

In her influential book *Britons* the historian Linda Colley made a case for the idea that warfare has done more than anything to unify the British as a nation. We think mainly of the wars against Napoleonic France and the two great twentieth-century conflicts against Germany in this respect. But what about the war against Russia, the Crimean War of 1854-56, fought at a time when our national identity was really being fixed in the new mass media of the Victorian age?

Today the names of the Crimean War - Alma, Balaklava, Inkerman, Raglan, Cardigan and Palmerston - continue to inhabit our collective memory, mainly through the signs of streets and pubs. Like David Cameron, we still like to name our daughters after Florence Nightingale, the nurse who made her name in the Crimea and became an icon of middle-class Victorian values.

But few of us could say what the Crimean War was all about - why it began with a religious conflict in the Holy Lands, or why France and Britain ever got involved in a conflict that developed in the Balkans between Turkey and Russia?

As in our own recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the reason given by the British government for its involvement in the Crimea (the defence of Turkish sovereignty against Russian aggression) was a long way from its real and deeper aims: to reduce the power of Russia as a rival to British imperial interests in the Levant; and to secure a firmer hold on the pro-Western reformist government of the Ottoman Empire, which struggled to control the Islamic nationalisms of the Middle East.

Because of this gap there was an important role for those who fixed the public meaning of the Crimean War: journalists and pamphleteers, poets, artists and photographers, orators and priests. This was the first 'modern' war in the age of mass communications - the first to be photographed, the first to use the telegraph, the first 'newspaper war' - and it shaped our national consciousness.

Four aspects of the British character emerged during the Crimean War. The first was the concept of the gallant Britons standing up against the Russian Bear to defend liberty - a simple fight of 'Right Against Wrong', as *Punch* portrayed it in an 1854 cartoon of Britannia wielding the Sword of Justice and with a lion at her side. This is

how we came to see ourselves and our position in the world - as John Bull coming to the rescue of the weak against tyrants and bullies. Many of the same emotive forces that took Britain to the Crimean War were again at work when Britain went to war against the Germans in defence of 'little Belgium' in 1914 and Poland in 1939.

Here perhaps are the origins of the 'moral interventionism' practised by our own liberal governments in the Balkans and the Middle East.

Much of this assertiveness goes back to the foreign policy of Lord Palmerston, the main 'war party' leader in the period leading up to the Crimean War, when he then took over as Prime Minister. More than any other politician before him, Palmerston understood the need to cultivate the press and appeal in simple terms to the public. His foreign policy captured the imagination of the British as the embodiment of their national character and popular ideals: it was Protestant and freedom-loving, energetic and adventurous, proudly British and contemptuous of foreigners, particularly those of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox religion, who Palmerston associated with the worst vices and excesses of the continent. The Victorians loved his verbal commitment to liberal interventionism abroad: it reinforced their view that Britain was the greatest country in the world and that the task of government should be to export its way of life and values to those less fortunate who lived beyond its shores.

The idea of Britain as a Godly land of 'Christian soldiers' fighting righteous wars became integral to this imperial mission. Here was the second aspect of our national consciousness that gained new force as a result of the Crimean War. Many of the ideas of this myth were embodied in the cult of 'muscular Christianity' - a concept first expressed in *Tom's Brown's Schooldays*, written in the wake of the Crimean War, and its sequel, *Tom Brown at Oxford*, where athletic sport is extolled as a builder of manly character, teamwork, chivalry and moral fortitude - qualities that made Britons good at war. The 'playing fields of Eton' and all that.

In fact the public school was one of the major casualties of the Crimean War, which did more than any other event during the mid-nineteenth century to advance the middle-class ideal of meritocracy - the third element of our national identity to develop at this time. As the American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote in his

*English Notebooks*, the year of 1854 had 'done the work of fifty ordinary ones' in undermining aristocracy and promoting the professional ideal.

It was not just a question of the military blunders made by the army's aristocratic leadership - most famously the Charge of the Light Brigade - but of the almost criminal negligence in failing to provide for the British troops in the Crimea. Without sufficient food, warm clothes or shelter to survive the freezing winter temperatures, thousands perished from the cold, exhaustion and disease.

The war's mismanagement triggered a new assertiveness in the middle classes, which rallied round the principles of professional competence, industry, meritocracy and self-reliance in opposition to the privilege of birth. It was a sign of their triumph that in the decades afterwards, Conservative and Liberal governments alike introduced reforms promoting these ideals (the extension of public schooling, the opening of the civil service, a new system of merit-based promotion in the armed services, etc). The political scramble for Middle England had begun.

Florence Nightingale symbolized the new-found confidence of the British professional classes. The legend of the 'Lady with the Lamp' was retold in countless schoolbooks, histories and biographies. It contained the basic elements of the middle-class Victorian ideal: a Christian narrative about maternal care, good works and self-sacrifice; a moral one of self-improvement and the salvation of the deserving poor; a domestic tale of cleanliness and good housekeeping; a story about individual determination; and a public narrative of sanitary and hospital reform that would influence the foundation of the NHS.

What Nightingale embodied above all was a nationwide concern for the suffering of the ordinary troops who had sacrificed so much for their country. Here was a fourth and final aspect of our national unification.

The Crimean War brought about a sea-change in Britain's attitudes towards its fighting men. Previously the British military hero was a gentleman, like the Duke of York, the son of George III and commander of his forces against Napoleon, whose

column was erected in Waterloo Place in London five years after the duke's death in 1833. It was paid for by deducting one day's pay from every soldier in the army.

But the heroes who returned from the Crimea were the common troops. Their deeds were recognized for the first time in 1857, when Queen Victoria instituted the Victoria Cross, awarded to gallant servicemen regardless of their class or rank. Among the first recipients of Britain's highest military honour were 16 privates from the army, five gunners, two seamen and three boatswains.

In 1861 the collective sacrifice of the British troops was commemorated with the unveiling of a Guards Memorial in Waterloo Place. Standing opposite the Duke of York's column, the three bronze guardsmen cast from captured Russian cannon at Sebastopol, symbolized a fundamental shift in our values brought about by the Crimean War.

From then on our military heroes were no longer dukes, but the ordinary soldier, the 'Private Smiths' or 'Tommies' of folklore, who fought courageously and won all Britain's wars in spite of the blunders of his generals. Here was the basis of our national story from the Crimea to the two world wars of the twentieth century and the more recent sacrifices which we honour once a year when we stand in silence at the Cenotaph.

Orlando Figes