

Book Reviews

The Crimean war in imperial context, 1854–1856.

Andrew C. Rath. 2015. New York: Palgrave MacMillan. 301 p, illustrated, hardcover. ISBN 978-1-137-54451-3. 83.19 €.

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The fact that the Crimean war was not simply a ‘Crimean’ war has taken a long time to seep into the consciousness of historians, both general and military, as has the awareness of its implications as a worldwide struggle. There are many interesting points that mark out its uniqueness. Just to mention two of these: the fact that the big loser of the war was not Russia but China is still wholly unappreciated, although it is of high geopolitical importance today, as is the extraordinary neutrality pact concerning the only place in world at which there was a land border between one of the major allied combatants, the United Kingdom, and Russia. This was at the frontier between Alaska and Canada where perfect peace reigned during the whole time that those states were at war with each other. The story behind this is fascinating and should be followed up by connoisseurs of the unusual.

Moreover, few wars have a more disproportionate and unbalanced historiography. Endless references (including films) are available covering those most famous 20 minutes of British military history, the Charge of the Light Brigade, and concerning the activities of the extraordinary Florence Nightingale. But few would know that war had serious implications in the Falkland Islands, sufficiently remote, one would think, to receive the barest ripples from the hostilities in the major theatres.

This book merits the attention of readers of *Polar Record* particularly because some of the seriously little known areas in which hostilities took place were in the White Sea in the Arctic or the Pacific sub-Arctic and, moreover, that the second of these was the theatre in which the Russians achieved their greatest success in comparison with the Baltic where the conflict was, put simply, a draw, and the Crimea itself where the allies were the victors. The ‘imperial’ in the title seeks to place the whole worldwide context of the struggle into place. But the approach is highly selective and one should state immediately that there is very little relating to the Turks, who certainly had an ‘imperial context’, in this book and those persons who are interested in, for example, the struggle between them and the Russians in the Caucasus will perforce have to look elsewhere. But the accounts of hostilities in the White Sea and in the sub-Arctic North Pacific are thorough and well presented. The author’s research on these topics has been extremely comprehensive and the critical apparatus is most imposing, almost intimidating, in fact, at no fewer than 99 pages.

The allied operations in the White Sea consisted in the establishment and maintenance of a blockade in 1854 and 1855 together with the destruction of the town of Kola and an assault on the buildings on Solovetsky island. One sidesteps the tricky, and much argued over, question of whether these constituted a monastery, or a fortress, or both! Due to the difficulties of navigation in the rivers leading to the city, the allies made no

attempt at attacking Arkangel’sk although the possibility that they might have done ‘tied up’ several thousand Russian troops who could have been more usefully employed in the Baltic or indeed in the Crimea.

When one comes to the Pacific the author addresses both the major and minor aspects of the campaigns in the two years in detail. The question of whether the death of the British Admiral Price was accident or suicide is thoroughly explored and the fundamental points of the considerable action at Petropavlovsk are presented. One minor *caveat* in this respect; this reviewer would have appreciated a more explicit statement of the undoubted fact that when the allies adhered to a scheme of action in which they were strong and the Russians were weak, namely bombardment by gun power, they were successful but when, due to faulty leadership, they reversed the process and undertook a land action in which they were weak in fighting soldiers, but in which the Russians were strong, they were humiliatingly defeated. The writer forbears from making the obvious point that Russian leadership improved in proportion to the distance from St Petersburg! One must greatly admire the Russian commanders in the Pacific theatre in 1854 and in 1855 they were even more successful and made the allied commanders simply look foolish on several occasions, much to the fury of the allied, particularly, British press.

This book will be an essential starting point for anyone interested in studying the more detailed aspects of any of the campaigns mentioned and especially with regard to the comprehensive extent of its references. However there is one aspect of the book that this writer cannot refrain from commenting upon. This is the maps. These are poor; very poor. There are only four and two of them, setting out the Baltic and the Pacific are at so small a scale as to be almost worthless. A reader would be much better served by having a decent atlas to hand or even a computer. Slightly better is a map of the White Sea, although several points of interest are omitted and one of the action at Petropavlovsk...but anyone who has actually been there and has ‘walked the battlefield’, as this reviewer was privileged to have been able to do, will immediately appreciate its limitations. The publishers have not, amazingly, seen fit to include a scale. This is a pity since several reasonable maps, out of copyright, are available. There are no maps at all concerning the hostilities at Bomarsund, nor of those at Sweaborg (Suomenlinna), the fortress outside Helsinki, the latter of which were of special importance concerning a possible attack on Cronstadt, outside St Petersburg, in 1856. This is a major omission and one wonders how the publisher can have allowed it to happen. There are no other illustrations except that on the cover that is a picture of a gun emplacement at Bomarsund, complete with an icon, taken after the fall of the fortress.

The book is solidly and attractively bound and will withstand much usage. The text is informative and well written and has much to interest readers of this journal. This book is a major step in reducing the view, alas still common, that the Crimean War was simply that, a war in Crimea. (Ian R. Stone, Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge, Lensfield Rd, Cambridge CB2 1ER (irs30@cam.ac.uk)).