immense, 25,000 British, 100,000 French and up to a million Russians died, almost all of disease and neglect. The human aspect of the conflict was recognised in Britain by the introduction of the highest decoration for gallantry. Unlike other medals, the Victoria Cross was awarded to officers and men without distinction.

It has long been believed that all Victoria Crosses are made from a captured Russian bronze gun, seized at Sevastopol, but the cannon in question was in fact Chinese.

## Media coverage

This was the first media war, typified by Times correspondent William Howard Russell, who sent first-hand dispatches from the front line. His reports, often exaggerated or partial, caught the attention of the public, and played a large part in bringing down the prime minister, Lord Aberdeen's government in January 1855.

Roger Fenton's photographs brought the Crimean battlefields to life, while the electric telegraph enabled news to travel across the continent in hours, not weeks. War became much more immediate - a massive leap forward on the way to our age of instant global coverage by satellite.


Roger Fenton's van and assistant ©

**William Howard Russell refused to become an 'embedded' journalist.**

Many officers regretted the presence of reporters, regarding them as a source of security leaks, and tried to control the news. But it was without success. To use the modern parlance, Russell refused to become an 'embedded' journalist.

Reports of the suffering of the sick and wounded - and far more were sick than wounded - inspired a number of organisations and individuals to set out for the war zone to minister to the soldiers.

Florence Nightingale became national heroine, although her work was essentially hospital management, while Mary Seacole combined a profitable canteen business in the Crimean with combat nursing. By 1856, Britain cared about the health of its soldiers and Florence Nightingale continued to campaign tirelessly to improve their conditions.

## 'Cold War'

The British had waged a limited war, relying on naval power, economic blockade, allies and industrial output to secure their aims. In mid-1855, Prime Minister Lord Palmerston had a choice between a limited war and a 'total war' effort to destroy Russia in the field.

Total war, of the kind waged during the world wars, would however require widespread social and political reform. He elected instead to limit the war and preserve the existing system.

**The Ottoman empire, excluded from the Vienna settlement of 1815, was brought into the European political system.**

Only Britain had the luxury of such choices. Even so, this conflict was a major success in the 19th century equivalent of the Cold War - the Anglo-Russian rivalry for global empire and influence. Russia would pose no further threat to British interests for close on 30 years.

The Crimean War was also a watershed in Western involvement in the Middle East. The Ottoman empire, excluded from the Vienna settlement of 1815, was brought into the European political system.

At the same time, the war continued the process of dismantling the Ottoman's multi-ethnic, multi-faith Eurasian Empire, developing nationalist ambitions in various Ottoman provinces, from Bulgaria to Arabia – ambitions that would exploited in World War One, when new nations and new boundaries would be drawn.

The current conflict in Chechnya is another legacy of the much misunderstood Crimean War.

## A new Europe

More fundamentally, the Crimean War witnessed the collapse of the Vienna Settlement, the system that had enabled Austria, Britain, France, Prussia and Russia to cooperate and maintain peace for three decades. Russia lost the war and with it the myth of Russian might, the legacy of 1812, was shattered.


British soldiers go 'over the top' in World War One ©

The other big loser would be neutral Austria. Within a decade it had been expelled from territory held in Germany and Italy and forced to enter into a dual-monarchy with Hungary, formerly a subject province. Multinational empires were on notice - the 19th century was an age of nations.

**Britain was unable to balance the new system, and the European Great Powers finally returned to war in 1914.**

The shock of defeat forced Russia to adopt a programme of sweeping internal reforms and industrialisation under Tsar Alexander II, who came to throne in early 1855. Elsewhere, Russia's defeat facilitated the unification of Germany under Prussian control. While France became the dominant military land power in Europe, this was a temporary situation and one that Prussia (Germany) overturned in 1870-1871.

Sardinian intervention ensured the kingdom a central role in the unification of Italy. The Crimean War laid the foundations for two powerful new nation states - Italy and Germany - states that would be united and secured in short, limited conflicts. The new six-power European system proved less stable than its predecessor, while the expectation that political and diplomatic aims could be satisfied by war led these states to adopt ever closer alliances.

Ultimately, Britain was unable to balance the new system and the European Great Powers finally returned to war in 1914, ninety-nine years after the Vienna Settlement. The Crimean War was a decisive turning point in European history, marking the end of the Vienna settlement, and the beginning of a new system.

## Find out more

**Books**

*The Charge* by M Adkin (Leo Cooper, 1996)

*The Crimean War, 1853-1856* by W Baumgart (Arnold, 1999)

*Britain and the Crimea, 1855-56: Problems of War and Peace* by J B Conacher (St Martin's, 1988)

*Russia's Crimean War* by J S Curtiss (Duke UP, 1979)

*The Origins of the Crimean War* by David M Goldfrank (Longman, 1994)

*The Crimean War: British Grand Strategy, 1853-56* by Andrew D Lambert (Manchester University Press, 1990)

*'I have done my Duty': Florence Nightingale in the Crimean War, 1854-56* by Florence Nightingale, (Manchester University Press, 1987)

*The Banner of Battle: the Story of the Crimean War* by Alan Palmer (St Martin's Press, 1987)

*The Origins of the Crimean Alliance* by A P Saab (Virginia UP, 1977)

*. Austria, Great Britain and the Crimean War: The destruction of the European Concert* by P W Schroeder (Cornell UP, 1972)

## About the author

Andrew Lambert is Laughton professor of naval history at King's College, London. His three-part television series 'War at Sea' was broadcast on the BBC in 2004.

### Questions:

1. What caused the Crimean War?
2. What were the major outcomes of the war?
3. How does this disrupt the Concert of Europe?
4. What role might the change in balance of power play in the revolutions that follow?