La Guerre de Crimée n’aura pas lieu

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Abstract
The Crimean War (1854–6) was, in the words of Eric Hobsbawn (2010), ‘the nearest thing to a general European war between 1815 and 1914’. Whereas it figures large in the national mythologies of Britain and Russia, in France it remains very much a footnote. This is despite the fact that it is the only nineteenth-century war the French ultimately won. But in the view of many, to quote Jules Michelet (1857), ‘La conquête du lama est dix fois plus importante que la conquête de Crimée.’ It would seem that the Crimean War has no place in the canon of culturally retained historical events that define modern French identity. Though news of the war in the contemporary press and popular literature was ubiquitous, it does not figure in the canonical literature of time. This paper considers how the Crimean War was and was not represented in French literature in the second half of the nineteenth-century.

Keywords
Charles Baudelaire, Crimean War, cultural memory, French literature, Victor Hugo

On a chilly day in March, fear of an impending Crimean war fills the front pages of newspapers throughout Europe with talk of Russian aggression, expansionism and eventual control of the Black Sea. Sebastopol, home of the Russian Black Sea fleet, suddenly figures on the cognitive maps of individuals who two months earlier would not have been able to find it on a globe. But the year is not 2014, it is 1854, and by the end of March, France, Britain and the Ottoman Sublime Porte – three vanished empires – would be officially at war with Russia, a fourth. For months the events that led up to and took place during the Crimean War would dominate political discussions throughout the Western world, not least in France, where they appeared ‘à la une’ for three solid years.

And so begins the narrative, or rather a narrative, of the ‘Guerre d’Orient’. For it is not at all clear where this particular nineteenth-century ‘histoire française’ fits into the larger story of modern France. The Napoleonic Wars at the beginning and the Franco-Prussian War towards the end of that century constitute loud, unforgettable chapters in the collective memory and narratives of
French history. But what of the Crimean War, the only one of the three that the French ultimately won? By comparison, it is a footnote surrounded by silence. This, despite the fact that the names of its victorious battles are daily repeated throughout France: Alma, Malakoff, Sebastopol.1 To paraphrase the art historian, Ulrich Keller, the Crimean War has no place in the canon of culturally retained historical events that define modern French identity (Keller, 2001: ix). In questioning the place, or lack of place, of the Crimean War in the history of the long nineteenth century, this paper represents an attempt to come to terms with how the Crimean War is and is not represented in French literature and French cultural mythology.

Crimea is widely considered the first modern war, with its tactical use of railways, telegraphs and battlefields, its rapid-fire rifles, its 200-pound explosive shells, its appalling new injuries and its notorious trenches – tactical precursors of the Great War. It is a war as famous for its displays of military incompetence as for its victories. It is also the first media war: the first to know the presence and impact of a war correspondent on the field of battle (on the British side),2 the first war to be documented in photographs.3 From start to finish it was a war that filled the pages of British and French newspapers and illustrated weeklies without interruption. It is a war that figures still in the national mythologies of Russia and Britain but remains at best a postscript in the French cultural imaginary.

The story of the Crimean War told from the Russian and British perspectives is primarily a narrative of loss: loss of a war, loss of international prestige and massive loss of life for the Russians; for the British, loss of command from an aristocratic but incompetent officer corps, and the senseless loss of life amongst its soldiers – even if those losses ultimately led to new standards of medical hygiene. From the French perspective, though the story is similarly one of tragic suffering and loss of life – 100,000 of the 300,000 Frenchmen who went over died, most of them from cholera and typhus – it is also a story, ultimately, of military victory culminating in the 1856 Treaty of Paris. To be sure, the Crimean War was France’s only victorious war in the nineteenth century with its triumphs at Alma, Malakoff and Sebastopol. But where are the lasting narratives that recount either loss or gain? This is the question that sent me ‘à la recherche de la guerre gagnée’.

The details of the Crimean War (1854–6) are confusing and, given the hundreds of thousands of lives it cost, baffling. Victor Hugo characterised it as ‘une guerre qui part du risible pour aboutir à l’horrible’ (Hugo, 1875: 125).4 In brief, its origins involve the refusal of the Orthodox Church in the Holy Land (then under the rule of the Ottoman Empire) to share the keys to the main entrance of the Church of the Nativity with the Catholic Church, whose clergy had to enter from the side. Tsar Nicholas I of Russia defended the rights of the Orthodox Church in the Ottoman Empire; Napoleon III of France argued on behalf of Catholic claims with reference to earlier treaties. In so doing, he was eager to rally support from French Catholics (and please his very Catholic wife, Eugénie). As Victor Hugo summarised it:

Rien de plus simple. Faire pencher à Jérusalem la balance du côté de Rome; rompre devant le tombeau du Christ l’humiliante égalité des deux croix; mettre l’église d’orient sous les pieds de l’église d’occident; ouvrir la sainte porte à l’une et la fermer à l’autre; faire une avanie au pape grec; en un mot, donner au pape latin la clef du sépulcre … C’est ce que M. Bonaparte a compris; c’est ce qu’il a fait. (Hugo, 1875: 101)

There was also a matter of personal ambition and ego. Recently snubbed by the Tsar, Napoleon saw in the prospect of a foreign war with Russia the opportunity to restore French pride in the military, to redeem French glory, and to assert his own status in the shadow of his uncle Bonaparte.5 When in 1853, the Ottoman Sultan adjudicated in favour of the French, the Tsar used the decision as a pretext to invade two neighbouring Ottoman-controlled principalities, Moldavia and Wallachia (present-day Romania). Great Britain and France, seeking to ensure the stability of the Ottoman
Empire, sent fleets to the Dardanelles to safeguard against Russian expansionism. For the British, debates over holy sites were of no particular significance; the concern was with protecting trade routes to the East and ‘ruling the waves’. The historian George Trevelyan is far more cynical: ‘The Crimean War … was merely a foolish expedition to the Black Sea, because the English people were bored with peace’ (James, 1981: 17). In the end the expedition that began as glorious adventure ended in a long, deadly siege of attrition before Sebastopol.

Given the complex backstory, it is not surprising that few people today are familiar with the details of the Crimean War. It is a war that nonetheless entered almost immediately into the literature and national mythology of Great Britain. Hours after reading the account of the catastrophic charge of the Light Brigade in The Times in 1854, Alfred Lord Tennyson started composing ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’, the poem that would quickly take its place in the minds of Britons everywhere alongside the story of Florence Nightingale, the mother of modern nursing, who attended to the sick in miserable makeshift hospitals in Crimea. The disastrous charge at Balaclava, ordered by Lord Raglan and led by Lord Cardigan, transfixed British readers. In the words of William Russell, The Times war correspondent, ‘some hideous blunder’ had destroyed the British light cavalry (Russell, 1877). Tennyson would immortalise the ‘blunder’ but especially the honour and courage of its victims.

... Theirs not to make reply,
    Theirs not to reason why,
    theirs but to do and die:
    Into the valley of Death
    Rode the six hundred.

(Alfred Tennyson, ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’)

The tragic Charge and the selfless service of the ‘Lady of the Lamp’, amply represented in paintings and lithographs, were engraved in the public imagination. Nor have those images and stories faded: aside from the many films on the Charge of the Light Brigade there is at least one heavy metal song and rock video commemorating the Crimean War (‘The Trooper’, by Iron Maiden).

On the Russian side, memories of the victory over Napoleon in 1812 constituted one of the central tropes of the ‘invincible nation’ during the Crimean campaign (Maiorova, 2010: 27). The myth of invincibility was sorely put to the test at Sebastopol. Whatever their position on the war, all the major poets of the time composed poems either during or after it: Fyodor Tyutchev (‘The Black Sea’), Afanasy Fet (‘The Sebastopol Brotherhood Cemetery’) Nikolai Nekrasov (‘Silence’), Apollon Maykov (‘To General-Lieutenant Khrulyov’, ‘The war is over. A vile peace is signed … ’), etc. Having served as an officer in the Russian artillery in Crimea, in 1855 Leo Tolstoy published his three Sebastopol Sketches that record his experiences during the siege of Sebastopol, scenes that later informed his novel, War and Peace. Even as they presented gruesome scenes of suffering, the sketches expressed profound admiration for the defenders of Sebastopol: ‘Long will Russia bear the imposing traces of this epic of Sebastopol, a hero of which was the Russian people’ (Tolstoy, 1986: 57). Accordingly, the Russian defeat prompted soul-searching on the part of nationally minded intellectuals. The defeat at Sebastopol provided the impetus for possibly the greatest social transformation in that country’s history: the abolition of serfdom. For it was Russia’s loss in the Crimean War that determined Tsar Alexander’s commitment to military and domestic reform and to the Great Emancipation of 1861. It is telling that the first feature film made in Russia was Defence of Sevastopol (1911).

In both Britain and Russia, in short, whether commemorating disasters or celebrating heroism, literature supplied a canonical framework for the narratives and the collective memory of Crimea.
The same does not hold true in France, where the war has fallen into collective forgetting. Already in May 1857 Alfred de Vigny derided French indifference to a war that had concluded just one year earlier: ‘On n’y pense plus … Cent mille hommes perdus sont pour la France comme une coupe de cheveux’ (Sabourin, 1998: 683). Neither proud patriotic responses to victory nor angry denunciations of imperial hubris – ‘on n’y pense plus’. The official government site of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, France Diplomatie, sums it up succinctly: ‘Guerre de Crimée, guerre oubliée.’

Even from the perspective of some nineteenth-century French historians, the Crimean War is back-page news. For Alain Gouttman, a historian of the Second Empire, indifference to or ignorance of the Crimean War is ‘presque caricatural’ (Gouttman, 1995: 5). It is of course understandable that the trauma of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870 should have overshadowed Crimea in the last decades of the nineteenth century, but this does not explain the general erasure of that war from memory. In the preface to a special issue of the Revue d’histoire du XIXe siècle on the cultural history of war in nineteenth-century France, for instance, editor Odile Roynette complains about the dearth of work by historians on the topic. It is true, she notes, that the trauma of the Great War of 1914–18, by virtue of its overwhelming impact, as well as the vast amount of source material, eclipsed all preceding nineteenth-century wars, including the Franco-Prussian War. However, in the face of the ‘relatif mutisme des XIXémistes’, Roynette insists, ‘Tout justifie … que l’on questionne le XIXe siècle en restituant à la guerre une place … plus conforme à celle qu’elle a réellement tenue dans la vie des Français’ (Roynette, 2005: 12–13). And yet, despite this call, in that same special issue on the cultural history of French wars in the nineteenth century, there is not one mention of Crimea. Even for French nineteenth-century cultural historians, it would seem, it is as if ‘la Guerre de Crimée n’aura pas lieu’. Cultural memory – like personal memory – is clearly selective about the battles it picks.

It is the role of cultural memory, according to historian and archaeologist Jan Assmann, to ‘preserve the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity’. It has ‘fixed points’ on its horizon: fateful events of the past whose memory is maintained through a body of ‘reusable texts [and] images … whose “cultivation” serves to stabilise and convey that society’s self-image’ (J. Assmann, 1995: 129–32). But at the same time that cultural memory participates in the shaping of identity by cultivating specific events of the past, it does so only ‘by forgetting what lies outside the horizon of the relevant’ (J. Assmann, 2008: 113, emphasis added). In the narratives of French collective identity, the Crimean War is clearly not one of those ‘fixed points’ on the horizon. On the contrary, lying outside the horizon of the ‘relevant’, it has been largely forgotten.

Forgotten, but not gone. For just as there are active and passive forms of memory, there are active and passive forms of forgetting. In the latter instance, the information has not been wilfully destroyed or silenced: it has fallen out of the frame of attention. ‘What is lost’, cultural critic Aleida Assmann notes, ‘may be discovered by accident at a later time in attics and other obscure depots’ (A. Assmann, 2010: 97–8). It is in such attics that we are obliged to rummage for lost traces of a Crimean War passively stored in French cultural memory.

Active and passive memory are for Aleida Assmann much like two distinct spaces in a museum: while the main galleries display precious artefacts selected for the edification of visitors, peripheral spaces, like the attic, are crammed full of objects not on view. She calls these latter spaces the ‘archive’ – the passive reference memory of a society. The display in the museum, on the other hand, represents the ‘canon’, that is, ‘the active working memory of a society that defines and supports the cultural identity of the group’. It is made up of cultural messages that are addressed to posterity and include works of art intended for continuous repetition and appreciation – works, for instance, such as the much memorised ‘Charge of the Light Brigade’: ‘into the valley of Death rode the six hundred’.
When we consider the example of the Crimean War and how it is remembered, it becomes apparent that whereas the cultural memory of the war has been actively circulating in the canon of British and Russian collective identity, this has not been the case in France where the war that was actively won on the battlefield was then passively lost in the archives.

For in French cultural memory, with few exceptions, the Crimean War did not happen. In Britain the Victoria Cross for bravery is still said to be made from the bronze of a captured cannon used by the Russians at Sebastopol. But the cannons at Sebastopol have no equivalent place in the canon of French literature.9

There are, of course, works of French literature that reference the Crimean War. But scouring the fiction, theatre and poetry of the time, one is hard-pressed to find, for instance, literary characters of consequence associated with it. When looking for such characters, aside from brief references to the occasional veteran or bonne sœur, one always comes back to Moutier, the dedicated French soldier, and Dourakine, the colourful Russian general, veterans of the Crimean campaign in two well-known and edifying children’s novels by the comtesse de Ségur.10

References to the Crimean War in the canonical prose literature from the late 1850s onward are, to be sure, slim. As a young man, Émile Zola experienced the deployment of French soldiers to Crimea. In *Nouveaux Contes à Ninon* (1879), he recounts his adolescent excitement at seeing French soldiers passing through his town on their way to Crimea:

Mais je me souviens mieux encore de l’autre guerre, de la campagne de Crimée … La petite ville du Midi que j’habitais fut, je crois, traversée par presque tous les soldats qui allèrent en Orient … Ah! les beaux hommes! et les cuirassiers, et les lanciers, et les dragons, et les hussards! Nous avions un faible pour les cuirassiers.

The dazzle gives way to the realities of war as the mature Zola recognises that the festive passage he admired as a young man was in fact a death march. For those who limped back, there were no excited adolescents cheering them on. ‘Un jour on les vit repasser en sens inverse, éclopés, saignants, se traînant sur les routes. Ce n’étaient plus nos beaux soldats. Ils ne valaient pas le moindre pensum’ (Zola, 1879: 207).

Zola’s poignant memories notwithstanding, in his 20-volume saga of the Second Empire, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, there are only the briefest of brief passing allusions to the war. The most ‘extended’ is a reference in *La Curée* (1871–2) that speaks to the indifference of Parisian speculators – ‘Les mois s’écoulèrent, la guerre de Crimée venait d’être déclarée. Paris, qu’une guerre lointaine n’émouvait pas, se jetait avec plus d’emportement dans la spéculation et les filles’.

Another is in *Le Ventre de Paris* (1873), where Gavard the poulterer denounces the Crimean War as that ‘expédition aventureuse’, ‘faite uniquement pour consolider le trône et emplir certaines poches’ (Zola, 1871: 97; 1969: 128).

Elsewhere references to the Crimean War are just as fleeting. In Alexandre Dumas’ *Bric-à-brac* (1861), the last heroic act of a harbour-master is to save the cargo of wine destined for the soldiers in Crimea from a sinking boat. In ‘L’Agonie de la Sémillante’ by Alphonse Daudet, first published in 1866 and based on a true story, 600 troops on their way to Crimea are not so lucky: they die eerily in the shipwreck of the *Sémillante*. In *Chérie* by Edmond de Goncourt (1884) the father of the heroine is fatally wounded in the taking of the Malakoff Tower. In George Sand’s *Césarine Dietrich* (1871), Madame Feron, a lace-mender, receives a small pension as the widow of a non-commissioned officer killed in Crimea. A secondary character in Zola’s *L’Assommoir* (1877), le Père Bru, lost his three sons in Crimea. A nun in Maupassant’s tale, *Boule de Suif* (1880), announces that her ‘speciality’ is treating soldiers wounded at the front: ‘Elle avait été en Crimée, en Italie, en Autriche.’ The list of minor Crimeania goes on.
If there are few fictional works by canonical authors that reference the Crimean War directly, there was no shortage of such references in non-fiction genres in the 1850s – aside from the specialised books on military tactics and engineering. Books such as Histoire des causes de la guerre d’Orient d’après les documents français et anglais by Eugène Forcade (1854); Comment finira la guerre: exposé de la question d’Orient dégagé de tous les faux bruits et envisagé sous son véritable jour by E.-Ch. Bourseul (1854); Mensonges et réalités de la Guerre d’orient by Victor Joly (1855); or the anonymous La Comète et le croissant: présages et prophéties relatifs à la question d’Orient, par un astrologue contemporain (1854). Writing in Alexandre Dumas’ journal Le Mousquetaire, Alfred Asseline was already complaining in July 1854 about the glut of books on the Crimean War that had so quickly taken the place of literature on French bookstore shelves:

Depuis six mois que voyez-vous à toutes les vitres? Rien que des mémoires sur la guerre contre la Russie. La librairie a exploité la question d’Orient et n’a fait que cela; et quel acharnement sans exemple, et quelle littérature ennuyeuse! Je ne sais pas si le public a digéré tout cela, mais je crois qu’il aurait préféré le moindre petit livre écrit en français, imprimé en caractères neuf sur papier blanc, et digne de figurer sur son meilleur rayon. (Asseline, 1854: 2)11

Following the war, such books were predictably removed just as quickly as they had appeared.

The war had its moments in the limelight but they too were short lived. Although there were many Crimea-inflected vaudevilles and pantomimes performed in popular theatres, they were largely topical entertainments with very brief runs. On the big stage, the war lent itself particularly well to spectacles at the Théâtre impérial du Cirque – such as Messieurs Albert and de Lustière’s La Guerre d’Orient, drame militaire en 3 actes et 20 tableaux – and equestrian extravaganzas at the Hippodrome created by its prolific director Pierre-Célestin Arnault (1855). In addition to such spectacles, cantatas were composed and performed to mark significant moments in the war – the departure of the French soldiers to Crimea, the taking of Sebastopol, the return and entry into Paris of the French Imperial guard on 29 December 1855, etc.

As for French poetry of the Crimean War, one has to dig deep in the attic to find it. Surely the French voice of the Crimean War cannot belong to the father of French-Canadian poetry, Octave Crémazie, and the forgettable verses he composed in 1855, ‘Sur les ruines de Sébastopol’?:

Peuples, inclinez-vous, c’est la France qui passe!  
Du despote du Nord tu réprimés l’audace …  
Aux murs Malakoff, c’est encore ta bannière  
Que le Russe vaincu vit flotter la première.  
… Aux jours même où chantant l’hymne de la victoire,  
Sous le ciel canadien nous redisons ta gloire. (Crémazie, 1972: 288–95)12

To be fair, patriotic Canadians aside, in the face of the heroic exploits of its soldiers in Crimea, French writers of poetry were not indifferent. For the most part, however, though numerous, they were poets neither by profession nor reputation but they left a significant body of now largely forgotten patriotic poetry that fed France’s Crimean War effort. Many wrote songs and poems on specific battles or significant moments in the war. The lengthy poem, ‘L’Ovation’, by C. Lys, for instance, recalls the memorable entry into Paris of the troops returning from Crimea on 29 December 1855:

Hourra! vivat! hourra! Comme leur front rayonne  
De fierté, de bonheur, de cet orgueil que donne  
Quelque grand devoir accompli!
Despite Lys’s fervour the soldiers were, alas, not ‘sauvés de l’oubli’.

Hundreds such poems were written at the height of the war to celebrate the courage of the French army, the righteousness of its cause, and the glory of its Emperor. Like ‘L’Ovation’, most are jingoistic, passionate and clumsy. Many were written by provincial notables: ‘Chanson sur la Guerre d’Orient’ by A. Caillebotte-la-Vente, avocat à Gers (1854); ‘La Vérité aux Français, épisode sur la guerre d’Orient’ by M. L’Abbé Deshayes, prêtre, aumônier de l’hospice civil et militaire de Vendôme (1855), etc. As one reads through these poems certain tropes emerge. Some invoke the Homeric epic, others the Bonapartian epic – with Napoleon III standing in for his uncle. Finally, in a deliciously ironic twist, there are the poets who present the Crimean War, in which French Catholics fought alongside Turkish Muslims, as the new Crusade for the Holy Land.13 It is telling that for earnest, aspiring poets, this strange new war, whose action (or inaction) took place in trenches and hospital beds more than on battlefields, could only be represented through the conventions of familiar battle epics.

Perhaps the most stunning example of poetry in the service of the Crimean War comes from the Académie française, which in 1857 set as the topic of that year’s concours de poésie ‘La Guerre d’Orient’. A surprising 150 poems were submitted to the competition that year – 45–50 was the norm – but, quite exceptionally, none was crowned by the jury; two were acknowledged as promising.

When the individual authors subsequently published their poems, many used the opportunity to air sour grapes. ‘Je me disais, il est vrai, que 300 vers c’était bien peu pour un sujet qui eût demandé une Iliade entière’, Hippolyte de Charlemagne wrote to Abel-France Villemain, secretary of the Académie, with reference to his own La Guerre d’Orient, Souvenir de Béranger: ‘J’espérai du moins une mention’ (1858: 10). Adolphe Dumas, whose submission to the 1853 concours had won him a medal, had even more to complain about. His poem, ‘La Guerre d’Orient’, written as tribute to the Emperor, with proud nods to both Homer and the Crusades, was interrupted 14 times and booed in the Académie Française when Alfred de Vigny read it aloud:14

Muse des temps anciens, muse de la Troade,
Au nom d’Homère, encore un chant de l’Iliade!
Esprit des temps nouveaux, esprit des temps chrétiens,
Encore une Croisade et chante pour les tiens! (Dumas, 1858: 1)

Neither the ‘temps chrétiens’ nor the ‘muse de la Troade’ could capture the ‘temps nouveaux’ of this modern war. Clearly, having one’s poem read by an Immortal to the Immortals did not guarantee immortality.

For that matter, even the poem of an Immortal did not enter the collective memory of Crimea. In October 1854, on the occasion of the death of Jacques Leroy de Saint-Arnaud, the marshal who had led the French army into Crimea, Victor Hugo composed his poem ‘Saint-Arnaud’. Celebrated as a military hero by the army and the state, Saint-Arnaud died not in battle but of cholera shortly after the Battle at Alma in which he had led his soldiers to victory. For Hugo, this was a fitting death for the criminal ‘jackal’ who had orchestrated the bloody massacres that followed Louis-Napoleon’s coup d’état, events that he would recount in detail in his vehement Histoire d’un crime (1877). Hugo wrote ‘Saint-Arnaud’ in Jersey where he had gone into exile to continue his attacks on the traitorous ‘Napoléon le Petit’. He had already published his volume of poetry indicting the Emperor, Les Châtiments, in 1853 before the outbreak of the Crimean War. The long poem on
Saint-Arnaud was added to the second edition in 1870, allowing the marshal to be memorialised as a supporting actor in both Paris and Crimea, in both *Crime* and *Châtiments*.

The poem begins with Saint-Arnaud’s bloody record of achievement during the coup d’état:

Ce général avait les états de service
D’un chacal, et le crime aimait en lui le vice …
Il avait fait charger le septième lanciers,
Secouant les guidons aux trois couleurs françaises,
Sur des bonnes d’enfants, derrière un tas de chaises;
Il était le vainqueur des passants de Paris;

Soon after, rumblings of a war with Russia arouse Saint-Arnaud:

Or, voici que la guerre à l’orient se lève!
Je ne suis que couteau, je puis devenir glaive…
Vainqueur, dans une illustre et splendide fumée,
Et duc de la mer Noire et prince de Crimée,
Et je ferai voler ce mot : Sébastopol,
Des tours de Notre-Dame au dôme de Saint-Paul!

The poem details events of the war as well as Saint-Arnaud’s ambitious actions and inglorious death – ‘Il voyait, pâle, amer, l’horreur dans les narines, / Fondre sous lui sa gloire en allée aux latrines’ – and ends with the avenging angel ‘Châtiment’ turning to the poet and asking: ‘Est-ce assez?’ (Hugo, 1967: 2, 240–7).15

Like the poems submitted to the Académie française, ‘Saint-Arnaud’ is the poem of a patriot. Unlike them it forcefully denounces the Emperor and condemns his military leader. Hugo presents Saint-Arnaud as an extension of Napoleon III, and the Crimean War as both an extension of his illegitimate government and a calculated distraction from that illegitimacy. One of five poems added to the 1870 edition and set outside the main events of the coup d’état, nevertheless, this is not a text that readers of *Les Châtiments* commonly turn to.

It is all the more interesting therefore that, writing on the occasion of Hugo’s death in 1885, the British poet and contemporary of Tennyson, Algernon Swinburne, should have singled out this particular poem in *Les Châtiments*. For him it represented not just another example of Hugo’s poetic genius, nor another instalment in his indictment of Napoleon’s crime, but a chapter in the Crimean War that had so marked the British imagination:

Then, in the later editions of the book, came the great and terrible poem on the life and death of the miscreant marshal who gave the watchword of massacre in the streets of Paris, and died by the visitation of disease before the walls of Sebastopol. There is hardly a more splendid passage of its kind in all the *Légende des Siècles* than the description of the departure of the fleet in order of battle from Constantinople for the Crimea. (Swinburne, 1886: 77)

Despite Swinburne’s appreciation, the poem by France’s most prolific poet of the nineteenth century did not, to borrow Rolph Trouillot’s term, ‘retrieve’ the event as had Tennyson’s poem.16 There are texts by Hugo that might well have done so, though once again, Hugo subordinated the Crimean War to the greater crime, the coup d’état of December 1851. In ‘La Guerre d’Orient’, a speech written from exile on 29 November 1854, the rivers of blood, Hugo insists, all lead back to 2 December: Ôtez l’intrigue dite affaire des Lieux-Saints, ôtez la clef, ôtez l’envie de sacré, ôtez le
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cadeau à faire au pape, ôtez le Deux-Décembre, ôtez M. Bonaparte; vous n’avez pas la guerre d’orient’ (Hugo, 1875: 167).

The rhetoric is more impassioned still in Hugo’s speech of 24 February 1855 in which, on the occasion of the sixth anniversary of the Revolution of 1848, he pauses in his vision of a future Europe to summon up the horrors of the trenches in one hallucinatory, unstoppable sentence, the following excerpt of which represents less than half:

Qu’est-ce que c’est que cette tranchée qu’on ouvre devant cette ville tartare? cette tranchée … où il y a des hommes qui passent la nuit debout … dans un demi-mètre de boue … d’autres qui sont couchés, mais sur la glace et qui ne se réveilleront pas; … tous sans abri, sans feu, presque sans aliments … rongés de dysenterie et de typhus, tués par le lit où ils dorment, empoisonnés par l’eau qu’ils boivent, harcelés de sorties, criblets de bombes, réveillés de l’agonie par la mitraille … cette tranchée où, en moins de trois mois, quatre-vingt mille hommes ont disparu; cette tranchée de Sébastopol, c’est la fosse des deux armées. (Hugo, 1875: 126)

If, indeed, securing this war in the canon of culturally retained events that define national identity required some form of commemoration in the literary canon, turn up the rhetorical volume as he may, Hugo’s anguish at the unspeakable conditions that soldiers endured did not do so. For unlike the image of tragic, if heroic, battle that Tennyson had painted, Hugo’s images of dysentery, typhus and cold muddy trenches did not yet connote war, as they would some 50 years later. Nor do we find the commemoration of this strange war in the literature of the other major canonical poet who referenced Crimea, Charles Baudelaire.

Baudelaire had personal reasons to sidestep things military. His relationship with his stepfather, General Jacques Aupick, was notoriously rocky. A man whose political allegiances swung with the times, Aupick had served under every French regime in the nineteenth century, up to and including the Second Empire. As chance would have it, from 1848 to 1851 he was appointed ‘envoyé extraordinaire et ministre plénipotentiaire’ at the French embassy in Constantinople where, in 1849, at the request of the Foreign Minister, he was instructed to protest against Russia’s occupation of the Danubian Principalities and demand the restoration France’s religious protection of sacred sites in the Holy Land as guaranteed by treaty. For this he was personally thanked by Louis-Napoléon, then President of the Republic.17 By all accounts, Baudelaire was unaware and uninterested in his stepfather’s diplomatic activities at this time; by 1851, the Aupicks were back in Paris.18

Within a few years, however, it was difficult to ignore the emerging tensions involving France, Britain, the Ottoman Empire and Russia. During the mid-1850s, like all French readers, Baudelaire was surrounded by news of Crimea everywhere in the press.19 In fact, from 1854 to 1856 one of his preferred artists, Honoré Daumier, filled the ‘Actualités’ pages of the satirical journal Le Charivari with caricatures from the Crimean War (86 of which were speedily published in two separate albums of lithographs: Les Cosaques pour rire and Chargeons les Russes!).20 This was a period of great productivity for Baudelaire. In addition to the poetry he composed, between July 1854 and April 1855 he published translations of 29 tales by Edgar Allen Poe in 55 issues of the daily newspaper, Le Pays (Journal de l’Empire). His translations of the Histoires extraordinaires appeared regularly on the bottom half of page 3. During that same time page 1 was always devoted to the latest news from the Crimean War. Baudelaire had literally to go through Crimea to get to his own story. The war figured similarly on the front pages of almost every other newspaper and filled pages of the more literary Revue des Deux Mondes, including the issue of June 1855 in which 18 poems by Baudelaire appeared for the first time under the title Les Fleurs du mal. In the page immediately following the last of those poems, the ‘Chronique de la quinzaine’ describes ‘le redoublement de l’activité en Crimée’: ‘Nos soldats après deux sanglants [sic] combats de nuit, sont restés maîtres
That is, the exit from *Les Fleurs du mal* led the reader directly to Sebastopol. Crimea was visible everywhere in print. While French press coverage of the war was far more censored than the British.
press reports from the front, it was, nevertheless, extensive and ubiquitous. If it is invisible in the
literature of the time, it is not for want of information or familiarity by writers. Some of that litera-
ture, as in the case of Baudelaire’s poems, rubbed shoulders with the war.

Images of death, spectres and tombs run throughout several of the 18 poems by Baudelaire
featured in the issue of the Revue des Deux Mondes. In the context of the articles and images of
Crimea surrounding Baudelaire’s writings in 1855, the final image of a dying soldier in poem XI,
‘La Cloche’ (later retitled ‘La Cloche Fêlée’) conjures up scenes of war not unlike the trenches
Hugo described in February of the same year:

Il arrive souvent que sa voix affaiblie
Semble le râle épais d’un blessé qu’on oublie
Au bord d’un lac de sang, sous un grand tas de morts
Et qui meurt, sans bouger, dans d’immenses efforts.

‘La Cloche fêlée’ is not, however, a poem about Crimea; nor does Crimea figure anywhere else
in Baudelaire’s poetry. If one is looking for Crimea in Baudelaire’s writing, one needs to go rather
to his writings on art and, in particular, on a French artist working for the English press.

Constantin Guys, the artist celebrated by Baudelaire in 1863 as the very Parisian ‘painter of
modern life’ – the eagle-eyed observer who extracts poetry from history – spent the war years in
Crimea producing hundreds of drawings for the Illustrated London News. Throughout the war
Guys’ Crimean drawings were dispatched to London engravers for mass publication in the illus-
trated weekly alongside reports from the front. The war drawings, by an artist who was not widely
recognised in his home country, were not well known in France outside a small circle of artists.
Baudelaire, however, who avidly collected and actively championed Guys’ work, was unusually
familiar with these drawings to which he would dedicate a chapter in Le Peintre de la vie moderne,
‘Les Annales de la guerre’. He referred to these drawings quite strategically when he solicited a
French government stipend for Guys, whose job and livelihood had terminated with the sudden
at the French Ministry of State Baudelaire praised the artist who was, he notes, ‘fils d’un Amiral de
la République et de l’Empire’. For the government bureaucrat he singled out the Crimean drawings
as central to the oeuvre and of particular interest: ‘J’ai vu toute la Campagne de Crimée dessinée
par lui, au jour le jour pendant qu’il suivait l’expédition à la suite de l’armée Anglais, chacun de
ses dessins accompagnés des notes les plus curieuses.’ Along with his letter of support, Baudelaire
sent dozens of Guys’ war drawings for the consideration of the ministry. Baudelaire wrote to
Desaux three times, but the request fell on deaf ears.

For Baudelaire, looking at Guys’ drawings, the story of Crimea was best told not in words, but
in images, for there was no adequate language to describe the sinister sweep of that war:

‘Je puis affirmer que nul journal, nul récit écrit, nul livre, n’exprime aussi bien, dans tous ses détails
douloureux et dans sa sinistre ampleur, cette grande épopée de la guerre de Crimée … En vérité, il est
difficile à la simple plume de traduire ce poème fait de mille croquis, si vaste et si compliqué, et d’exprimer
l’ivresse qui se dégage de tout ce pittoresque, douloureux souvent, mais jamais larmoyant, amassé sur
quelques centaines de pages. (Baudelaire, 1976 : 2: 701–3)

If for Baudelaire there were no words to translate Guys’ vast and complicated album of the
Crimean War, similarly and more generally, I would argue, there was no idiom yet in place to
represent such a war in French literature. This was a new kind of war that did not conform to
familiar paradigms of heroism, glory or the drama of battle. On the contrary, this was a war that
belied epic tropes, where French soldiers sat waiting – much as Hugo described them – in cold,
damp, muddy trenches, dying ingloriously of typhus and cholera. If conventional models for writing about war – as exemplified by 150 failed submissions to the Académie française – derived from the Iliad, the Crusades and Napoleon I, such models no longer obtained for the realities of a differently waged modern war.

Accordingly, for Baudelaire, whatever ‘grande épopée de la guerre de Crimée’ there was, it would be conveyed in visual images. Not, however, the spectacular battle scenes of popular state-commissioned painters such as Horace Vernet, whose military paintings hark back to his heroic images of Napoleon I at the front, but the rapidly sketched eye-witness drawings of the day-to-day produced by the extraordinary hand of Constantin Guys, the artist of modern life and also of modern war.24 Referring to the epic military paintings on display at the Salon of 1859, Baudelaire denounced the emptiness of the genre:

Les victoires françaises engendrent sans cesse un grand nombre de peintures militaires … Ce genre de peinture, si l’on y veut bien réfléchir, exige la fausseté ou la nullité … il n’y a plus de tableau, ou du moins il n’y a qu’un tableau de tactique et de topographie. (Baudelaire, 1976: 2, 642)

Flipping quietly through an album of Guys’ drawings from Crimea, on the other hand, Baudelaire finds the opposite of ‘fausseté’. As a particular image catches his eye, the poet stops to reflect:

Quel est ce cavalier … qui, la tête relevée, a l’air de humer la terrible poésie d’un champ de bataille, pendant que son cheval … cherche son chemin entre les cadavres amoncelés, pieds en l’air, faces crispées, dans des attitudes étranges? Au bas du dessin, dans un coin, se font lire ces mots: Myself at Inkermann. (Baudelaire, 1976: 2, 702)

For Baudelaire it is quiet pictures such of these that convey the reality of that war: not the drama of a heroic officer windswept on his steed but the expression of a stunned individual on foot leading his horse through a field of cadavers. This is the terrible poetry of war: ‘Myself at Inkermann.’ Indeed, for Baudelaire the narrative of the Crimean War and its poetry is filtered through the English language. And for him the Battle of Balaklava, as told in several of Guys’ drawings, is further refracted through Tennyson’s ‘Charge of the Light Brigade’, whose poetic echoes reverberated in a way no French poem had. It is an English story, told in an English newspaper, as commemorated by an English poet and admired by a French poetic ally.

‘La bataille de Balaklava se présente plusieurs fois dans ce curieux recueil, et sous différents aspects. Parmi les plus frappants, voici l’historique charge de cavalerie chantée par la trompette héroïque d’Alfred Tennyson, poète de la reine: une foule de cavaliers roulent avec une vitesse prodigieuse jusqu’à l’horizon entre les lourds nuages de l’artillerie. (Baudelaire, 1976: 2, 702, emphasis added)

Perhaps it is Guys, after all – extractor of poetry from history, distiller of the eternal from the ephemeral – who is the French poet of the Crimean War.25 Where there was perhaps no adequate literary paradigm in place to describe this new kind of war, Guys’ rapidly sketched drawings, and the widely disseminated journalistic engravings they inspired, offered a modern form of visual representation of war that Baudelaire respected and celebrated. He concludes the chapter on the annals of war with one regret: that the Napoleon III never saw these images. Had he done so, the poet seems to suggest, he would have understood the everyday nature of war for French soldiers in Crimea. The unheroic, un-Homeric nature of an evitable, unnecessary, merciless war of attrition that – between ‘stunning actions’ and the ‘trivial occupations of life’ – cost the lives of 100,000 men.
Il est malheureux que cet album, disséminé maintenant en plusieurs lieux, et dont les pages les plus précieuses ont été retenues par les graveurs chargés de les traduire ou par les rédacteurs de l’Illustrated London News, n’ait pas passé sous les yeux de l’Empereur. J’imagine qu’il aurait complaisamment, et non sans attendrissement, examiné les faits et gestes de ses soldats, tous exprimés minutieusement, au jour le jour, depuis les actions les plus éclatantes jusqu’aux occupations les plus triviales de la vie, par cette main de soldat artiste, si ferme et si intelligente. (Baudelaire, 1976: 2, 703)

And yet – whereas, with Baudelaire’s endorsement, Guys’ paintings and drawings of Parisian modernity have taken their place in the canon that is ‘addressed to posterity’ and ‘intended for continuous appreciation’, even the praise of France’s greatest poet of the nineteenth century could not imprint Guys’ Crimean drawings on French cultural memory. To be sure, the Guys drawings we have committed to memory represent the carriages of grandes dames in the Bois de Boulogne, not the ambulances of the wounded at Balaklava.

We are left, in the end, with a war that has left virtually no stamp on French collective identity. It lies outside ‘the horizon of relevance’ – invisible as well as surrounded by silence.

How is it that the memory of a war can be silent? Many past events, Trouillot (1995) notes, have been silenced through ‘conflicting appropriations’ of the information. I would maintain that in the case of the Crimean War in the French imagination, the events have been silenced through lack of canonical appropriation. The sources and narratives have simply – or not so simply – fallen out of the frame of attention. To borrow Assmann’s metaphor (2010), they are lost somewhere in an attic, the quintessential ‘lieu d’oubli’.

In Paris thousands of Parisians walk daily down the Boulevard Sébastopol oblivious to the victory it commemorates that ended a foolhardy war. Some of them take the metro and get off at Malakoff, while others will take the RER to the Pont de l’Alma. As befits the oeuvre of Constantin Guys and his depictions of urban modernity, the Crimean War is invisibly inscribed in the rhythms and traffic patterns of modern Paris. Perhaps, after inspecting the site of the historic event most associated with the Pont de l’Alma – the fatal car crash that killed Princess Diana – a flâneur will walk across the bridge to admire the five-metre-high sculpture of the valiant Zouave who stands on one of its piers: he of legendary courage on the battlefields of Crimea. William Russell, war correspondent for The Times declared the Zouaves ‘probably the most perfect soldiers in the world’ (Russell, 1877: 422). Even Russians defeated at the Battle of Alma could not hide their admiration for the prowess of the Zouave. Remembered and celebrated with great pomp, the Zouave on the bridge is now best known, however, for serving as a measure of the water level of the Seine. He has, nevertheless, fared better than his colleagues on the three remaining piers of the bridge: the chasseur à pied, the grenadier and the artilleur who have since disappeared. Their scattered story lies forgotten in the archives, much like the war from which they emerged. In the end, the brave soldiers on the Pont de l’Alma who were destined to carry the weight of memory now simply carry the weight of a bridge.

Notes

1. A reference to the many streets, squares, bridges and neighbourhoods throughout the country that bear these names. See, for instance, Moulin (2015).
2. William Howard Russell, correspondent for The Times. Russell’s columns about the suffering of soldiers and inadequate medical services eventually brought down a government. It was in response to his account of the Charge of the Light Brigade in October 1854 that Tennyson wrote his famous poem.
3. The British photographer Roger Fenton (1819–69) is the most famous of the photographers at the Crimean front. The French photographers include Jean-Baptiste-Henri Durand-Brager, Léon-Eugène Méhédin and Jean-Charles Langlois. In 1860 Langlois and Méhédin produced a 360-degree panorama of
the siege of Sebastopol for which a special rotunda was built on the Champs Élysées. See Bolloch (2004) and Keller (2007).

4. On the fiftieth anniversary of the victory at Sebastopol, a journalist in *L’Illustration* (1905) commented:

Et cependant tant de fatigues supportées, tant de sang répandu ne nous donnèrent que la stérile possession d’une ville détruite par le canon et par l’incendie. C’est que la guerre de Crimée n’avait été, d’un bout à l’autre, comme l’écrivait, le 24 août 1854, le général Bosquet, qu’une ‘aventure’. (*L’Illustration*, No. 3267, 7 October 1905).

5. Tsar Nicolas had addressed Napoleon III, whom he shunned, as ‘mon bon ami’ rather than the ‘monsieur mon frère’ called for in correspondence between sovereigns. See Anceau (2008: 211).

6. In his 1856 *Examen de conscience à l’occasion de la guerre d’Orient*, Karl Ludwig Ficquelmont caricatured the British rush to battle:


7. On British representations of the war, see Markovitz (2009) and Lalumia (1984). As in the case of the Charge of the Light Brigade there are a number of films on Florence Nightingale, as well as countless books, including, and especially, many children’s books.


11. I am grateful to Catherine Nesci for bringing this article to my attention.


13. No one was more aware of the ironies behind this association than Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels:

To drive the Moslems out of Europe would once have roused the zeal of England and France; to prevent the Turks from being driven out of Europe is now the most cherished resolve of those nations. So broad a gulf stands between Europe of the nineteenth and Europe of the thirteenth century! So fallen away since the latter epoch is the political influence of religious dogma. (Marx and Engels, 1952 [1854]: 149)

14. Dumas was sufficiently incensed by the outburst at the Académie française to inscribe the copy of the poem he sent to the Emperor as follows: ‘La lecture de ce poème faite à l’Académie française par M. Alfred de Vigny, a été interrompu quatorze fois par les Membres hostiles au gouvernement – Il croit devoir en informer l’Empereur.’


16. Rolf Trouillot has argued that silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance). See Trouillot (1995: 26).
17. On Jacques Aupick’s career in Constantinople, see Pichois (1955) and Goldfrank (1994: 78–81). Du Camp recounts a delicious anecdote about the dinner he and Flaubert had as guests of the general at the palace of the French delegation in Constantinople while on their trip to the Middle East. When the general asked if he had any news of literary events since he left Paris, Du Camp mentions the theatrical success of Murger’s ‘Vie de Bohème’. He then remembers, quite innocently, a letter he just received from Louis de Cormerin: ‘Il m’écrit: “J’ai vu dernièrement, chez Théophile Gautier, un Baudelaire qui fera parler de lui … c’est un tempérament de poète, chose rare à notre époque”.’ As soon as he had pronounced the name Baudelaire, he goes on, ‘Mme Aupick baissa la tête, le général me regarda fixement comme s’il eût relevé une provocation, et le colonel Margadel me toucha le pied pour m’avertir que je m’aventurais sur un mauvais terrain’ (Du Camp, 1883: 2, 76–7). Flaubert refers to this same dinner in his correspondence with Baudelaire’s mother. After the poet’s death, in a letter to Madame Aupick thanking her for the gift of Baudelaire’s works (31 December 1868), he recalls ‘la gracieuse hospitalité que vous m’avez accordée à Constantinople dans l’hiver de 1851’ (Flaubert, 1980: 3, 833).

18. Baudelaire’s (very limited) correspondence with Aupick speaks primarily to ongoing money concerns and bitterness at his stepfather’s mistrust. The closest he comes to acknowledging Aupick’s work in Turkey is in a letter of 8 December 1848, two days before the election of Louis-Napoleon to the presidency of the Republic: ‘Vous êtes sans doute là-bas pour longtemps. Des gouvernements nouveaux ne vous déplaceront sans doute pas … Peut-être dans un an, si je suis plus riche, irai-je à Constantinople; car ma rage de voyage me reprend perpétuellement’ (Baudelaire, 1932: 30–3).

19. The Crimean War was widely and consistently covered in the French press, from the events leading up to it to the Treaty of Paris that officially ended it. Though ubiquitous, the reports in the French press were not as candid or critical as in Britain. The British press, which was not subject to the state censorship of the French, provided readers with provocative reports from the front, in particular from William Russell, the war correspondent of The Times. There was no equivalent battlefield correspondent on the French side.

20. On Baudelaire’s critical admiration of Daumier’s work, see ‘Le Salon de 1845’: ‘Nous ne connaissons à Paris que deux hommes qui dessinent aussi bien que M. Delacroix … L’un est M. Daumier, le caricaturiste, l’autre est M. Ingres, le grand peintre.’ In 1857 Baudelaire subsequently devoted a large section of his essay on ‘Quelques caricaturistes français’ to Daumier, whom he considered ‘l’un des hommes les plus importants, je ne dirai pas seulement de la caricature, mais encore de l’art moderne’ (Baudelaire, 1976: 2, 356).

21. In addition to his skills as a draughtsman and an illustrator, Guys was particularly well suited to be a roving military artist: born in 1802, he joined the French army in 1824 and pursued a military career until 1830. The Illustrated London News, considered the first illustrated weekly of its kind, began publication in 1842. In 1843 the equivalent French weekly, L’Illustration, journal universel, began publication. As in the case of the Illustrated London News, from 1854 to 1856 L’Illustration was filled with reports, maps and illustrations of the war. On coverage of the Crimean War in L’Illustration, see Bacot (2005: 69–76).

22. Apart from the essay he dedicated to Guys (‘Le Peintre de la vie moderne’), Baudelaire’s enthusiasm for the artist was well known among his friends. In 1859, he offered his mother a drawing by Guys (Femme turque au parasol, now in the Musée Carnavalet), and that same year both Champfleury and Gautier gave Baudelaire drawings by Guys. In a letter to Arsène Houssaye in 1860, describing his study of the artist, he notes: ‘C’est l’analyse du talent d’un homme inconnu et plein de génie, dont je possède une centaine de dessins.’ See Duflo (1988: 108).

23. Writing in May 1861 to Auguste Laucassade, director of La Revue européenne (in which he had just published his essay on Richard Wagner and Tannhäuser,) Baudelaire invites him to look at his collection of Guys drawings:

Si vous voulez vérifier mes assertions relativement à M. G., venez un de ces jours feuilleter mon album, et quand je repêcherai celui que j’ai communiqué au ministère d’État, je pourrai vous montrer des multitudes de scènes de la guerre de Crimée dessinées sur les lieux et en face des événements.

He indicates that he sent thousands of drawings to the state ministry, including, especially, Crimean War drawings, in the hopes of securing a pension for Guys. See Duflo (1988: 108).
Baudelaire’s pronounced distaste for Vernet’s popular large-scale military paintings dates back at least to his Salon of 1846, where he declared:

M. Horace Vernet est un militaire qui fait de la peinture … Cette immense popularité qui ne durera d’ailleurs pas plus longtemps que la guerre, et qui diminuera à mesure que les peuples se feront d’autres joies, – cette popularité … est pour moi une oppression … il vous raconte votre gloire, et c’est la grande affaire. (Baudelaire, 1976: 2, 469–70, emphasis added)

At the Universal Exhibition of 1855, where numerous state-commissioned paintings representing the Crimean War were featured in the French galleries, an entire room was dedicated to military paintings by Vernet, who was widely admired by the French public and widely excoriated by critics.

25. The epithets are from ‘Le Peintre de la vie moderne’ (Baudelaire, 1976: 2, 694).

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