The Crimean War

BY EUGENE FINERMAN

A catastrophic collision of forces in the mid-19th century helped modernize warfare by introducing the telegraph, modern nursing methods and more.
For centuries, Great Britain’s mastery of the sea was a chief focus. For all its seeming audacity, the plan was actually feasible. The prosperity and protection of the world’s greatest empire depended on that. But Britain also maintained a keen interest in the balance of power in Europe, and in the mid-19th century, a new threat arose to that balance: Russia.

The interests of imperial Russia were not defined by commerce and politics. No, Russia’s policy was animated by a mystical sense of identity. The bastion of Orthodox Christianity and self-anointed champion of the Slavic people, Russia felt entitled to liberate them. Turkish forces were heroic but incompetent; Russia’s army was soon in Bucharest. The Romanians probably preferred the Russians to the Turks, but that was not Britain’s concern. The status quo was, and Britain was prepared to prop up the collapsing Ottoman Empire. So was France. France’s foreign policy reflected the ambitions and insecurities of its new emperor, Louis Napoleon. Looking back on two centuries of French defeats, especially his uncle’s (the empire-building Napoleon Bonaparte ultimately fell from power after launching an invasion of Russian in the summer of 1812), this Bonaparte decided it was far wiser to be England’s ally than its foe.

In case the Russians entertained any plan to cross the Danube and liberate Bulgaria, the British fleet sailed into the Black Sea and a French army landed in Varna, Bulgaria. That dissuaded the Russian crusade. In fact, Russia withdrew her forces from Romania. The status quo seemed restored, but Britain was not so easily satisfied. Russia had to be humiliated, and the allies imagined a brilliant way to do it. The Russians had just one naval base on the Black Sea: the Crimean port of Sevastopol. As an affront to Russian pride and proof of their power, the British and French would invade Crimea and seize Sevastopol. Though definitely a bold move, the plan had potential.

As an affront to Russian pride and proof of their power, the British and French would invade Crimea and seize Sevastopol. Though definitely a bold move, the plan had potential.
mainland. The Russian army was poorly equipped, armed with muskets against the allies’ rifles. Lacking railroads, Russia could not easily reinforce or supply its forces in the Crimea. So the allies expected to land in Crimea and quickly take Sevastopol. On Sept. 14, 1854, their invasion began, a force of 50,000 men landing north of the port. Some 30,000 Russian soldiers awaited them … and were routed. Moving on to Sevastopol, the allied generals soon realized that a quick capture of the city was not realistic. Besieging Sevastopol seemed more prudent.

The allies started digging in, encircling the city with 75 miles of trenches. Reinforcements brought their total to 175,000 men. Warfare at the time still adhered to a certain chivalry; civilians were permitted to evacuate the city before Sevastopol was subjected to continuous bombardment. Perhaps to their surprise, the allies found themselves in more miserable circumstances than the 80,000 besieged Russian troops. The siege of Sevastopol would last a year. But the British and French had made no plans for a long campaign, let alone a siege. No provision had been made for a Russian winter: not warm clothing, fuel or shelter. The allies eventually supplied their men with tents and huts, but not before thousands died of illness and exposure.

Of course, the Russians made repeated attempts to break the siege. One of their few victories was actually a British blunder: the Charge of the Light Brigade. Responding to the Russian attack, a British commander led his cavalry in the wrong direction, charging a formidable and irrelevant Russian position. The brigade had 700 men; only 195 returned. Viewing the superb horsemanship and the pointless attack, a French general said, “It is magnificent, but it is not war.”

Worse for the British, the calamity was quickly publicized. Journalists had accompanied the army and, with access
to telegraphs, could transmit their stories. A courier would carry the
dispatches on a boat, a day’s voyage
from Crimea to Varna, Bulgaria, where
the French had established a telegraph
line. From there, the news could be sent
to Paris and London. So, three days after
the Charge of the Light Brigade,
Londoners could read the dismaying
details in their morning newspapers.
By the autumn of 1855, with a 310-mile-
long cable under the Black Sea, the
telegraph line extended to Crimea.

While “the thin red line” of infantry
remained heroes, those men faced far
worse adversity than Cossack cavalry:
incompetent officers, inadequate
supplies and appalling medical care. If
a soldier was wounded on the battlefield
or sickened in the squalid camps, he
first had to survive a 300-mile voyage
on the Black Sea to the Barracks
Hospital in Scutari, Turkey. Awaiting
him were conditions of filth and neglect
that Florence Nightingale described as
“the Kingdom of Hell.” The Barracks
Hospital had a mortality rate of 52
percent. No battle was as deadly.

Responding to the public outrage,
the British government sponsored a
nursing mission to Barracks Hospital.
A group of 38 nurses was led by
Florence Nightingale. Until Miss
Nightingale, nursing was not a vocation
but a joke. However, the need for
methodical care of the sick was real, and
the young British heiress made it her
life’s work. Studying health care abroad,
she returned to England to practice
nursing and train others who shared her
dedication. She arrived at Barracks
Hospital and reported the scandalous
squalor: “a washing once in 80 days for
2,300 men. The consequences of all this
are fever, cholera, gangrene. … “ She
and her nurses instituted and
maintained a standard of care: bathing
the sick, laundering their clothes and
bedsheets, ensuring regular and healthy
meals. Nightingale seemed tireless.
Supervising the wards through the
night, she came to be known as “the
lady with the lamp.” Thanks to her
and her nurses, the mortality rate at
the Barracks Hospital declined to
20 percent.

Sevastopol finally fell in September
1855. The war did not officially end
until March 1856. By the terms of the
Treaty of Paris, the status quo was
reestablished. Turkey still had nominal
control of Romania, although the region
was ceded autonomy. Otherwise,
500,000 Russian troops had died for
nothing and Russia’s economy was left
in ruins.

At least the British army, which had
lost only about 21,000 troops, was
willing to learn from the Crimean War.
The requirements for officers would
now be more than just social standing.
There would be staff colleges for
training them. Anyone above the rank
of captain actually had to earn it.
Finally, there was an acknowledgment
of the heroism and sacrifice of the
enlisted men. On June 26, 1857, Queen
Victoria thanked and honored 62
veterans of the Crimean War with a
medal “for gallantry in the face of the
enemy.” The medal, cast from captured
Russian cannons, was—and remains—
the highest award that Britain could
bestow upon a person in her armed
forces: the Victoria Cross.