

The Land of the Balaklava

"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."

These are lines from Alfred, Lord Tennyson's poem "The Charge of the Light Brigade" about the British cavalry charge in the 1854 Battle of Balaklava during the Crimean War. That war was fought by the Russian Empire to expand its influence into the Black Sea and the lands surrounding it. The moribund Ottoman Empire opposed Russia's expansion into its "sphere of influence", and was supported in the war by the British Empire, which wanted to stop Russian naval expansion into the Mediterranean, the French Empire, which wanted to protect Catholic influence in the Holy Land and to gain "prestige" for France and its leader Napoleon III, and the Kingdom of Piedmont, which wanted to gain influence at the bargaining table with France for the establishment of a future unified Italy (which happened four years after this war). For the sake of these many empires, over half a million lives were lost in battle and many more civilian lives were destroyed. The Crimean War, often forgotten, was in fact a hugely important conflict that still has very real consequences today. In many ways it was also the first modern war: the telegraph, railway, and explosive naval shells were first used in war; the field of professional nursing developed on the battlefields from the work of Florence Nightingale and Mary Seacole; arguably the first war correspondence was written by Leo Tolstoy in his *Sevastapol Sketches*, which informed his later masterpiece *War and Peace* as well as his pacifism. The shuffling of borders and alliances during this war ended the post-Waterloo "concert of Europe" and stirred up romantic sentiments of nationalism, both of which helped lead directly to the First World War.



Armed servicemen stand near Russian army vehicles outside a Ukrainian border guard post in the Crimean town of Balaclava March 1, 2014. Russian President Vladimir Putin secured his parliament's authority on Saturday to invade Ukraine after troops seized control of the Crimea peninsula and pro-Moscow demonstrators hoisted flags above government buildings in two eastern cities. REUTERS/Baz Ratner (UKRAINE – Tags: MILITARY POLITICS CIVIL UNREST)

The immediate result of the Crimean War was that Russian imperialism was temporarily checked, but by no means stopped permanently. Russia today is the largest country in the world by far, which is the result of a long and aggressive history of expansion and imperialism that began with Peter the Great and seems to continue today albeit on a smaller scale under Vladimir Putin. The large Crimean peninsula was home to Greek settlers thousands of years ago, and was later settled by Turkic tribes moving west towards Europe. The Tatars, one of these tribes, fought against Russia for centuries and were the majority population of the Crimea until they were forcibly relocated to Uzbekistan by Josef Stalin and replaced by Russian speakers. The possession of Crimea within the Soviet Union was shifted from Russia to Ukraine during the Khrushchev regime in 1954, and this possession was secured by permanent treaty between Russia and Ukraine after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Unreconstructed Russian imperialists and nationalists never forgot that this land seized by force 100 years earlier should somehow be theirs by rights, and the rise of Putin has signaled the return to a revanchist Russian foreign policy. Putin has gradually worked towards his long-term aim over the past 15 years: secure strategic areas

bordering Russia that have friendly Russian-speaking populations, thus maintaining buffer states around Russia that are friendly or at worst neutral. Putin built his reputation around brutally subduing Chechnya and generally never backing down from tough rhetoric backed up by armed force when necessary. When Georgia looked west and considered joining NATO it was promptly invaded and squelched, and had two independent regions wrested from its authority that are currently unrecognized by any nation other than Russia. It is worth mentioning that the last time Russian tanks rolled into Georgia was 2007 at the tail end of the Bush administration, which even as the lamest of ducks did not see fit to intervene in this unwarranted use of force for fear of provoking Russia. Another place where Russia used its strong arm and maintains military presence is the sliver of Moldova east of the Dniester River called Transnistria; sandwiched between Moldova and Ukraine it does not even border Russia proper, but its citizens speak mostly Russian instead of Romanian.

The Ukraine, on the other hand, is a large and important state dominated by Russia since the Napoleonic wars which closely shares a culture, history, and language with Russia. Indeed, the first Russians actually came to power in 13th century Kiev before moving east to Vladimir and later Moscow. When Ukraine became independent in 1991 for the first time in centuries, the country was divided into two main camps: those who wanted to stay closely aligned with Russia, mostly in the eastern provinces, and those who wanted a more western and liberal government, in Kiev and the western provinces. From 2004 to the present, the two groups traded power mostly between the presidencies of Victor Yanukovich (the Russian-friendly party) and Yulia Tymoshenko (the west-leaning party). Eventually Yanukovich fled the country and abandoned his post of president in 2014 during a protest movement against his corrupt regime and his move away from the European Union in favor of Russia. Putin, left without his political ally in charge of Ukraine, set in motion a plan to take Crimea by

force and gradually send enough men and arms to the eastern provinces to effectively establish an “independent,” Russian-friendly state there as well. Everything went according to plan when Russian soldiers suddenly took control of bases and infrastructure across Crimea, followed by a dubious referendum that showed Crimean residents voted in favor of Russian annexation. Things are not going as smoothly in the eastern regions of Ukraine where fighting between separatist rebels and the federal government has continued unabated for over a year. Putin continues to maintain the most transparent denial ever in saying that Russia is not supporting the rebels.

Like the cardigan, named after the British general who led the Charge of the Light Brigade, another garment derived its name from the Crimean War—the balaclava. This black cloth cap which covers the entire head except for the eyes and mouth has been a staple of cold weather troops and bank robbers ever since its namesake 1854 battle. Most recently, it has been seen on the “unmarked” soldiers who appeared suddenly in great numbers to secure Crimea’s government buildings and Russian military bases. Likewise for the groups of organized rebels using advanced weaponry against the Ukrainian government in the east of the country, where there have been daily reports of military equipment and personnel convoying in from Russia. Even after a civilian airplane was shot out of the sky causing European countries to begin sanctions against Russia, Putin’s resolve to arm and support the rebels has been unwavering. Western countries easily condemn the conflict and Russia’s part in it, but Putin knows they are not willing to go further than a few economic sanctions—a mere slap on the wrist compared to the prestige in his homeland of bringing historic Russian lands back into the fold. What Putin could not expect is the drastic drop in oil prices, which has depleted Russia’s substantial monetary reserves and will eventually cause a full-scale crisis in Russia when the government funding for bread and circuses dry up (bread, in this case, representing subsidized food, and circuses representing either

the Sochi Olympics, the image of their president as the most macho man in the world, or the sad tradition of cheap vodka and alcoholism). Putin's power and popularity are due to fully exploiting Russia's vast natural reserves, including oil and gas, at the expense of any other development of his country. This is a much bigger threat to Putin's one-dimensional authoritarian regime, and Russia's economy, than the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, especially considering that the ongoing conflict is draining Russia's coffers at the same time as its main source of income is drying up and its currency is collapsing.

There has recently been a temporary ceasefire agreed to by Ukraine and Russia, mediated admirably by France and Germany. This does not mean that hostilities will not continue by the "independent" rebels anyway, or that Putin will not use this to his advantage to further cement his gains in eastern Ukraine. In fact, only days after the "ceasefire" there were reports of more arms and equipment moving across the border, more shelling in disputed towns, and even possibly some artillery fired from inside Russia. This means either that Putin has no control or influence over the rebels, or, more likely, that he is just playing for time and hoping that a formal truce will earn him support within a divided European Union. There are calls by America and some European countries to arm Ukraine and give more substantial military support. This is a bad idea and will only escalate a conflict which has already been long and violent and destructive enough. Ukraine could never compete with Russia militarily even with some extra help from America, and will further only give more excuse for Putin to drop his shabby alibi and move Russian units and arms into Ukraine more openly. It would also feed into his rhetoric about the West meddling in "Russia's sphere of influence". Stephen Walt has written a convinced article along these lines [here](#). Let's not forget that wherever America sends weapons to influence its favored outcome, trouble surely follows and the problem inevitably becomes much larger than it

was at the start (Afghanistan of the 1980s is only one of many such examples). Instead, America and Europe should continue the economic and diplomatic pressure on Russia in lieu of reaching a more permanent pragmatic agreement that can end the bloodshed. Russia, despite the carefully crafted image and blunder of Putin, is a weak and declining country—the kind that often has the least to lose during the heated days before a local conflict becomes a greater regional or world war.

America and Europe should also give further economic aid to Ukraine and help build up their institutions as far as possible, not necessarily to be a future NATO member (the thing that most infuriated Putin in the first place, and rightfully so), but to avoid being a large failed state at their doorstep. It obviously does not set a good precedent to let countries invade others, even when done with “unconventional forces”, and to change borders at will, but in some cases it can be the best outcome from a bad situation. Frankly, it is not worth the escalation of a bigger European war against a paranoid, desperate, and declining country which also happens to have the most nuclear weapons in the world just to support a losing cause against some impoverished eastern regions of Ukraine that have always been happier being considered Russian than Ukrainian. For those that think that anything less than full armed intervention equates with appeasement, a la Germany in the Sudetenland, I would tell you that not everything is comparable with the Third Reich, and more weapons and tension do not automatically improve violent situations where power and prestige are at stake—history bears this out whether it be imperialists and war-mongers from the past or opportunistic autocrats of the present like Putin. In this case, as usual, the best hope for a peaceful resolution is continued dialogue and increased economic aid for Ukraine and Russia’s other neighbors, and the best prospect for stopping Russian imperialism is not on the battlefield but with a patient economic and diplomatic approach. Since the first Crimean War, many things have changed, but many

other things have stayed the same. Another line from Tennyson's poem reads "someone had blundered", which is something that can be said about every war in history (including several of America's own recent adventures). Sending more soldiers and arms to die in this valley of death in the name of prestige, power, and spheres of influence is bound to fail—let's at least try to avoid a blunder this time.