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Orlando Figes, *The Crimean War: A History*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010. Pp. xxiii, 575. ISBN 978-0-8050-7460-4.

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In the middle decades of the nineteenth century, European nations fought a number of wars. Most involved the making of a new nation and lasted only a few months. The one exception was the Crimean War, in which the fighting went on for more than two years and religious issues and imperial rivalries played important roles. Of all the midcentury wars, it was by far the most murderous, costing the lives of over 600,000 soldiers and an untold number of civilians. The majority of soldiers who perished succumbed to disease, and Florence Nightingale, the most remembered and revered figure of the war (at least in Great Britain), earned her fame managing the care of the sick and wounded. No other person is so often mentioned when the subject of the war comes up. It is telling that her fame resulted from acts of mercy. Contrary to common opinion, the European public had been confronted with the horrors and pity of war long before 1914.

British historian Orlando Figes (Univ. of London) never directly explains what prompted him to write about the Crimean War. His earlier books have focused on twentieth-century Russia, and have mostly addressed political and cultural issues. In fact, as he confesses in his introduction, his family “could never quite believe that I was writing a war book” (xvi). What they presumably came to realize, as will his readers, is that Figes sees the war as almost a world historical event, a far more significant conflict than historians have judged. “What I hope emerges from these pages is a new appreciation of the war’s importance as a major turning point in the history of Europe, Russia and the Middle East,” a “crucial watershed” in relations between the European and Muslim worlds (xxi). Figes, pace his family, was writing not so much a war book as a work of history intended to reshape the world’s thinking.

He begins by asserting that, while the war has not lacked historians, it has been left too long in the hands of military historians, “mainly ... British ..., many of them amateur enthusiasts” (xxi). Given its significance, the war deserves to be examined by a professional historian able to see how “the geo-political, cultural, and religious factors that shaped the involvement of each major power in the conflict” are crucial for understanding what happened in the war. Thus Figes devotes his first four chapters, more than a quarter of the book, to the war’s causes. Readers “eager for the fighting to begin” are encouraged to be “patient” or simply “skip over them.” Such patient readers will be rewarded not only with a lucid survey of complicated matters but insight into what prompted the writing of this book. For Figes believes that historians, besides not appreciating the war’s significance, have seriously underestimated the role of religion in its causes. They have “tended to dismiss the religious motives of the war,” thinking them either irrelevant or “no more than a trigger for the real causes of the war: the struggle of the European powers for influence in the Ottoman Empire” (xxiii). Sensitized by the “religious wars of our own age,” we need to grasp the “importance of religion in the nineteenth century,” particularly how “politics and faith were closely intertwined in this imperial rivalry, and every nation, none more so than Russia, went to war in the belief that God was on its side” (xxiii). Hence the subtitle of the UK edition of the book—“The Last Crusade.” The American publisher, in the post-9/11 era, understandably felt the need to replace that toxic phrase.

While acknowledging the “global scale of the fighting,” Figes, like most of his predecessors, attends largely to the fighting in the Crimea. He describes well the battles of the war, especially the protracted siege of Sevastopol, and effectively uses soldiers’ writings to evoke conditions and attitudes. Here is a British officer commenting in the winter of 1854-55 on the plight of the soldiers at Sevastopol, who were without means to make fires: “The consequence is they cannot dry their stockings or shoes; come in from the trenches with frost-bitten toes, swelled feet, chilblains, etc.; their shoes freeze, and they cannot put them

on. Those who still, in spite of their misery, continue to do their duty, often go into the trenches without shoes by preference, or they cut away the heels to get them on.... If this goes on, the trenches must be abandoned I heard of men on their knees crying with pain" (285).

Figes's evident empathy for the soldiers leads him at one point to a revealing exaggeration. Describing the Russian siege of Silistria in April 1854, he declares that there "had never been a time in the history of warfare when soldiers were subjected to so much constant danger for so long" (173). Hyperbole in the service of one's views is a common and venial sin among historians. But this example bears noticing, for it is intended to buttress the author's endeavor to establish this conflict as "the first total war" (xix). To justify that standing, bold claims have to be made. So, for example, the Crimean War is the "first industrial war," a designation most historians reserve for the American Civil War or World War I. The use of the Minié ball, the building of a ten-kilometer stretch of railroad from Balaklava harbor to the British camp, and the introduction of ironclad ships as floating batteries in the bombardment of Kinburn are harbingers of what is to come, not industrial war itself.

Other assertions come nearer the mark, especially Figes's argument that the war was the first "to be brought about by the pressure of the press and by public opinion" (147). True enough for England, but unconvincing for France where the press, as Figes admits, was "censored and controlled" (311) by the government of Napoleon III. Public opinion certainly mattered to Napoleon III, and he took pains to gauge it. But a censored and controlled press cannot "pressure" its government. England's freedom of press is evidenced in the role of *The Times* in bringing down the Aberdeen government in January 1855. Later that year the inaugural edition of the *Saturday Review* charged that England was "ruled by *The Times*," an obvious exaggeration but one that some readers would have believed. The paper certainly had far more clout than any in Paris, nor did any French journalist gain the degree of fame William Howard Russell did as a result of his reporting from the Crimea. Russell's colorful writing set a standard for war reporting that other reporters were expected, and often tried, to emulate. He is arguably the only other commonly recalled figure from the war besides Florence Nightingale.

All of this suggests a "first" for the war that Figes does not propose. The work of Nightingale and Russell brought home to the public the harsh conditions of soldiers' lives. The next war in Europe, in Italy in 1859, and particularly the battle of Solferino, a more lethal affair than Inkerman, inspired in the mind of a Swiss businessman the idea of the Red Cross. Henri Dunant was at Solferino by accident, but stayed to attend the wounded. What else could an admirer of Florence Nightingale do?