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The Crimean War and its Afterlife: Making Modern Britain

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Author: Lara Kriegel
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Writing in *Macmillan's Magazine* a few years after the denouement of the Crimean War, Thomas Hughes, author of *Tom Brown's School Days*, declared that this conflict's 'drama ... will never fail deeply to move the heart of England, at least until the grave has closed over our generation.'⁽¹⁾ For Victorians this was a war which, unlike the Napoleonic Wars and Britain's various colonial military engagements between 1815 and 1854, felt strikingly different. 'Special artists', 'special correspondents', and photographers who travelled to the Black Sea peninsula rendered the battlefield and its horrors both immediate and visible. Telegraphy and servicemen's letters carried in the press added to the war's affective impact on the home front. The Crimean War also abruptly ended around four decades of peace in Europe, and drowned Victorians' paeans to peace and liberal internationalism which the Great Exhibition's Crystal Palace had given expression to in 1851. Hughes rightly surmised that this epoch-making conflict would linger in public consciousness for at least a generation. What he might have found rather astonishing is that its reverberations in British society and culture have continued ever since. This is what Lara Kriegel's highly original book, *The Crimean War and its Afterlife: Making Modern Britain*, is about.

Kriegel advances a compelling argument. The clue is in the book's title: the conflict that Britain fought in alliance with France, the Ottoman Empire, and Piedmont-Sardinia against the Russian Empire between 1854 and 1856 had a vibrant and complex afterlife, and its legacies shaped Britain's traditions, values, ideals, and culture from the moment Victorians unsheathed the sword to the present day. This volume does not retell the history of the origins of the war and its significance in the so-called 'Eastern Question'. Nor is it an account seeking to reconstruct the war's intricate diplomacy, or to examine its theatres in the Black Sea, the Baltic, and in a global context. Rather, Kriegel's fascinating and deeply researched book marks a significant addition to a recent body of scholarly literature which has shifted away from the paradigms of diplomatic and military history—the dominant genres in the historiography of the Crimean War—towards a more imaginative engagement with the multifaceted cultural impact of this conflict and its indelible place in the British imagination.⁽²⁾

Divided into three parts ('Persistence', 'Avatars', 'Angels'), *The Crimean War and its Afterlife* charts the manifold reverberations of a Victorian conflict—often dismissed as a blunder and an instance of colossal failure—over the ages. Its analytical framework convincingly employs the 'notion of afterlife' to capture the war's persistence in history and historical memory, and to uncover its bequests to modern Britain (p. 4). A condescending posterity and the cataclysm of twentieth-century total warfare did not relegate the Crimean War to the margins of British public consciousness. The six well-chosen case studies of the book make this abundantly clear. Its captivating historical tapestry portrays various moments in nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first-century history when the Crimea and its protagonists resurfaced in the minds of Britons and shaped their identity and sense of national belonging. A range of images, including a twentieth-century photograph of Crimean veterans (p. 11), an interwar travel poster for Soviet Russian Crimea (p. 51), and a picture of a souvenir handkerchief commemorating the 1920 Buckingham Palace Garden Party of Victoria Cross Heroes (p. 107), complement the book's lucidly written chapters and bring the war's afterlife to life.

The book's first chapter invites the reader to embark on a journey through history alongside an eclectic group of Crimean 'adventurers'. Drawing on a largely neglected pool of sources—primarily travel narratives—Kriegel reveals 'the precarious, if persistent, place of the Crimea in the British national imagination' (p. 22). Although there had been some travellers and writers producing accounts of the obscure peninsula since at least the late 1780s, following its annexation by Russia, the Crimea firmly entered British national consciousness in the 1850s, following the war's outbreak. Lectures, articles in newspapers, and personal accounts by British servicemen, nurses, chaplains, camp followers, and others written either for public consumption or for private circulation, acquainted readers with the Crimea as a 'terrain of lived experiences and wartime encounters' (p. 27). The end of the war did not mark the end of Britons' Crimean adventures. People who visited the peninsula in the following decades included military men, tourists, students, and New Women. Their country's recent wartime experiences forged a discursive framework within which they interrogated new conflicts and tensions on the geopolitical stage. The South African War, for example, saw a revival of interest in the Crimea. Its troubled history offered travellers a mixture of cautionary tales and lessons for the new century. Parallels between Russian 'barbarism' of the 1850s and Bolshevism were drawn by the British press in the early twentieth century. The Crimea occupied again an important place in British and Western minds during the Yalta Conference of 1945. The opening up of the peninsula to tourism after 1992 until its annexation by Russia in 2014 led newspapers to revisit the history of the Victorian conflict, and to encourage readers to travel to the Crimea swiftly in order to avoid its invasion—this time by British vacationers.

In Chapter 2, Kriegel considers the afterlife of the Charge of the Light Brigade, the most famous episode of the war on Britain's part, which took place in the battle of Balaklava on 25 October, 1854. The survivors of the fabled (albeit disastrous) Charge acquired lasting fame due to Alfred, Lord Tennyson's poem, 'The Charge of the Light Brigade', published in *The Examiner* in December 1854. Its stirring image of the 'Noble Six Hundred' riding into the 'Valley of Death' overwrapped disaster with an heroic ethos and the ideal of patriotic duty ('to do and die'). The poem sowed the 'Chargers' deeply into the British imagination. During the 1870s, illustrated prints, paintings, and commemorative events brought new attention to the hallowed incident and its protagonists. With the coming of the Great War, Victorian notions of heroic duty and sacrifice were brought into question. This meant that the Chargers who embodied these ideals became 'outdated emblems of the nineteenth century' (p. 73). However, Tennyson's poem remained well into the twentieth century 'an artifact of Victoriana in a changed world' (p. 77). In the decades after the end of World War II, the Charge became the focus of nostalgia-driven attempts to reconnect with a glorious past and to revivify Victorian 'values' (especially the notion of duty) at a time of decolonisation. But, during the 1960s, the Charge also attracted criticism from those associated with anti-war and countercultural movements. Tony Richardson's 1968 film, *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, reflected some of these

sentiments in its exploration of the futility of war. Ending the story in the twenty-first century, Kriegel reminds the reader that, in 2013, the BBC television series *Antiques Roadshow* starred a trumpeter who sounded the Charge on William Brittain's legendary bugle. Once again, the Crimean past reverberated into the present.

Chapter 3 focuses on the Victoria Cross. Established in 1856 by Queen Victoria, the Cross is one of the most distinguished and well-known legacies of the Crimean War. It remains one of the highest and most sought-after awards in the country. The years immediately after the war saw the Cross becoming more mainstream. A Victoria Cross Gallery opened in London in 1859, following the Indian Mutiny. In the late nineteenth century the Cross was awarded to Britons and colonial troops who fought the empire's wars. The result, according to Kriegel, was that military violence was sanitized and domesticated. More Victoria Crosses were awarded during the Great War than in any other conflict. Politics certainly played a role in this regard, as the Cross came to be seen as 'a tool of unity in a fracturing empire' (p. 103). The centennial celebrations in June 1956 saw Queen Elizabeth II paying tribute to the bravery of three hundred Victoria Cross winners in Hyde Park. The 'spirit of 1856' permeated the queen's address to the veterans (p. 111). The Victorian past resonated into the post-war present, and the Cross became once again a potent monarchical symbol. At the time of the Falklands War and Thatcher's ministry, 'the Cross played its role in refashioning Britain as a military power in the later twentieth century, while linking it to the gallant past of the Victorian age' (p. 115). In 2010, more than one and a half centuries after the establishment of the Cross, a gallery of Victoria Cross and George Cross medals opened in London's Imperial War Museum (Lord Ashcroft Gallery), showcasing Victoria Crosses awarded over the ages. What links the stories of VC winners is bravery, which Victorians first recognised and institutionalised at the end of the Crimean War.

Chapter 4 argues that the war's legacies also bequeathed to modern Britain various custodial practices. Crimea's 'custodians' were a group of combatants and non-combatants, both British and foreign, who showed a concern for the dying, the fallen, and their graves. The 'pursuit of custodianship', according to Kriegel, came 'as a response to military blunder and lives lost' (p. 124). The Officers' Cemetery at Cathcart's Hill became a crucial site for the development of Crimean custodianship. The general state of disrepair in which the cemeteries in the Crimea were falling raised many voices of indignation in Britain, and sparked a national conversation about the need for the establishment of proper custodial practices. In the early 1880s there were new efforts to safeguard Cathcart's Hill and Crimean graves. These efforts continued well into the twentieth century, under the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

Chapters 5 and 6 offer new perspectives into the lives, afterlives, and legacies of two heroines of the Crimean War: Florence Nightingale and Mary Seacole. Nightingale, the legendary 'lady with the lamp' who travelled to the Crimea in late 1854 with a number of nurses to establish proper medical practice at Scutari hospital, Constantinople, enjoyed an enduring popularity and 'became something of a secular saint' (p. 161). From the end of the war Nightingale symbolised the triumph of science, improvement, and professionalism. In public memory she was also transformed into 'an avatar of Englishness and a vision of womanhood' (p. 162). But her afterlife proved unstable. The nursing profession and the NHS turned their backs to Nightingale's legacy as the twentieth century drew to a close. The renowned Crimean nurse was a white, privileged, and wealthy Briton who no longer served as the source of inspiration for a diversified profession. The currents of multiculturalism eroded the Nightingale myth. But Nightingale's story and legacies, as Kriegel reminds us in the Afterword of her book, resurfaced once again during the coronavirus pandemic when, in 2020, a hospital bearing her name (NHS Nightingale) was set up to fight the virus. Her 1859 message 'Wash your hands' could also be heard once again. The book's final chapter moves on to the second Crimean heroine, the Jamaican creole healer and hotelier, Mary Seacole. Seeking to write herself into the history of the Crimean War and to avoid financial precarity, Seacole published her

autobiography, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands*, in 1857. Its discovery and republication in 1984 drew attention to the laudable labours in the Crimea of this Black Briton. An exemplar to minority communities, Seacole found herself in the National Curriculum in the twenty-first century. Her status as a national icon was secured with the unveiling of her statue at St Thomas' Hospital in London.

Since the publication of Kriegel's book, there have been numerous instances demonstrating 'the notable resonance of the Crimea and its legacies at a time of crisis and reckoning' (p. 237). Shortly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in late February 2022, Chris Riddell's cartoon for *The Guardian* showed a gigantic bear, armed with the hammer of 'War' and the sickle of 'Lies', advancing towards Kyiv.⁽³⁾ Notwithstanding its overt Soviet symbolism, the cartoon reflects some of the major themes which informed the uncoloured lithographs produced between 1853 and 1856 by Victorian caricaturists, and published in the popular satirical journal, *Punch, or the London Charivari*. The images of the Crimean War—the aggressive Russian bear thirsting for territorial expansion; the Russian autocrat seeking to suppress 'the truth'—which were at the heart of Victorian visual culture and public consciousness, resurfaced more than one and a half centuries later. On 6 July 2022, at the culmination of a period of political turmoil fuelled by a litany of scandals for which the expiring Johnson ministry had only itself to blame, the Labour Party leader, Keir Starmer, described the remaining cabinet ministers on the Treasury bench during PMQs as 'the charge of the lightweight brigade'.⁽⁴⁾ Starmer's jibe, which amused the Opposition benches, numerous pundits, and the Twitterati, points to what Kriegel has called '[t]he persistence of the Crimean War' (p. 5) and the survival into the twenty-first century of its famous Charge of the Light Brigade as 'a piece of common cultural currency' (p. 54). The Crimean War and its legacies resonate in our own time and will undoubtedly continue to do so in the future. One can therefore sympathize with Kriegel's opening remark in the book's Afterword: 'It is difficult to know when, and how, to end a book on afterlives' (p. 236).

Kriegel's *The Crimean War and its Afterlife* could have perhaps examined the war's immediate 'afterlife' in debates provoked by subsequent flare-ups of the 'Eastern Question'—especially during the late 1870s. Even a cursory glance at various interventions in these debates made by E. A. Freeman, John Bright, and other commentators reveals the transformation of the Crimean War's recent history into a crucial site of reference and contention. But this slight omission does not take away from the importance of this volume. It is a work of first-rate scholarship and one of the best and most illuminating books on the Crimean War. It should be strongly recommended not only to students, scholars, and others interested in modern British history, but also to military historians, cultural historians, historians of gender, literary scholars, and those working on history and memory.

Notes

1. [Thomas Hughes], 'The Last Voice from the Crimea.', *Macmillan's Magazine*, 9/50 (Dec. 1863), p. 160, ProQuest British Periodicals.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. E.g., Stefanie Markovits, *The Crimean War in the British Imagination* (Cambridge, 2009); Paul Huddle, *The Crimean War and Irish Society* (Liverpool, 2015); Holly Furneaux, *Military Men of Feeling: Emotion, Touch, and Masculinity in the Crimean War* (Oxford, 2016); Trudi Tate, *A Short History of the Crimean War* (London and New York, NY, 2019); Tai-Chun Ho, *The Crimean War in Victorian Poetry* (Oxford, 2021); Helen Rappaport, *In Search of Mary Seacole: The Making of a Cultural Icon* (London, 2022).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. 'The Russian bear advances on Kyiv - cartoon', *The Guardian* (26 Feb. 2022), <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/picture/2022/feb/26/the-russian-bear-advances-on-kyiv-cartoon>.[Back to \(3\)](#)

4. House of Commons Hansard, Vol. 717, col. 865 (6 July 2022),
[https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2022-07-06/debates/D60848BC-D026-474D-943C-93136BC8D027/Engagements.Back to \(4\)](https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2022-07-06/debates/D60848BC-D026-474D-943C-93136BC8D027/Engagements.Back%20to%20(4))
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