

# Book Review: The Crimean War in Imperial Context, 1854-1856 by Andrew C. Rath

[blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2016/05/04/book-review-the-crimean-war-in-imperial-context-1854-1856-by-andrew-c-rath/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2016/05/04/book-review-the-crimean-war-in-imperial-context-1854-1856-by-andrew-c-rath/)

*In **The Crimean War in Imperial Context, 1854-1856**, Andrew C. Rath offers an account of the conflict that not only explores the European dimensions of the Crimean War, but also opens up a new perspective on its global and imperial dimensions, including major events in the Baltic, the White Sea and the Pacific. It is this integrated analysis and Rath's focus on the greater imperial picture of the Crimean War that will prove highly attractive to scholars, writes Mahon Murphy.*

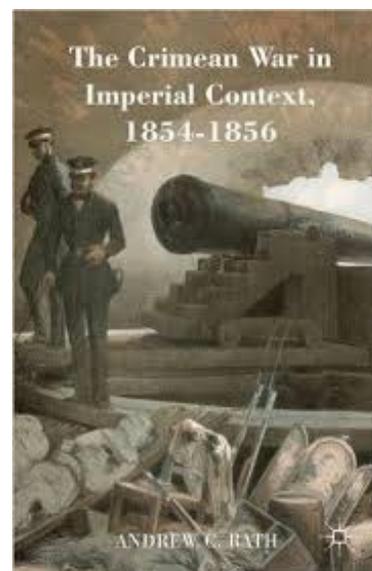
***The Crimean War in Imperial Context, 1854-1856.* Andrew C. Rath. Palgrave MacMillan. 2015.**

Find this book: 

The centenary of the First World War has revived debates on the global and imperial nature of the conflict. The narrative of the war has resoundingly been shifted from that of a conflict confined to Europe, and its significant impact on global politics and economy is very much at the forefront of current historiography. Andrew C. Rath's new book works in the same vein as these studies, but turns its attention to the Crimean War. On the whole, fighting was confined to the battlefields of Europe; accounts of these are perhaps well-known (or at least used to be) to most British schoolchildren. However, the global dimensions of the war are lesser-known, which is surprising as this was a war that could trace its origins not to Europe, but rather to a brawl between Catholics and Russian Orthodox Priests in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

*The Crimean War in Imperial Context, 1854-1856* does not ignore the conflict's European dimensions, but integrates seemingly lesser theatres of the war into an overall narrative. This expansion away from the traditional narrative of the Crimean War opens up a new perspective on the war's global and imperial dimensions. Through looking at major events in the Baltic, the White Sea and the Pacific, Rath traces the trends that followed them and shows the major impact of the war on imperial relations in East Asia especially.

The book offers a narrative that begins with British and French plans to join the Ottoman Empire as allies against Russian aggression. The Russian response receives a lot of detail as Rath focuses on how Russia used the conflict to geopolitical advantage against neutral China. The Crimean War had an impact far beyond Sevastopol, and Rath examines China's response to Russian aggression in 1854 and Britain and France's attack on Petropavlovsk as an assault that was designed to protect British and French interests in the Northern Pacific. The shift of focus to the Pacific links the Crimean War to Russian negotiations with Japan and the tentative first steps toward opening the country to trade.





**Image Credit: The Crimean War, 1854 – 56. Views of the ruined interior of the Great Redan, one of the six main redoubts which defended Sevastopol, showing broken parapets and abandoned guns ([Robertson James, Photograph Q 71234, Imperial War Museum Collections](#)).**

Russia, of course, was the geographic centrepiece of the war. Its expanding empire meant that it had to plan for war on a continental, if not global, scale. Russia's vast territorial acquisitions in the 1850s have often been credited to one man, the governor general of Eastern Siberia, Nikolay Nikolayevich Muravov. However, using the Crimean War as a backdrop, Rath maps out the complex dynamics that allowed Russian troops and settlers to move down the Amur River and annex lands to its north. The timing of the Crimean War coincided with the ongoing Taiping rebellion in China (1850-64) and the wake of the First Anglo-Chinese (Opium) War of 1839-42. China was ripe for the taking, and the Crimean War made it easier for Russian imperialists to argue for expansion along the Amur, lest their enemy, Britain, get there first. Thus the conflict that broke out over a range of issues unrelated to East Asia fits seamlessly with Russian fears that Britain would eventually conquer all of China. British imperial planners likewise used the war as an opportunity to strengthen their foothold in East Asia.

The British assault on Petropavlovsk presented Britain with an opportunity to approach isolationist Japan. Sir James Stirling, Commander for the East Indies and China station, ordered his squadron to engage in a series of negotiations with the Tokugawa government. This was initially a tactic to prevent Russian warships from accessing Japanese ports and to stop Russia's developing diplomacy with the Shogun. However, Stirling's negotiations were extremely successful, and he was able to gain a fully-fledged diplomatic convention that 'opened' the Japanese ports of Hakodate and Nagasaki to Royal Navy warships. Rath provides interesting signposts as to how the Crimean War shaped British Imperial strategy and policy. Had the War not occurred, it might have been many years before Britain would have been able to negotiate such an opening up of Japan. The spillover effects of the war brought the British and Russian empires deeper into Asia, and also encouraged the opening up of Japan and its own imperial awakening, which would see it become the dominant power in East Asia through defeating Russia less than fifty years later in the war of 1904-05.

An interesting discussion that Rath raises is around the modernity of the Crimean conflict. Rather than the First World War being viewed as the first truly modern war, Rath points to some similarities in methods of warfare between the Crimean and the First World Wars. For example, the proposed use of sulphur to asphyxiate defenders dovetails neatly with the historiography around the narrative surrounding the use of poison gas from 1914-18. Although the

term 'propaganda' was not in parlance at the time, British and French planners were very wary of using such methods as their conduct would be scrutinised by domestic and international audiences. National reputations were also at stake in this primitive propaganda war.

Overall Rath's book weaves the imperial context of the Crimean War into a narrative that highlights its long-term global impact and its transformative effects on empire, especially on two empires that were not official belligerents: China and Japan. The book does not, however, simply focus on the extra-European dimensions of the war as it dedicates a great deal of space to the conflict within Europe. Nevertheless, it is Rath's focus on the greater imperial picture that will particularly attract readers.

---

**Mahon Murphy** is currently a research fellow at Trinity College Dublin, working on the British military occupation of Jerusalem 1917-20 as part of the HERA-funded project Making War, Mapping Europe; Militarized Cultural Encounters, 1792-1920. He received his PhD from the History department at the LSE, where he also undertook his MA. His PhD research concerned German prisoners of war and civilian internees in the extra-European theatre of the First World War. His thesis looked at the treatment of European prisoners in a colonial context with a focus on the fall of the German colonies and protectorates in Africa, China and the Pacific. [Read more reviews by Mahon Murphy.](#)

*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*

- Copyright 2013 LSE Review of Books