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Julian Spilsbury, *The Thin Red Line: An Eyewitness Account of the Crimean War*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2005). Pp. 340. ISBN 978-0-304-36721-4.

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Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon in front of them
Volley'd and thunder'd¹

Julian Spilsbury's *The Thin Red Line* details a conflict that would have passed into obscurity if not for James Brudenell, the seventh Earl of Cardigan and reluctant commander of the Light Brigade. The narrative begins in 1853 when the sun never set on the British Empire. The Russians are eyeing a cherished naval base to give them unimpeded passage into the Mediterranean Sea. The decline of the Turkish Empire, the "sick man" of European politics, gives Tsar Nicholas I an opportunity to seize a Turkish port that will give him the access he craves. The Tsar's telegraphed intention is the *casus belli* the appalled British and French use to take up arms against him.

In a time eerily reminiscent of the present, seemingly disconnected events in the Holy Land, rebellion in the Balkans, and the ebb and flow of power between Eastern and Western Europe quickly bring matters to a head. After a brief review of the specific causes of the war, Spilsbury² moves to the Crimea Peninsula, where the British and French, joined in an uneasy alliance, choose to make their stand. If they can seize Sevastopol, the principal port in the Crimea and home to Russia's Black Sea Fleet, the Tsar's expansionist aims will be foiled. It is only supposed to take a year.

Spilsbury weaves a tapestry of anecdotal eyewitness accounts depicting the entire bloody campaign with astonishing detail and power. The story is a chronicle of firsts: the first use of the Minié ball by British and French riflemen, with devastating results; the first deployment of rifled cannon; the first news reports to be flashed by telegraph from a war front; the first time the British public reads daily accounts of fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons dying miserable, unattended deaths from disease and wounds.

Many remarkable witnesses tell the story. Lord Raglan, the overall British commander, his generals, staff officers, sergeants, and private soldiers all get their say. Their distinctive writing styles lend a unique flavor to a narrative that might otherwise have been quite drab. Particularly intriguing is Francis Isabella "Fanny" Duberly, the wife of Henry Duberly, the Paymaster of the 8th Hussars. "Blonde, attractive, witty, and twenty-four" (11), she one of a handful of wives allowed to accompany soldiers to perform menial labor and provide rudimentary nursing care that was otherwise unavailable. From her extraordinary perch, Fanny records in vivid detail the moments of brilliance and days of despondency that mark the course of the year-long siege of Sevastopol.

Like all battlefields the Crimean Peninsula is a dismal place when the British and French armies arrive after a seven-day, thirty-mile march from their landing beaches at Calamita Bay in September 1854. Barren, unoccupied except for the enemy, and parched by the summer sun, it is miserably hot and humid. It will be equally unbearable in the cold, wet winter to follow. The enemies they will soon meet in force are watching from a respectful distance.

From the deck of a troopship floating serenely on the Black Sea, a Captain Wilson of the Coldstream Guards watches the Cossack cavalry sent to harass the Allied landing: "Scurvy-looking knaves in grey watchcoats, mounted on active, shaggy ponies, and armed with long, unpleasant-looking flag-less spears are watching our proceedings" (35).

¹ Alfred Lord Tennyson, "The Charge of the Light Brigade" (1854).

² In addition to authoring *The Indian Mutiny* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2007), Spilsbury writes military obituaries for the *Daily Telegraph* and scripts for the British television series *The Bill*, *Taggart*, and *Casualty*.

Action is not long in coming and the Light Brigade is the first unit to find it—a skirmish fought to repel Russian Cossacks from the invading army. Spilsbury uses the encounter to illustrate the divisiveness among commanders at every level in a time when officers' commissions are bought and sold by the rich and idle to give them something respectable to do. In this instance, Raglan orders Cardigan to attack, only to have his methods questioned by Lord Lucan, his brother-in-law, superior, and frequent nemesis throughout the campaign. It is the first of many clashes between senior officers more concerned with personal pride and position than operational efficiency.

The mission of the invaders is to occupy Sevastopol, at the peninsula's southern edge, and Balaklava, a port town ten miles away, thereby excising the Crimea from Mother Russia with a single brilliant stroke of the knife. At first it seems they will succeed. When the combined armies march south in five columns, the officers and ranks are fueled with optimism. Everyone knows the Russians are an uncivilized lot, easy pickings for the best trained, best equipped army in the world. This is the first of many errors in Allied judgment.

The book describes the principal battles of the campaign chronologically and in splendid detail: the Battle of Alma, on the banks of a miserable, muddy stream of the same name; the year-long siege of Sevastopol; the battles for the heights overlooking Balaklava, where the charge of the Light Brigade occurred; and the final Battle of Inkerman. One can almost feel the barrages of solid shot bounding across the ground like startled hares while the air buzzes with angry blasts of grapeshot and musketry. The agony and nobility of war are captured in all their Victorian magnificence.

With the 46th [Regiment] ... Lieutenant Frederick Dallas ... wrote [of the battle for the Heights above the Tchernaya Valley], "The fire was very heavy. At last the enemy began to waver, and we took advantage of it and made a most splendid headlong Charge on them, pushing them down the steep side of the mountain in utter confusion. The slaughter of them was immense, for we charged right at them, and every man had shot away his 60 rounds (or nearly so) before we could get them to pull up." Lieutenant-Colonel Colin Campbell ... took up the story. "Dallas took the five men next to him and attempted as he described 'to boil up a little charge.' But when he got within about ten yards of the Russians, finding himself totally unsupported, he ran back again as fast as he came; extraordinary to say, he got back untouched, although he says that every man in the Russian line seemed to be firing point-blank. Three out of his five men were killed" (224, 228).

Spilsbury describes the darker face of the war very well. Putrefying wounds, cholera, dysentery, and smallpox decimate entire regiments in a few days. By their efforts to relieve the agonies of crudely treated wounds and rampant disease, Florence Nightingale and her indomitable nurses enter the forefront of history. Somerset Calthorpe, an aide-de-camp to Raglan, describes the horrors of a regimental hospital: "Here might be seen the surgeons hard at work in their terrible but merciful duty, their arms covered with blood, the floors strewn with limbs just amputated, and slippery with gore. The enormous number of wounded quite overpowered the unceasing efforts of the medical officers" (102).

Disease kills many more men in the Crimean War than bullets. *Times* reporter W.H. Russell sends home dispatches describing the conditions at the Scutari barracks hospital, just across the Bosphorus from Istanbul, where Florence Nightingale treats the sick and wounded evacuated from the Crimea. Disease is so pervasive, one regiment reports it has only seven soldiers available for duty. More than 10,000 British soldiers sent to the Crimea—thirty-five percent of the army—die of disease there. Of the 22,500 British, French and Turkish troops ultimately sacrificed, only 4,000 succumb to wounds sustained in fighting.

Then as now generals and physicians lie to prevent the public from turning against a war. Thus, although Chief Medical Officer Dr. John Hall reports that all is well in health care in the Crimea, in fact, Spilsbury reveals, "There was no soap, no towels, no scrubbing brushes. There was no hospital clothing, no kettles, knives, forks or spoons, Rations were cooked in thirteen great Turkish coppers which rarely even boiled the water, let alone cooked the meat. There were no rations suitable for the sick or convalescent, and very few drugs..." (256).

The British and French prevail—for a time. The strategic goal of destroying the Black Sea Fleet and nullifying the threat of Sevastopol is accomplished, but at overwhelming cost. On 28 February 1856, the Allies

and Russians negotiate an armistice and Sevastopol reverts to Russia in exchange for a shaky peace. The next day the war is over.

Spilsbury closes with an apt allusion: “‘But what good came of it at last?’ asked the small boy at the end of Robert Southey’s poem ‘The Battle of Blenheim.’ The old man answered, ‘Why I cannot tell,’ said he,/ But t’was a famous victory’” (321).³

³ An Appendix usefully summarizes what is known of the subsequent history of the book’s principal eyewitnesses. Other helpful inclusions are a “Select Bibliography” of some fifty entries, five very clearly labeled gray-scale maps, and fifteen high-quality color illustrations of paintings relevant to the Crimean War in the National Army Museum in London.