

Sebastopol: On the Fall of a City

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In the early hours of 9 September 1855, huge explosions shook the ground around Sebastopol. ‘The city was enveloped in fire and smoke, and torn asunder by the tremendous shocks of these volcanoes’, wrote William Howard Russell in *The Times*.¹ By 9 a.m., ‘the whole of Sebastopol was in flames; but nearly half of the burning city was hidden by the impenetrable cloud caused by the explosion.’² Soon the city was ‘a mass of flames, and the pillar of black, grey, and velvety fat smoke ascending from it seemed to support the very heavens’ (Lambert and Badsey, p. 248). To some observers, it looked like a biblical apocalypse, but also ‘beautiful’, ‘sublime and terrific’, ‘a magnificent sight’.³ Civilian Mary Seacole recalled standing on Cathcart’s Hill, watching ‘the city blazing beneath us’, feeling ‘awe-struck at the terrible sight’. The air was cold and clear. ‘The night was made a ruddy lurid day with the glare of the blazing town.’⁴ As the siege ended, night became day, and nature itself seemed to be inverted. Observers found this uncanny, disturbing. This might have been the beginning of victory for the allies, but the feeling was not happy, triumphant, nor even optimistic.

The military history of the eleven-month Siege of Sebastopol is well documented.⁵ Here, I want to explore some of the cultural reverberations

¹ Quoted in Andrew Lambert and Stephen Badsey, *The War Correspondents: The Crimean War* (London: Bramley Books, 1997), p. 248.

² *Six Months at Sebastopol: Being Selections from the Journal and Correspondence of the Late Major George Ranken, Royal Engineers*, ed. by W. Bayne Ranken (London: Westerton, 1857), p. 63.

³ Nicholas Dunscombe, *Captain Dunscombe’s Diary: The Real Crimean War that the British Infantry Knew*, ed. by Colin Robins (Bowdon: Withycut House, 2003), p. 154 (8 September 1855); Alexis Soyer, *Soyer’s Culinary Campaign: Being Historical Reminiscences of the Late War* (London: Routledge, 1857), p. 379; Fanny Duberly, *Mrs Duberly’s War: Journal and Letters from the Crimea*, ed. by Christine Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 239.

⁴ Mary Seacole, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands* (London: Blackwood, 1857; repr. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 172.

⁵ See, for example, Winfried Baumgart, *The Crimean War 1853–56* (London: Arnold, 1999); Orlando Figes, *Crimea: The Last Crusade* (London: Allen Lane, 2010); Andrew Lambert, *The Crimean War: British Grand Strategy against Russia 1853–1856* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011); Alan Palmer, *The Banner of Battle: The Story of the Crimean War* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987); *Romaine’s Crimean War: The Letters and Journal of William Govett Romaine, Deputy Judge-Advocate to the Army of the East 1854–6*, ed.

of this gruelling event, every day of which had been closely documented in the British newspapers, especially *The Times*. What did the fall of Sebastopol mean to the British who were present, and how were those meanings expressed, both visually and in writing? The Crimean War was the first conflict to be reported first-hand in the newspapers, the first to make use of the telegraph, the first to be represented in the illustrated press, and the first to be photographed. In certain respects, it is regarded as the first modern war, in the sense that it employed modern methods of representation, and those representations began to play some part in the machinery and politics of warfare. It was also modern in its employment of new technologies, such as the Minié rifle, long-range artillery and ironclad ships, as well as a railway constructed at Balaklava. At the same time, it is seen as looking backwards, with the mentality, as well as with some of the equipment, from Napoleonic times, forty years earlier.

The Crimean War raised conceptual as well as political questions which remain pertinent today. Recent theoretical commentators, such as Susan Sontag, Judith Butler, Mary Favret, and Paul Virilio, are very interested in the problems of how war is represented, and what place those representations have, or ought to have, in our political understandings of war.⁶ These are complex questions whose roots lie very deep in our history. They are perhaps as old as warfare itself, but they take particular forms at the Crimea. In this article, I look at just one aspect of this conflict, and meditate upon its meanings, both at the time, and for later thinking about war and representation.

Into Sebastopol

Before evacuating the city, the Russians had mined it thoroughly. Explosions continued throughout the day on 9 September, and over the next few days as well. Some thirty to forty booby traps were left behind (Palmer, *Banner*, p. 219). Lieutenant Colonel Frederic Dallas wrote that ‘the Russians, outside all their works, have Machines, our men call them “Man traps”, which explode when you touch, or rather tread upon them, and they

by Colin Robins (Stroud: Sutton, 2005); Trevor Royle, *Crimea: The Great Crimean War, 1854–1856* (London: Little, Brown, 1999); John Sweetman, *War and Administration: The Significance of the Crimean War for the British Army* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1984), and *The Crimean War* (Oxford: Osprey, 2001).

⁶ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin, 2003); Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009); Mary Favret, *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, trans. by Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 1989), and *Desert Screen: War at the Speed of Light*, trans. by Michael Degener (London: Continuum, 2002).

are a frightful source of accidents'.⁷ The *Illustrated London News's* war artist wrote a vivid account of such a trap, witnessed on 28 September:

Yesterday, as I was sketching in the west of Sebastopol, an explosion shook the buildings around and reverberated through the roofless and untenanted edifices of the place. The Arsenal Creek was filled with a heavy black smoke, and showers of large stones fell into the water, lashing it for a moment into sheets of foam. The centre of the fire was a battery on the left flank of the Creek Battery. This was one of the works erected by the Russians to sweep the approaches of the Woronzoff road; it was built of stones taken from the houses around it, faced with earth externally, and without a ditch. The magazine was in the foundations of a house which had once stood there [...]. The Russians had placed a *fougasse* over it, and an accidental tread upon a wooden peg driven into the earth broke a glass tube of inflammable matter which communicated with the powder below [...].

Three of the men in the work were blown to atoms; and a large number were buried in the ruins; whilst sad havoc was at the same time committed on parties of workmen leading mules along the road close by. Two soldiers of the guard in the Creek Battery were killed by stones projected with great violence into the air, and launched with fatal force upon them. Several mules and horses were killed in this same manner, and every point within 200 yards of the spot was visited by the terrible shower. The crater left by the explosion was about twenty feet deep and twenty wide; and in its crumbled sides were found some of the wounded, who were speedily conveyed to hospital.⁸

The men immediately searched for other traps, and discovered one in a nearby battery. They suspected that other Russian works were also mined and likely to explode at any time. These 'infernal machines' seemed to be everywhere, making it impossible for the British and French to occupy the city properly.

The victorious armies were in a state of limbo. What to do next? The British military authorities issued strict orders against entering Sebastopol, but a number of people made their way into the ruins.⁹ 'For a few days all

⁷ *Eyewitness in the Crimea: The Crimean War Letters (1854–56) of Lt. Col. George Frederic Dallas*, ed. by Michael Hargreave Mawson (London: Greenhill Books, 2001), pp. 185–86 (30 September 1855).

⁸ 'The War in the Crimea: From our Artist and Special Correspondent', *Illustrated London News*, 13 October 1855, p. 434.

⁹ The French troops were given much more freedom to enter and plunder the city, somewhat to the irritation of the British soldiers. A number of French looters were killed by explosions.

business seemed suspended in the camp', wrote civilian chef Alexis Soyer, 'and the rage with every one was to visit the ruins of the far-famed city' (p. 385). Some immediately began looting and destroying. (Each nation had different rules about looting, which led to resentment between the troops.) Others went simply to look. Many observers were moved to represent the event — in letters, newspaper articles, diaries, drawings, and paintings. Photographers came in to record the fallen city. By late autumn, remarked Mary Seacole, visitors 'thronged the streets of Sebastopol, sketching its ruins and setting up photographic apparatus' (p. 178).

Sebastopol exercised a magnetizing fascination, despite, or perhaps because of, the danger. There were soldiers, sailors, war artists, journalists, war tourists, soldiers' wives, and professional photographers all trying, in their different ways, to represent the inside of Sebastopol; to see what the war had done. Yet, like the war itself, Sebastopol remained elusive, an object which at once demanded and defied representation. It was a mesmerizing place, abandoned yet not empty; fallen yet dangerous; beautiful even in its damaged state, yet a disgusting site of mangled and decaying bodies; bereft, yet a treasure house of abandoned objects, which some of the visitors immediately began to plunder.

According to her memoir, Seacole was one of the first civilians to enter Sebastopol. 'For weeks past', she reported, 'I had been offering bets to everyone that I would not only be the first woman to enter Sebastopol from the English lines, but that I would be the first to carry refreshments into the fallen city' (pp. 172–73). The day after Sebastopol was taken, she loaded up some mules with provisions and set off, only to discover that no unauthorized person was permitted to enter the city, because of mines. Undeterred, Seacole went to visit the general in charge. He immediately recognized her, and provided an official pass for herself and her 'attendants' to distribute food and drink. So many soldiers immediately joined her staff as temporary attendants that she could hardly get going, but eventually the large party managed to pass the sentries into Sebastopol, somewhat to the annoyance of the men left behind. Everyone, it seems, wanted to see the fallen city. The British and French had shelled it for months: what did it look like now? From a distance, it was hard to see any damage. As officer's wife Fanny Duberly remarked, Sebastopol seemed 'almost uninjured — so calm, and white, and fair did it look' (p. 282; also Figs, p. 395). What was going on; where did the firepower go? When they got inside, visitors realized that the city was in fact badly mauled; not a single building was untouched.

'Sebastopol must have been a beautiful town, quite a city of palaces', wrote Lieutenant Robert Biddulph in a letter, 'but it is knocked about terribly by our shot; there is not a house that does not bear the marks of our bombardment. The interior of the Redan is like a ploughed field from

our shells.’¹⁰ Similarly, for Captain Nicholas Dunscombe, ‘the barracks [in Sebastopol] must have been once magnificent buildings, but are gravely knocked about now [...]; in fact there is not an entire house in the town standing’ (p. 157 (13 September 1855)). He observed the effects of the shelling upon the population, as hundreds of Russian bodies were taken for burial. ‘The more I see of the place the more I admire it’, wrote Lieutenant Colonel Dallas on 28 September. ‘The Public Buildings are so beautifully situated, and are themselves so handsome’, but, ‘I don’t think that there is a single house that is not completely destroyed, excepting the mere outward shell’ (*Eyewitness*, ed. by Hargreave Mawson, p. 183).

‘Sebastopol is finely situated, and laid out in broad spacious streets’, noted Royal Engineer George Ranken. ‘Some of the houses [...] must have been very handsome and elegant’, though now little remains but ‘blackened disfigured walls’. He looked ‘with deepest interest at the remains of the famous city’ (*Six Months*, ed. by Bayne Ranken, p. 75). There were buildings

perforated in all parts, and a scene of desolation and ruin [...]. The whole of the civil portion of the city was still in a blaze; and as it was quite uncertain where the Russians might have secreted their mines, or what fort or buildings they might intend to blow up, it was by no means prudent to venture far into the town. (pp. 68–69)

On 10 September, the city was still burning. Ranken observed that

the magnificent ranges of white barracks and public buildings all more or less injured; the barracks near the Redan perforated in all directions by cannon shot, or torn and smashed by shells; a number of smaller buildings, probably the poorer suburbs, literally a mere heap of ruins. (p. 69)

‘I can give you no very clear description of Sebastopol’, wrote Seacole. ‘Many parts of it were still blazing furiously [on 9 September] — explosions were taking place in all directions — every step had a score of dangers; and yet curiosity and excitement carried us on and on’ (p. 173). Lost for words to describe the city, Seacole turned her attention to the new inhabitants, hungry soldiers, to whom she passed out refreshments. Some had refreshed themselves already in the Sebastopol cellars. She observed one group of men, ‘ingloriously drunk, and playing the wildest pranks. They were dancing, yelling, and singing — some of them with Russian women’s dresses

¹⁰ ‘The Fall of Sebastopol: A Contemporary Account by Lieutenant Robert Biddulph, RA’, ed. by H. Biddulph, *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, 19 (1940), 197–99.

fastened around their waists, and old bonnets stuck upon their heads' (p. 174). Drunk or sober, the men plundered materials from the houses — furniture, crockery, every imaginable kind of domestic object. One inebriated soldier presented Seacole with a stolen parasol. He was dressed in a woman's silk skirt, with some torn lace around his wrists. He came 'mincingly' towards Seacole, 'holding the parasol above his head, and imitating the walk of an affected lady, to the vociferous delight of his comrades'. 'And all this, and much more', she noted, suddenly more serious, 'in that fearful charnel city, with death and suffering on every side' (p. 174). Seacole's memoir is deliberately light, often amusing. She wrote it primarily as an entertainment, to save herself from bankruptcy, and she made no claim to offer a serious analysis of the war. Yet, like other witnesses, she found this scene disturbing, even as she tried to make it comical.

Those who went inside Sebastopol were troubled by the sheer quantity of *things*, damaged and deranged, scattered among the dead and dying. So much human work went into making those things, and caring for them. So much human effort and courage went into the defence of the doomed city; and into attacking it. Where did all the labour end up? War produces a particular kind of *waste*, and at the Crimea it began to happen on an industrial scale. It was an early hint of what would come in 1914.

Looting and pillaging were the most immediate reactions. This is a familiar scenario at the end of a war — there were still vivid cultural memories of the Napoleonic armies in Moscow in 1812, looting while the city burned — and it was played out in a peculiarly intense form in Sebastopol.¹¹ Some intruders went in search of alcohol and ended up dancing in the streets, often dressed in bits of looted gear, and especially in women's clothing. Others gathered up vast quantities of domestic objects — china, cooking utensils, furniture, clothing, shoes, babies' carriages, cats and dogs, candlesticks, etc. Some took weapons, ropes, and other items which might be put to practical use. And much was simply destroyed: shredded, broken up, trampled, or burned by groups of soldiers moving randomly through the ruins.

The Times described the sight of the Russian barracks in Sebastopol as 'painful' after the victorious soldiers had passed through, creating 'as much havoc as lay in their power':

In the portions of the buildings underground vast quantities of new clothing and accoutrements were scattered about. Hundreds of helmets were being trodden down by the men, and bales of cloth lay on every side. Furniture of all kinds was being removed; pictures, lamps, dresses, and musical instruments

¹¹ A number of writers in 1855 draw precisely this comparison. See Paul Britten Austin, *1812: Napoleon in Moscow* (London: Greenhill Books, 1995); Anthony Dawson, *French Infantry of the Crimean War* (Leigh-on-Sea: Partizan Press, 2011).

were all there for those who went sufficiently early, and who cared to carry them home.¹²

Russell noted that British sailors were quick to get in and plunder; he saw them ‘staggering under chairs, tables, and lumbering old pictures, through every street, and making [their] way back to the trenches with vast accumulations of worthlessness’ (Lambert and Badsey, p. 253). Many of the objects were of no value, except to their original owners; many were broken beyond repair. But the context made them newly desirable; any piece of rubbish might suddenly become saleable. The looters ‘were laden with every conceivable article, I think, except “babies”’, wrote Frederick Robinson on 10 September:

There were puppies and dogs, however, together with children’s carriages, invalids’ chairs, bedding, crockery ware, military and plain clothing, bales of cloth, and every kind of domestic utensil, looking glasses, richly gilt cornices, and chandeliers wrenched from their sockets, books, vegetables, and kegs of butter, — evidently prizes much valued; pictures, for the most part tawdry prints.¹³

The sheer jumble of objects was exciting, but also disturbing. The soldiers recognized the objects from their own domestic lives. The entire contents of houses were shaken up and tossed together, a sight which was at once familiar and unfamiliar — what Freud would later describe as uncanny. In response, the intruders were driven by two conflicting impulses: to preserve and to destroy. Many of the objects mentioned are associated with women, and this perhaps intensified the grief as well as the pleasure as the things were damaged, saved, mocked, destroyed, or sold off. Either the objects were destroyed with the men’s own hands in what looks like a kind of infantile rage (and pleasure); or they became commodities, carried about, exchanged, sold. A huge mobile marketplace sprang up out of the ruins, with a new kind of commerce, as *The Times* reported on 5 October 1855:

The camps have consequently abounded with itinerant vendors of all kinds of goods, for every one of which fabulous prices were demanded. The variety of articles was astonishing,

¹² ‘A Picture of the Interior of Sebastopol’, *The Times*, 5 October 1855, p. 10.

¹³ Frederick Robinson, *Diary of the Crimean War* (London: Bentley, 1856), pp. 393–94. Similarly, an anonymous medical officer, writing in *The Times* about the Battle of Alma, looks forward to some ‘grand “looting” at Sebastopol’. ‘This is a horrible way to talk, and, no doubt, will shock you much; but it is one of the concomitants of grim war, and, perhaps, one of the most agreeable’ (‘The Battle of the Alma’, *The Times*, 12 October 1854, p. 8).

and from valuable silver plate to the most worthless of old books, which no one could read, everything seemed to meet with some purchaser. Pictures were most in demand, and some really valuable ones were taken. ('A Picture of the Interior of Sebastopol', p. 10)

People from all classes wanted war trophies. Military surgeon Douglas Reid reported that he had taken a Russian book of poems from Sebastopol and 'some doctor's prescriptions from the Hospital in the town'; he also had 'a silver ring taken off a dead Russian in the Redan'. His account does not seem at all embarrassed to take possession of the spoils of war. Reid bought two photographs by James Robertson: 'one of a Turkish, the other of a Circassian lady'; images not of the city, but of unknown women.¹⁴ All these things he sent back to England as souvenirs. Similarly, Major General William Allan noted tersely: 'I have picked up a few trashy things from the town; they may, however, be prized in England some day.'¹⁵ As Sebastopol was rendered uninhabitable as a home for its citizens, its objects, however useless, acquired a new monetary value. The sense of what is valuable and what worthless became inverted.

It is striking that pictures were often the most popular item. Mary Seacole writes that she rarely accepted loot, but she was persuaded to buy a painting stolen from above the altar of a Sebastopol church (p. 176). She was moved by the face of the Madonna in the painting: 'soft and beautiful', with a look of 'divine calmness and heavenly love'. Seacole imagined people during the siege kneeling before this image and finding some comfort 'in its soft loving gaze' (p. 176). She expresses kindness and sympathy, at least in fantasy, for the suffering Russians, even as she reports taking away one of their precious possessions as a war trophy. The looters took plenty of real objects to sell, but many of their customers, like Seacole, preferred *representations* — pictures of things which, we can be certain, were not scenes from the fallen city; not images of the reality in which they now lived.

Fanny Duberly, too, was consumed with curiosity about Sebastopol, but she did not enter it immediately after it was taken. Her first view of the fallen city was from the heights on Sunday, 9 September, where she watched the south side burning. 'I counted ten separate fires', she wrote a few days later; 'a magnificent sight' (p. 239). Should the victors feel sympathy or regret after the long siege? For Duberly, the flaming vision produced 'greater satisfaction than pain', and effaced 'the destruction and desolation of war':

¹⁴ *Soldier-Surgeon: The Crimean War Letters of Douglas A. Reid, 1855–1856*, ed. by Joseph O. Baylen and Alan Conway (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1968), p. 111 (20–22 September 1855).

¹⁵ William Allan, *Crimean Letters from the 41st (The Welch) Regiment, 1854–56*, ed. by W. Alister Williams (Wrexham: Bridge Books, 2011), p. 125 (17 September 1855).

I could only remember that the long-coveted prize was ours at last, and I felt no more compunction for town or for Russian than the hound whose lips are red with blood does for the fox which he has chased through a hard run. It was a lawful prize, purchased, God knows! dearly enough, and I felt glad that we had got it. (p. 239)

To compare the Siege of Sebastopol with chasing a fox is a particularly curious metaphor. A siege is static; the opposite, one would have thought, of a galloping hunt. The metaphor allows Duberly to imagine herself as an active participant in the war; a victor stained with the blood of battle. But it also has the effect of drawing attention to itself *as metaphor* precisely because it is so inappropriate. The moment of victory left her feeling rather troubled. She knew she ought to be delighted, self-righteous, triumphant; but when she tried to express these emotions, her imagination began to falter, and her language seems forced.

A few days later, on 13 September, Fanny Duberly entered Sebastopol. If the city looked ‘calm, and white, and fair’ from a distance, inside was ‘a very different tale’: ‘the ruined walls, the riddled roofs, the green cupola of the church, split and splintered to ribands’ (p. 282). It was an ugly mess. Like other visitors, Duberly was troubled by the damaged buildings, the litter of objects, the waste and desolation. Despite this, she was calm and interested. Then she was struck by a ‘pestilential’ smell. ‘Anything so putrid, so nauseating, so terrible, never assailed us before’ (p. 284). Perhaps there were dead horses and cattle nearby, ‘and yet they do not smell like this!’:

What is it? It cannot surely be — oh, horror! — a heap, a piled-up heap of human bodies in every stage of putrid decomposition, flung out into the street, and being carted away for burial. As soon as [the allies] gained possession of the town, a hospital was discovered in the barracks, to which the attention of our men was first attracted by screams and cries. Entering, they found a large number of wounded and dying. (p. 285)

This horrible discovery lay at the heart of Sebastopol: perhaps as many as three thousand wounded Russians, festering, suffering, and dying among the ruins of the city.

When one is exposed to such sights, writes Duberly, the mind protects itself, refusing to register the full horror (p. 286). But the vision returned with force later, and she knew she would never forget ‘that foul heap of green and black, glazed and shrivelled flesh’ (p. 285). Like Mary Seacole, Duberly found Sebastopol difficult to describe and impossible to forget. Where Seacole’s book resorts, uneasily, to comedy, Duberly’s account becomes self-righteous (‘a lawful prize [...] I felt glad that we had got it’),

even while admitting some sympathy. But neither writer's approach seems to answer the terrible sights of the battered city.

Inside the city

The shelling in the last days of the siege took a heavy toll of the Russians inside Sebastopol, killing and injuring as many as a thousand people every day (Figes, p. 277; Lambert, p. 262). When the city was evacuated on 8 September, the Russians were faced with large numbers of wounded soldiers and civilians, many of them too sick or injured to make the journey across the pontoon bridge. So the worst cases were simply left behind in the hope that the invaders would take care of them. However, because the allies could not occupy the mined city, most of the injured Russians were not discovered for two days or more. By then, those who were still alive were in a terrible condition, without food or water or medical care, as Ranken recorded:

I thought I had seen sufficient horrors on the 8th and the ensuing day; but on the morning of the 10th, I witnessed a spectacle more terrible than any I had yet seen. About a thousand or more poor wounded Russian soldiers and officers were found in a large building near the ruins of Fort Paul, on the morning of the 10th. They had passed nearly two days in agony and misery, without food or any assistance. Many dead were there, and the stench in the vast charnel-house of horror so dreadful, that it is a marvel how any had supported existence. (*Six Months*, ed. by Bayne Ranken, p. 72)

Russell wrote in *The Times*:

Of all the pictures of the horrors of war which have ever been presented to the world, the hospital of Sebastopol presents the most horrible, heart-rending, and revolting. It cannot be described, and the imagination of a Fuseli could not conceive anything at all like unto it. How the poor human body can be mutilated and yet hold its soul within it when every limb is shattered, and every vein and artery is pouring out the life stream, one might study here at every step, and at the same time wonder how little will kill! (Lambert and Badsey, pp. 256–57)

The scenes in the hospital were shocking:

Entering one of these doors I beheld such a sight as few men, thank God, have ever witnessed! In a long low room [...] lay the wounded Russians, who had been abandoned to our mercies

by their General. The wounded, did I say? No, but the dead — the rotten and festering corpses of the soldiers, who were left to die in their extreme agony, untended, uncared for, packed as close as they could be stowed, some on the floor, others on wretched trestles and bedsteads, or pallets of straw, sopped and saturated with blood, which oozed and trickled through upon the floor, mingling with the droppings of corruption. (Lambert and Badsey, p. 257)

Russians who had served their nation loyally throughout the siege, writes Russell, were simply abandoned:

Many might have been saved by ordinary care. Many lay, yet alive, with maggots crawling about in their wounds. Many, nearly mad by the scene around them, or seeking escape from it in their extremest agony, had rolled away under the beds, and glared out on the heart-stricken spectator — oh! with such looks! Many with legs and arms broken and twisted, [...] implored aid, water, food, or pity. (Lambert and Badsey, p. 257)

Russell's powerful account was widely read in Britain, and became known around the world. Many other people wrote private accounts in diaries or letters. For many observers, this was surely the most pitiful event of the war.¹⁶ According to Orlando Figes, the Russian doctor in charge of the evacuation of the hospitals, Dr Guibbenet, had left the wounded behind deliberately, in the full expectation they would be found and cared for in a short time.¹⁷ He was 'mortified', writes Figes, to learn afterwards that help took so long to arrive (p. 394).

Visual images of the hospital also appeared in some of the illustrated papers. The *Illustrated London News*, for example, printed a drawing on 6 October 1855, which is much less disturbing than the written accounts (*Fig. 1*). Some things could be said in words but not in pictures.

¹⁶ For Trevor Royle, witnessing the plight of the wounded Russians left behind in Sebastopol 'was living proof of the old military adage that next to a battle lost there is nothing so pitiable as "a battle won"' (p. 415).

¹⁷ Prince Gorchakov admitted in his despatch that wounded Russians were left behind, but he estimated the numbers to be around five hundred. The precise history of this aspect of the siege remains to some extent unknown. Why the Russians expected the allies to save the wounded immediately, given that the city was so heavily mined, is yet to be fully researched. Some Russian historians argue that the British accounts of finding the Russian wounded are exaggerated, perhaps as a kind of propaganda, to discredit the Russians in defeat. (Yulia Naumova, personal communication, at 'Charting the Crimean War: Contexts, Nationhood, Afterlives' conference, July 2013, National Army Museum, London.)

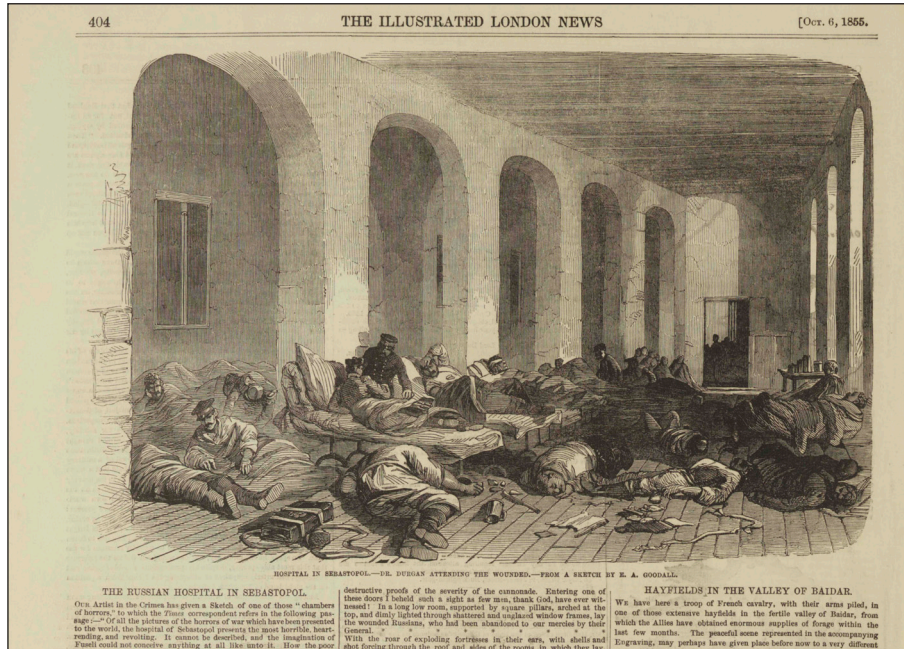


Fig. 1: 'Hospital in Sebastopol', *Illustrated London News*, 6 October 1855, p. 404.

The ambivalence expressed by observers such as Mary Seacole and Fanny Duberly is typical of writings about the Crimean War, and is especially true of representations of the Siege of Sebastopol. These works are some of the most powerful cultural legacies of the war, expressing both hatred and love for the city and its brave defenders; joy and sorrow (and possibly some guilt) at the outcome of the siege. More than this: the writings, photographs, and other representations of the fall of Sebastopol open up new ways of seeing modern warfare. They raise questions of looking and witnessing which remain both important and perplexing to us today.

These matters are explored conceptually by Susan Sontag in *Regarding the Pain of Others* and by Mary Favret in *War at a Distance* (among others). Both books are concerned with the question of how wars are represented, particularly to those far away. Neither engages closely with the Crimean War, even though it occupies such a crucial place in the history of war and representation. Sontag argues convincingly that while war photographs are often deeply disturbing, their meaning can be quite ambiguous, and that they can be mobilized for different, even opposing, political purposes (pp. 9–10, 35). She pays little attention to the Crimea, the first war to be photographed, apart from a very short discussion of Roger Fenton's photographs.¹⁸ Favret

¹⁸ Sontag, pp. 43–44. Sontag's discussion of the Crimea contains a number of factual errors. For example, she argues that Fenton was 'under instruction from the War

argues that the modern 'structure of feeling' in relation to warfare was created by the Romantic poets, imagining events of distant conflicts, inspired by contemporary words and pictures. Favret's argument is suggestive, yet it is oddly indifferent to the actual conflicts and the experiences of millions of people, both soldiers and civilians, who were directly affected by the Napoleonic wars. Favret has almost nothing to say about the Crimean War or the significant changes in representation which took place in the 1850s. Both writers suggest that, in Sontag's words, 'being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience' as if those who were present in 'another country', actually in the war, being killed, hurt, or displaced by the conflict, were somehow not modern, or not part of history (p. 16). The representations, and the feelings of those who see those representations far away, become more important, in this approach, than those who are affected directly by war. But this is not what we learn from the representations of the Crimean War. The poetry, newspaper reports, and photographs of the Crimea raise questions of proximity and distance, but they do not privilege the distant civilian, sitting by his fireside, reading the newspaper or writing a poem (Favret, pp. 1–6). They are intensely aware of events and experiences of the war itself — the hard labour, the violence, the suffering, the boredom, and also the pleasures — even as they find 'the war itself' difficult to describe.

For more than eleven months in 1854 and 1855, Sebastopol was a very powerful *idea*. The siege was observed by the British and French from a distance. That distance might be just twenty-five yards (as for the French soldiers in the trenches in front of the Malakov), or it might be several miles, from one of the camps or settlements outside the city. Near or far, those besieging Sebastopol watched and wondered as it was battered with the heaviest shelling in the history of warfare, yet appeared, miraculously (and falsely), hardly touched by it all. Many other British people followed the siege from thousands of miles away, in the newspapers. People felt very strongly that they were witnessing an important (and possibly barbaric) historical event. This raised complex new questions. How is one placed as a witness to war? The literate middle class had access to a huge amount of information from newspapers and magazines, art and photography exhibitions, panoramas, and other representations of the war. The representations in the press, especially, included a large amount of accurate, or near-accurate information: much more accurate, indeed, than most news

Office not to photograph the dead, the maimed, or the ill'. This is incorrect. Fenton was not under direction from the War Office; it was his own decision not to photograph dead bodies, probably as a matter of decorum, respect, or good taste. Sontag also claims that Fenton was sent to the war by the British government (p. 48), but this is incorrect. He was sent by a publisher. See Ulrich Keller, *The Ultimate Spectacle: A Visual History of the Crimean War* (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach, 2001); Jan Mieszkowski, *Watching War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), pp. 113–17.

sources today.¹⁹ So the civilian witnesses were, on the one hand, very well informed. On the other hand, apart from a few war tourists in the Crimea, civilians actually saw nothing at all first hand. All they had were representations. What did the representations mean? How should they be interpreted; and how did they position the civilian citizens, making them complicit in the war, paying for it through raised taxes, witnessing it daily, indirectly, in the press? This question of witnessing versus seeing was to become quite pressing during the First World War, as I have argued elsewhere.²⁰ This modern paradox has important roots in the Russian War, and especially in the fall of Sebastopol.²¹

Visualizing Sebastopol

Watching from above the ruins as Sebastopol burned was at once ‘sublime and terrific’, writes Alexis Soyer. How can one describe this? Soyer looked to the visual arts to express what he had seen: ‘A Martin or a Danby alone could trace on canvas, with their vigorous tints and their wild genius, the stupendous scene which my eyes are now beholding’ (p. 379). Only the apocalyptic paintings of artists John Martin (1789–1854) or Francis Danby (1793–1861) — who produced huge, violent canvases, often on biblical or classical themes — could do justice to the sight of the fallen city.²² Soyer looked to a particular kind of art — extreme, fantasmatic, hysterical paintings, mainly from the 1820s and 1830s — to bring the experience of 1855 into history and cultural memory. Yet most of the visual art of the Russian War is *not* in fact in this style. There are a few such works — such as William Simpson’s *Fall of Sebastopol* (1856) — but these are unusual.²³

Most of the paintings and sketches of Sebastopol are quite modest and factual in style. There are works by soldiers as well as by civilian artists, both amateur and professional, including William Simpson and Henry Clifford. These works are often a kind of reportage, depicting the scene as

¹⁹ Philip Knightley, *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-maker from the Crimea to Kosovo* (London: Prion, 2000).

²⁰ Trudi Tate, *Modernism, History and the First World War*, 2nd edn (Penrith: Humanities eBooks, 2013), p. 14.

²¹ If, as Favret argues, the modern pattern for representing war at a distance is established by British writers during the Napoleonic wars, this develops and changes in significant new ways in the Crimean War, with the use of eyewitness reporters, the expansion of press readership, and the use of photography.

²² Some of Martin’s paintings can be seen on the Tate Gallery website <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/john-martin-371>> [accessed 25 March 2015].

²³ Held in the National Army Museum and reproduced on its website <<http://prints.national-army-museum.ac.uk/image/424952/william-simpson-the-fall-of-sebastopol-1856>> [accessed 25 March 2015]

straightforwardly as possible. They avoid the biblical analogies and hyperbole imagined by Soyer. Others attempt an epic, heroic interpretation of the end of the siege, especially of the French storming of the Malakov. But such dramatic scenes are less common, it seems to me, than the images of everyday life through the months of the siege.

A few commentators liken the ruins of Sebastopol, somewhat bizarrely, to ancient catastrophes: the destruction of Pompeii, or a biblical disaster.²⁴ But the siege was not high drama; it was grinding, dismal, relentless fear, and hard work, together with periods of great suffering from cold, disease, and hunger. As Colin Robins points out in his introduction to *Captain Dunscombe's Diary*, boredom, fear, and cold were the typical experiences of the war, and the art often presents precisely this.²⁵ Indeed, the images of Sebastopol that speak most powerfully are almost the opposite of what Soyer imagined. The most haunting pictures of the war are the curious, quiet photographs by James Robertson and Felice Beato; works which are all the more powerful for their understatement.

James Robertson (1813/14–1888) was a British engraver who had a long career at the imperial mint in Constantinople. For about fifteen years he was also active as a photographer, working with his brother-in-law, Felice Beato. They photographed in the Crimea in the autumn of 1855 and spring of 1856.²⁶ Their photographs are, I suggest, some of the most important cultural documents of the fall of Sebastopol.

Robertson's photograph of the interior of the Redan, taken not long after it had been abandoned by the Russians, is a masterpiece of understatement (*Fig. 2*). Contemporary viewers would have had quite a detailed knowledge of the siege from the newspaper reports, and might have had a fairly good idea of what the image meant. ('What wonderful engineering!', wrote Fanny Duberly on first seeing the Redan (p. 243)). But even if one has little military knowledge, the photograph has tremendous power. Robertson merely documented places, landscapes, things. The fact that photography was fairly primitive, in technical terms, gave it a kind of honest simplicity which, one might argue, got lost as cameras and techniques became more sophisticated. Ulrich Keller goes so far as to say that

²⁴ Keller, *Ultimate Spectacle*, p. 164; *Inside Sebastopol and Experiences in Camp: Being the Narrative of a Journey to the Ruins of Sebastopol* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1856), p. 165.

²⁵ Dunscombe, p. 7; see also, Matthew Lalumia, *Realism and Politics in Victorian Art of the Crimean War* (Epping: Bowker, 1984).

²⁶ Information is taken from the *ODNB* entry on James Robertson (1813/14–1888) and from Keller, *Ultimate Spectacle*, pp. 162–70. Both Robertson and Beato took photographs, which exhibited and sold under the company name 'James Robertson'. Beato went on to have a long career as a photographer, whereas Robertson seems to have stopped taking pictures after the Crimea (Keller, *Ultimate Spectacle*, p. 162).

Robertson's 'sparse' photos 'come close to that impossibility: the image without a rhetoric' (*Ultimate Spectacle*, p. 165). His pictures of Sebastopol convey a real sense of anguish and loss, which one can feel even now, across the years.



Fig. 2: James Robertson, 'Interior of the Redan'. © National Army Museum, London.

How is this achieved? I think through stillness and the absence of things that can move: people, animals, even plants. Nothing living is present. All here is solid, hard to move. It is nearly all damaged; wrecked. It cannot move itself; but it has been moved. Which things have been thrown about by explosions and which by human hands? Where are those human hands now?

The scene suggests both protection and exposure. There are sandbags and gabions, some still in protective formation. But the place is also frighteningly open. And much of the protective material is broken and has fallen, or has been shoved roughly, into a hole in the middle. The scene is quite desolate; empty, yet filled. It is filled with things that had been useful until very recently but are now just rubbish; it is filled with despair and failure. Robertson is British, but this is not an image of allied triumph. The

point of view is from the inside; not a Russian perspective, exactly; more the view of a neutral, sad observer.

In the photograph of the Barrack Battery, there is a stronger sense of protection (*Fig. 3*). The stone wall looks solid. The cannons seem in about the right place; one can imagine the Russians defending themselves. The woven rope mats look strong and more or less in one piece. One can see the work and skill that went into making the objects, whether by hand or in a factory. Here they are still reasonably intact; in the photograph of the Redan more things are broken and useless. In both, there is a sense of what Keller calls Robertson's 'stubborn austerity' (*Ultimate Spectacle*, p. 164). The images are at once simple — simply composed — and complex, full of *stuff* and of powerful, unspoken, unimaginable emotions. Thirty years later, English readers would get a vivid sense of the experience of being *inside* those batteries, when Tolstoy's *Sevastopol Sketches* were translated.²⁷



Fig. 3: James Robertson, 'Barrack Battery'. © National Army Museum, London.

²⁷ Tolstoy was first translated into French and then English in the late 1880s. The Maude translations were published in 1901 and 1932. See Susan Layton, 'The Maude Translations of the Sevastopol Stories', *Tolstoy Studies Journal*, 20 (2008), 14–26.

At the time, the fall of Sebastopol was marked in English by a considerable amount of poetry, much of it published in the press (not much of it of great literary value).²⁸ The end of the siege was most memorably represented not by poetry, nor by the apocalyptic paintings imagined by Soyer, but by the simple yet profound black and white photographs of Robertson and Beato. The new medium of photography offered new ways of memorializing war. Its technical clumsiness made it, paradoxically, a most nuanced medium. As Keller notes, it did not yet have the claim to mimetic truth that it gained later, but it seems to offer some other kind of truth; the truth about our ambivalent relationship to war, perhaps, that the Russian War so profoundly revealed.²⁹

Look what we have done

As we have seen, many commentators found it difficult to describe the interior of Sebastopol; they faltered at the sight of ‘that charnel city’. Why? The sheer horror was difficult to describe, and mitigated the relief that the war would soon be over. And there was perhaps some element of disappointment; the allies had won the city, but they could not really occupy it and they didn’t know what to do next. It took some time to establish that the war was finished; the peace treaty was not signed until March 1856. More than a century later, we came to realize that the sad fate of Sebastopol made little if any difference to the outcome of the war. As Andrew Lambert has shown, the war was won not in the Crimea, but in the Baltic, not least by an economic blockade which was a key element in convincing the Tsar to agree peace terms (pp. 4–6, 341).

What remained was the *fantasy* investment in Sebastopol. British visitors were fascinated to see the effects of their bombardment up close. Look at what we have done! But at the same time they were rather frightened: *look at what we have done*. The industrial age had brought an astonishing ability to create and build: Brunel’s bridges, steam power, the railways, all kinds of manufacturing; and a vast range of commodities and objects, great and small. Britain was filling up and expanding through machines, things, power — all much celebrated a few years earlier, in the Great Exhibition of 1851. But industry has a huge capacity to destroy, too, and this came into focus in new ways at the Crimea. Some sixty years later, the First World War was perceived as the first industrial war. Men faced machines, with the machines always winning. Killing was organized on

²⁸ Trudi Tate, *A Short History of the Crimean War* (London: Tauris, 2015), ch. 5.

²⁹ Keller, *Ultimate Spectacle*, p. 170; Keller, ‘Photography, History, (Dis)belief’, *Visual Resources*, 26 (2010), 95–111.

an industrial scale.³⁰ This is the great trauma of the First World War, and it retains its ability to shock, even today. But there were early intimations of industrial warfare, of industry put at the disposal of warfare, at the Crimea, and this was one of the many things that troubled writers about Sebastopol. On the other hand, observers were excited and delighted by the destruction around them. The Russians had excellent fuses, good explosions; they showed great technical competence. All over Sebastopol, the British were impressed by the ‘extreme strength and solidity’ of the Russian works: the huge defences, the massive docks (*Six Months*, ed. by Bayne Ranken, p. 78).

For engineer Nicholas Dunscombe, the Russian batteries were ‘all perfect’; ‘the Malakoff is a perfect work.’ Major General William Allan admired the ‘indefatigable labour’ of the Russian soldiers in constructing ‘such formidable bomb proof earthworks within their bastions’, under the direction of their ‘great and renowned Engineer’, General Totleben. On 12 September William Howard Russell noted that

the wonder of all visitors to the ruins of Sebastopol is divided — they are astonished at the strength of the works, and that they were ever taken; they are amazed that men could have defended them so long with such ruin around them.

Once they had looked at the fallen city, most visitors to Sebastopol, both military and civilian, then studied the great docks; marvellous works of engineering. For military surgeon Frederick Robinson, the docks were ‘the lion of Sebastopol’; ‘beautiful structures’ produced by an enormous investment of labour, time, and money. ‘They seem the works of giants’, commented engineer Ranken. ‘It is impossible not to be astonished at the vastness of the undertaking’. ‘Prodigious’, declared Russell; ‘splendid’, wrote Douglas Reid. ‘It seems a pity to destroy them.’³¹

The British continued to admire the docks, even as they prepared to blow them up, a painstaking job which took several months. Viewers were excited all over again by the sublime beauty of the docks in a state of ruin. Robertson’s photographs document them before and after; from a mighty feat of engineering to a mighty pile of rubble (*Figs 4, 5*).

Responses to Sebastopol were among the most profoundly ambivalent representations of the Crimean War. The desolate city generated pleasure and terror; admiration and horror. Wars have always stirred such

³⁰ Daniel Pick, *War Machine: The Rationalisation of Slaughter in the Modern Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

³¹ Dunscombe, p. 157 (13 September 1855), p. 158 (14 September 1855); Allan, p. 125 (17 September 1855); Lambert and Badsey, p. 251; Robinson, p. 404; *Six Months*, ed. by Bayne Ranken, p. 78; Lambert and Badsey, p. 252; *Soldier-Surgeon*, ed. by Baylen and Conway, p. 112.

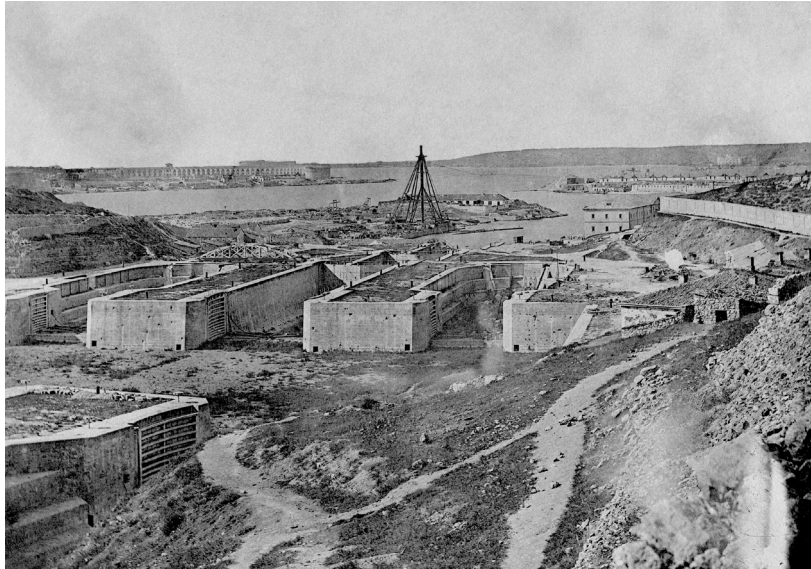


Fig. 4: James Robertson, 'Sebastopol Docks before Destruction, 1855'.
© National Army Museum, London.



Fig. 5: James Robertson, 'Sebastopol Docks in Ruins, 1856'.
© National Army Museum, London.

emotions, of course, but as weapons became more powerful and more dreadful, war became increasingly horrible as well as more exciting; even, perversely, in some respects more beautiful. British representations of the fall of Sebastopol in 1855 record these paradoxes. On the other hand, there was hope that the horrible fate of the city might bring about the end of this terrible war. But how much difference did it make? Possibly none at all. As Lambert has shown us, the immense courage and suffering on all sides at Sebastopol had very little effect upon the outcome of the war (pp. 31–33). This knowledge surely casts a further shadow of sadness over the Crimean conflict, and gives us even greater pause today.