

The Crimean war

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A war in which two christian countries fighting a third claimed Islam as their ally

MODERN mechanised warfare, with soldiers and civilians alike struck down in huge numbers by industrial killing machines, is often said to have started in the fields of Flanders in 1914. But it can also be argued that it had its ghastly birth 60 years earlier, on the north coast of the Black Sea. For its protagonists—the leading European powers of the day—the Crimean war was certainly the most significant conflict of the second half of the 19th century. If deaths from disease are included, it cost at least 750,000 lives, two-thirds of them Russian, and it triggered big social and cultural changes in all the countries affected.

Its defining event, the year-long assault on the Russian fortress of Sebastopol (depicted above), was conducted with high-tech efficiency: the besiegers fired up to 75,000 artillery rounds a day in an early version of “shock and awe”. And the human consequences of war were relayed to the public at home with speed and unsparing honesty by journalists such as William Russell of the *Times*, who blazed a trail for generations of war reporters. When the Russians finally abandoned Sebastopol, they left about 3,000 wounded whose condition Russell described in horrific detail: injuries infested with maggots, broken limbs protruding through raw flesh.

Yet for all its modernity, the fighting was also a “holy war” for each belligerent power. Leaders used religious rhetoric and ordinary soldiers and sailors said their prayers as they tried to make sense of what they were doing. That, presumably, is the point Orlando Figes, a historian at Birkbeck College in London, is making with his British subtitle, “The Last Crusade”. His book reveals the strange mixture of meanings the war had for its combatants. He puts the conflict into its broader context: the determination of Britain (and with some reservations, France) to stem Russian expansion and to bolster Islam in its fight with eastern Christianity.

No, that last point is not a mistake. The great historical paradox of the Crimean war—and of the longer-term Russo-Turkish conflict of which it was one episode—is that Anglican England and Roman Catholic France were aligned with Islam’s sultan-caliph against the tsars who saw themselves as the world’s last truly Christian emperors. Above all, the western Christian powers were determined to avoid any reversal of the

Muslim conquest of Istanbul: “The Russians shall not have Constantinople” chorused an English music-hall song.

How did the various players in this strange religious game explain themselves to their own pious subjects? For the theocracies of Russia and Turkey, and their God-fearing soldiers, things were fairly straightforward: they were fighting, respectively, for Christianity and Islam.

It was harder, you might think, for the Church of England and the Catholic establishment in France to explain their support of the caliphate. In fact, they found it easy enough to construct the necessary arguments. First, British and French clerics demonised Russian Orthodoxy as a semi-pagan creed. Second, they maintained that in some peculiar way the Ottoman empire was more friendly to its Christian subjects than the tsar was. (The Ottomans tolerated Protestant missionaries, so long as the evangelisers limited their search for souls to Orthodox Christians.)

In the spring of 1854, as the Crimean fighting began in earnest, an Anglican cleric declared that Russian Orthodoxy was as “impure, demoralising, and intolerant as popery itself”. What could be more natural, then, than to team up with Islam and popery to cleanse that terrible impurity? A French newspaper, meanwhile, gave warning that the Russians represented a special menace to all Catholics because “they hope to convert us to their heresy”.

As Mr Figs recalls, the tactical friendship between Western Christians and Ottoman Muslims had its limits. To be sure, British envoys to the Holy Land probably found more in common with lordly Ottoman administrators than with the exuberant faith of Orthodox Christian peasant-pilgrims. But not all Muslim Turks were overjoyed at being embraced, and hailed as Christian-friendly, by Western powers. When in 1856 the sultan yielded to Western pressure and granted Christians some equality, there was a backlash from the Islamic establishment across the empire.

It is a complex tale, told vividly by Mr Figs. Perhaps it should serve as a healthy cold shower for any modern civilisational warrior who sets out to present the course of history as a simple tug-of-war between Christianity and Islam.