

The Crimean War and Its Afterlife: Making Modern Britain. By Lara Kriegel. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. ISBN 978-1-1088-4222-8. Maps. Figures. Illustrations. Photographs. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xvi, 347. \$120.000 (hardback).

Whatever your views on Brexit, the response to Covid, or the Black Lives Matter movement, do not be put off by the somewhat crass simplicity of the rather ill-informed comments on modern Britain offered toward the close of this book. There is a lot of interest here in terms of the legacy of the Crimean War in British culture. As someone who lives in nineteenth-century suburb with its accompanying street-names, including a nearby Alma Place, I can see how tracing that theme is fruitful and Professor Kriegel has done a very good job of recording and assessing of tracing memorialisation and indeed its failings. She writes with conviction on heroines – Florence Nightingale and Mary Seacole, and the highly contrasting significance taken from their lives. Kriegel also covers topics that are not so well done, such as the cemetery at Cathcart’s Hill, the focal point for British grief at the end of the war and the gathering point for the monuments erected across Crimea in the decades after. Damaged in World War II, it suffered Cold War destruction in the 1950s before attracting attention in the early 2010s and then being affected by the Russian takeover in 2014.

Visitors to the peninsula are considered, including, briefly, Churchill at Yalta. More space is devoted to the films, notably *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1968). This was an attack on blunders set against the background of a harsh army. Apropos of the latter, Kriegel, like many commentators, has less interest in the process by which the army’s performance improved during the war, as, indeed, was the case for most wars. Linked to this comes the role of the war in political contention and polemic, a role that does not appear to interest Kriegel. In the short-term, there was the critique of the Aberdeen ministry, but there was also an attack on an apparently failing system. This proved opportune for those seeking to present politics in terms of a clash between men of talent and those of decadent failure. Yet, that was a rhetoric as much as a reality, and a rhetoric that has to be considered on those terms. The assault on the British *ancient regime* was a ‘culture wars of its days,’ and military events, such as the Charge of the Light Brigade were deployed accordingly.

This also set the pattern for the “afterlife” of these events. Indeed, in many respects, there was a prefigurement of caricatures of British generalship in World War One. Kriegel or another scholar might like to consider this **put**.

Her book also fails to engage with the geopolitics of the book and the “lessons” thereby learned. In particular, the role of the war when British options in future confrontations with Russia came to the fore requires consideration. There is no real engagement with the significance of the war for British military doctrine or, indeed, the development of strategy. Instead, there is a greater commitment to considering the Victoria Cross and its legacy. This does give her the opportunity for

some somewhat questionable judgments. There is an instrumentalism in the writing: “In the fraught, early years of Thatcher’s regime, 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). Actually, Argentina was the attacking power in a war the British government was not seeking. Apparently, “Britain under Margaret Thatcher was embracing neo-Victorian values” (pp. 114-15), which presumably was why Thatcher never won a majority of the votes cast, while, as any specialist will know, Victorian values varied greatly. Lots of interest then, but needs to be read cautiously. To use the Crimean War for the purpose of cultural history, it is necessary to engage with the complexity both of Victorian culture and later culture. Moreover, the sort of cultural history fashionable in the 2000s assumed we could leave the politics and geopolitics behind, which recent events had disproved. A more useful, albeit very different work, is offered by Winfried Baumgart, *The Crimean War: 1853-1856* (2nd ed, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

(683 words)

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