

Crimean war: history

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Introduction

This essay examines the claim that the Crimean War (1853-1856) was ‘disastrously planned and poorly executed’ (Economist 2014). The first section looks at the circumstances out of which the war arose, providing some background to the conflict while suggesting that from its inception the war was characterised by errors in judgment and miscommunication. The next section proceeds to discuss the many naval blunders that took place during the war, looking both at the Crimea as well as the less commonly discussed Far East. This is followed by a consideration of the land operations of the conflict, paying particular attention to actions of the British. The analysis then turns to the provisioning of the Allied and Russian forces, as well as the quality of services such as medical care. Finally, the last section briefly considers the consequences of the war for the parties involved. It is concluded that the Crimean War was characterised by an unusually large number of errors in terms of planning and execution.

Poor planning and organisation can arguably be seen from the outbreak of war. The desire to access the Mediterranean had been a long-standing ambition of Russia’s by the mid-19th century (Economist 2014; Lambert 2011). Thus the weakness of the Ottoman Empire in the period was seized upon, partially concealed, of course, by excuses about the persecution of Christian minorities in the Ottoman Empire. The backdrop to this was a broader dispute about who should rule the Holy Land: Orthodox Russia or Catholic France (Clough 1964). The Turkish-Russian dispute included several lacklustre, abortive attempts at peaceful resolution through diplomacy, after which the Russian Army invaded Moldavia and Wallachia (parts of modern-

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day Moldova and Romania) on 2 July 1853, sinking the Turkish fleet at Sinope in 1853. This was followed by a Turkish declaration of war on 5 October of the same year (Economist 2014).

However, the actions of Russia were to an extent the result of a miscalculation. In spite of a caustic public reaction in Britain and France, the Allied response to the invasion was a cautious one to begin with, characterised by dithering, uncertain diplomacy (Economist 2014). This ' misled Russia into believing that it could continue its aggression against the Ottomans without consequences', and Britain and France unexpectedly declared war in March 1854 (Economist 2014). The conflict then escalated when the Kingdom of Sardinia-Piedmont joined the war against Russia the following year. A degree of poor coordination and misunderstanding can therefore be seen from the outset. For Britain and France, this took the form of confused, uncertain policy; for Russia, it was a misinterpretation of the likelihood that other parties would join the war (Lambert 2011). Clough (1964: 917) makes this point succinctly, arguing that war arose from ' Napoleon's search for prestige; Nicholas's quest for control over the Straits; his naive miscalculation of the probable reaction of the European powers; the failure of those powers to make their position and the pressure of public opinion in Britain and Constantinople at crucial moments'. For Clough (1964), therefore, the war was a disorganised, poorly planned shambles from the very beginning. It was the product not only of confusion but also of the hubris and inflated ambitions of the leaders of Europe at the time.

It seems probable that the war arose out of somewhat chaotic circumstances and was therefore tainted from the start, but the question of whether this

pattern continued remains. The actual combat side of the war appears to have been shambolic in many cases. This is suggested by the first events of the war. Despite being unyielding in the face of Russian aggression, it seems that Turkey was not prepared for the eventuality of conflict (Economist 2014; Bloy 2002a). When the Russian fleet arrived off Sinope on the southern coast of the Black Sea, the Turkish Admiral was unprepared for battle. His squadron was relatively weak, consisting of only 6 frigates, 3 corvettes, and two small paddle steamers. Additionally, his largest guns were only 24-pounders, and his troops were poorly trained and unready for war. By comparison, the Russian fleet under Admiral Nakhimov was ‘vastly superior in numbers, size and firepower’ (Brown 1989). The full extent of the imbalance is revealed by the fact that with the exception of one ship the entire Turkish fleet, including 3000 sailors, was destroyed, with the Russians suffering negligible losses. The Turks were not prepared to defend their territories, and probably did not have the ability to do so in any case (Brown 1989).

The dramatic outcome of this conflict was a great shock. Few in the navy or elsewhere had anticipated the devastating effect of shells on wooden ships, and as Brown (1989) notes, ‘Naval and public opinion showed surprise, shock and horror at the casualties’. Therefore, even at this early there is evidence of poor preparation and a lack of understanding of how the war would be conducted on the part of the Turks if not the Russians. The same cannot quite be said of the British and French. While many critics expressed shock at the event of Sinope, preparations had been made. The British had tested shells against the Prince George and the French had done likewise at

Garve. Moreover, in response to the success of the Russian navy the French began the construction of heavily fortified armament batteries for coastal attack. That this was prior to the declaration of war suggests a degree of naval preparation on the part of the Allies (Lambert 2011).

Nevertheless, there were serious shortcomings with the British fleet in particular that suggest both poor execution and planning. In the first place, it was wrongly believed that the Russian Baltic fleet might invade the United Kingdom, which turned out to be unjustified and stalled operations for over a year (Brown 1989). This was a strategic error and what it suggests about execution and planning can be debated. Additionally, when the British fleet went into the conflict it had problems with manpower. For example, admirals were promoted by seniority, which meant they tended to be older than was desirable. More importantly, many vessels were undermanned due to the poor pay and conditions on ships. When Britain declared war these problems had yet to be resolved, which indicates a distinct lack of preparedness (Brown 1989).

In recent decades it has been argued by historians that Britain was guilty of extremely poor naval strategy, which would amount to a poor execution of the war on their part. Lambert (1990, cited in Fuller 2014) is among the most famous to put forward this thesis. He argued that ‘the real war could have been decided...in the Baltic, and won by the full might of a modern maritime power against a continental one’ (Fuller 2014: 2). When the strength of the British navy at this time, in terms of size and technology, is considered, this argument seems like a strong one. The British navy was notably ahead of its counterparts insofar as it included large numbers mortar vessels and

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ironclad batteries. Lambert believed that Cronstadt would definitely have fallen to the heavily armed British flotilla, and that the Russian realisation of this fact what forced peace in the end (Fuller 2014). Perhaps, then, the failure of the British to fully utilise its navy's potential in the Baltic amounts to a strategic blunder.

It is doubtful, however, that this part of the war was as poorly executed as Lambert argued. As Fuller (2014) notes, unilateral action (the so-called 'Great Armament') against Cronstadt might have alienated the French, who were on poor terms with the British. It might also have driven up the cost of the war to unsustainable levels, stretching the economy to breaking point. This much is suggested by a review in 1856 of the 'Great Armament', which noted that Britain could not provide any 'proof of unabated strength and unexhausted resources' (Fuller 2014: 38). This warning was echoed by Sir George Cornewall Lewis, Chancellor of the Exchequer in Palmerston's ministry, who expressed concern that 'our financial prospect is very bad, a declining revenue, rising prices, a large loan wanted which will be got on bad terms, and more money lent to Sardinia and Turkey' (Fuller 2014: 38). The so-called missed opportunities in the Baltic, therefore, do not suggest poor planning and execution. Nevertheless, one might make the case that the poor financial prospect of Britain by the end of the war suggests a lack of preparation.

Another line of argument, directed once again at the British, focuses on naval operations in the Pacific. Stephan (1969: 257), for example, describes the 'tragi-comic nature of tactical operations in the Far East'. He notes that despite the overwhelming superiority of the Allied naval forces in around <https://assignbuster.com/crimean-war-history/>

China and the Pacific, almost no headway was made in that sphere. Indeed, the Allies had twenty five ships of war, including six steamers, while the Russians could muster only six which were later reduced to four (Stephan 1969). Poor execution and planning in this case manifested in two ways. In the first place, there was little coordination between the China and Pacific squadrons and the British and French fleets in the area. As Stephan (1969: 258) notes, 'at the outbreak of war...the British Commander-in-Chief of the China Squadron, Rear Admiral Sir James Stirling, was sailing from Singapore to Hong Kong. The rest of the squadron lay scattered among the Chinese treaty ports such as Shanghai, Amoy, and Canton.' This arose from the folly of dividing command of the fleet, as well as a lack of information about the location of both friend and foe. Indeed, Stephan (1969) suggests that Stirling (who rather tellingly was only appointed Commander-in-Chief on 4 March), probably did not even know the location of Russian warships.

There is relatively clear evidence that naval operations were fairly shambolic on the part of both the British and the French. The same is true of events on land. The Battle of the River Alma on 20 Sept 1854, for example, saw the British forces charge headlong against a fortified Russian position, the result of a 'lack of information and lack of reconnoitre' which meant that a number of easier routes went undiscovered. The British forces only triumphed because such an imprudent move was considered too unlikely to prepare against. The aftermath, moreover, saw poor execution insofar as the cavalry did not pursue the routing Russians, allowing them instead to fortify Sevastopol and thus draw out the war. This was further compounded when disagreements between the French and British commanders delayed the

march to Sevastopol by several weeks, after which the city was heavily defended. The most famous of the blunders was, of course, the Charge of Light Brigade during the Battle of Balaclava on 25 Oct 1854, in which a brigade of 670 cavalry under Lord Cardigan attacked an extremely heavily fortified Russian redoubt. The now famous calamity during which much of the Light Brigade was destroyed was the product of a simple miscommunication but reflects deeper issues with the British forces related to internal divisions, inexperience, and the unwillingness to question absurd orders. All of this translates to poor execution in warfare.

In examining the conduct and organisation of the war more generally it is obvious that there was little sophisticated coordination or planning (Sweetman 2001). At every level of the Allied war effort this was true. Within the British army, for example, the artillery and engineers were commanded by the Master-General of Ordnance while the infantry and cavalry were commanded by the Commander-in-Chief at the Horse Guards, Lord Raglan, which made coordinated planning difficult (Sweetman 2001). Then, of course, the Royal Navy was a separate branch of the military, answerable only to the Lords of the Admiralty. This chaotic set-up hindered the Allied offensive at Sevastopol, as Raglan could not coordinate the British forces on land and sea without undertaking time-consuming and inefficient communications (Sweetman 2001). This is not to mention the fact that there was no overall commander with the authority to coordinate the various national armies of each Allied nation, as had been the case during the Peninsula War with the Duke of Wellington. Thus, 'the entire ramshackle structure palpably lacked coordination', and it is important to appreciate '

the constraints that this put on drawing up strategic plans or executing tactical operations' (Sweetman 2001: 16).

The Russians were less culpable in these terms, although there were many shortcomings in their preparations. Urry (1989) has noted how the Russian land forces suffered severely from poor provisioning, something which became particularly damaging in the summer of 1854. By September, there were 50,000 Russian troops in the Crimean Peninsula, but the Provisions' Commission was comparatively small and badly managed. Place this in the geographical context and it appears even more serious. Most of the Crimea was barren and sparsely populated, which meant that the troops and animals in the region were more reliant on their supply chain than usual (Urry 1989). The infrastructure necessary to support the Russian war effort was also inadequate in many cases. Roads were of poor quality and transport networks were badly run and unreliable, which contributed to the problem of supplying the troops. Even those supplies that did arrive had often spoiled because of the excessive time it took to transport goods. This situation was improved somewhat when the new Russian Commander, General Prince M. D. Gorchakov, saw the reorganisation of the supply system, but much of the damage was already done (Urry 1989; Curtiss 1979). This is a clear example of poor preparation on the part of the Russians.

Poor planning in terms of supplies was also a major problem for the Allies. The most striking example of this occurred on 14 November 1854 when a 'Great Storm' sunk 30 ships in Balaclava harbour and destroyed ? 3 million worth of supplies, coinciding with the onset of the harsh winter. The Allies,
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however, had only prepared for a summer campaign, and the results were catastrophic. As Bloy (2002a) put it: ‘ The Allies...had to make do with summer equipment: tents, light clothes and so on. It took months to re-supply them. Men died of exposure, disease, starvation.’ The situation was compounded by poor organisation and management in the aftermath, as well as the natural barriers of substandard roads and communication networks (Bloy 2002a).

As poor as the organisational side of the war was for all sides, the Russian war effort was comparatively impressive. This conclusion is supported by the fact that the Russian were operating under very difficult conditions. Firstly, the defence of Sevastopol was an inherently problematic affair. The size of Russia required a wide distribution of troops, especially in the Baltic to prevent the Allies landing there (Urry 1989). Then there was uncertainty regarding the neutrality of Prussia, and especially Austria, which meant that troops had to be stationed along Russia’s lengthy western border. The barren nature of much of the Russian territory, moreover, especially in the south, was an unfortunate barrier that hampered supply, communication, and the movement of troops (Urry 1989). As Urry (1989) argues, these factors contributed to difficulties experienced by the Russians, and in many cases even good preparation and execution would have made it difficult to overcome such factors. On the other, one might argue that the decision to start a war in the face of so many natural barriers should be regarded as a major strategic failure (Jones 2013; Bloy 2002a).

One area in which all parties lacked planning was medical provision. The low quality of care afforded to wounded soldiers in British hospitals has become <https://assignbuster.com/crimean-war-history/>

notorious primarily because of Florence Nightingale's work as Scutari. The quality of French medical care was supposedly slightly better, as is attested by William Howard Russell: ' Here the French are greatly our superiors. Their medical arrangements are extremely good... and they have the help of the Sisters of Charity.... These devoted women are excellent nurses.'

Nevertheless, even this relied on volunteers (Curtiss 1966: 98). The Russians likewise had to rely on volunteers, who operated under the aegis of the Exaltation of the Cross (Curtiss 1966). Testimony from the brace medical volunteers in the Russians forces reveals the shoddy set-up in place, especially with regard to the convoy system designed to transport wounded soldiers. This was supposedly poorly supplied with blankets, had few good drivers, and little in the way of food and water (Curtiss 1979; Curtiss 1966).

The Crimean War was concluded peacefully at the Treaty of Paris on 30 March 1856 after the fall of Sevastopol, probably to the advantage of all parties. The conflict itself was of little obvious benefit to any nation, with the possible exception of Turkey, which had captured possessions restored to it by Russia (Bloy 2002a; Seton-Watson 1988). In turn, regions captured by the Allies, such as Sevastopol and Balaclava, were restored. Territories were thus redistributed to the participants in much the same way as before the war had begun. One of the most important effects of war was that it prohibited both Turkey and Russia from establishing a naval or military arsenal on the Black Sea, which weakened the Russian position. However, this turned out to be unenforceable and a few decades later Russia had violated the agreement (Gorizontov 2012; Seton-Watson 1988). The conflict did have important long-term implications insofar as it permanently weakened the

position of Tsarist Russia, and saw the ascendancy of the France as the preeminent power in Europe. It therefore saw the end of the Concert of Europe, the balance of power that had existed since the Congress of Vienna in 1815 (Bloy 2002a, 2002b).

In conclusion, the Crimean War was both poorly planned and poorly executed. This essay has outlined the numerous strategic, tactical, and logistical failures perpetrated by all sides, but especially by the Allies and Britain in particular. However, as important as these moments were in defining the nature of the conflict and solidifying its reputation, it was problematic from the outset. As Clough (1964: 917) puts it: ‘it was not the result of a calculated plan, nor even of hasty last-minute decisions made under stress. It was the consequence of more than two years of fatal blundering in slow-motion by inept statesmen who had months to reflect upon the actions they took.’ Ultimately, while there are many mitigating factors, moments of triumph, and cases of heroism and coordination – especially in the medical sphere – this is a reputation well-deserved.

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