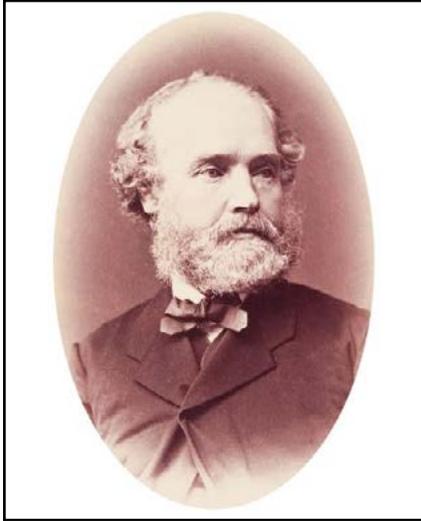


Battlefield Photography as Military Intelligence

Cory M. Pfarr



The work of pioneering English photographer James Robertson, who with his partners captured iconic scenes of the Crimean War, drew the attention of US army officers eager to understand military trends in Europe.

Many readers will have seen the stark images of the aftermath of Civil War battles like Antietam and Gettysburg. Despite the limitations of this still new technology, photographs by Matthew Brady, James Gibson, and others of dead soldiers sprawled on the ground or propped against stone walls, along with more prosaic scenes of camp life, battlements, and field hospitals, shaped how Americans perceived the war then and now.

Less well understood, even among today's intelligence practitioners, is how these images had their antecedents in the imperial wars of the mid-19th century that coincided with the growing popularity of photography worldwide and rapid advances in technology and technique in the 1840s and 1850s in continental Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States. One result was the first US effort to use photographs of Crimean War (1853–56) battlefields as a source of military intelligence.

Photographing Wars of Empire

The first known wartime scenes reproduced from a negative were taken by British army surgeon John McCosh during the Second Burmese War (1852–53). McCosh had also served in the Second Anglo-Sikh War (1848–49) and had taken photographs—many the first of their kind—of Sikh leaders, British army

officers, architecture, and landscapes. In March–June 1855, commissioned by a Manchester publishing house and encouraged by the British government, English artist and photographer Roger Fenton produced a collection of 360 negatives of Crimea for reproduction and public display. However, none these showed battle scenes or documented the war's destruction.

The work of still another pioneering photographer, James Robertson, would draw the attention of US military planners. Robertson, an engraver at the Imperial Ottoman Mint in Constantinople, wanted to pursue the new field of photography. Robertson, 22, joined Italian-British photographer Felice Beato in 1853 to form a business partnership and set up a portrait studio.^a (The two were also related; Robertson was married to Beato's sister.)

In 1855, Robertson, Beato, and several other contemporaries made their way to the Crimean Peninsula, then engulfed in a war between Russia and the "Allied Forces" of the Ottoman Empire, Great Britain, France, and Piedmont-Sardinia. The

a. Felice Beato also photographed the aftermath of the Indian Rebellion (1857) and the Anglo-French expeditionary force during the Second Opium War (1860). He would later work extensively in Japan. His brother Antonio was also an accomplished photographer, and the two collaborated together and with Robertson on various projects.

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origins of the war are complex—control over sites in the Holy Land, Russo-British competition, French imperial ambitions, religious animosity, Russian expansionism—but its breadth and ferocity would prefigure the world wars to come.

In late 1855, Robertson and Beato traveled to Balaklava and began photographing the closing scenes of the war, arriving not long after Roger Fenton had departed. The two photographers moved eastward to Sevastopol, a Russian stronghold that had finally fallen to the Allied Forces on September 9, 1855, after a 337-day siege. They produced a series of photographs that would be of importance to another group of men who arrived in Crimea the next month.



Robertson photograph of the interior of the Great Redan (Salient) in Sevastopol, 1855. (Source: Luminous-Lint)

US Military Commission

Majors Richard Delafield and Alfred Mordecai, along with Capt. George B. McClellan, had traveled to Crimea as part of a US military commission^a sanctioned by Jefferson Davis (of later Civil War infamy), then secretary of war under President Franklin Pierce. The commission was tasked with examining the modernization of European warfare, war-making equipment, and strategy, ranging from the latest and greatest in arms, ammunition, and clothing, to fortifications, siege tactics, and transportation (including “the use of camels...and their adaption to cold and mountainous countries”).

a. (U) The commission also visited Great Britain, France, Prussia, Poland, Russia, Austria, and Italy—in some cases multiple times—to examine fortifications, naval and land defenses, and military armaments and equipment.

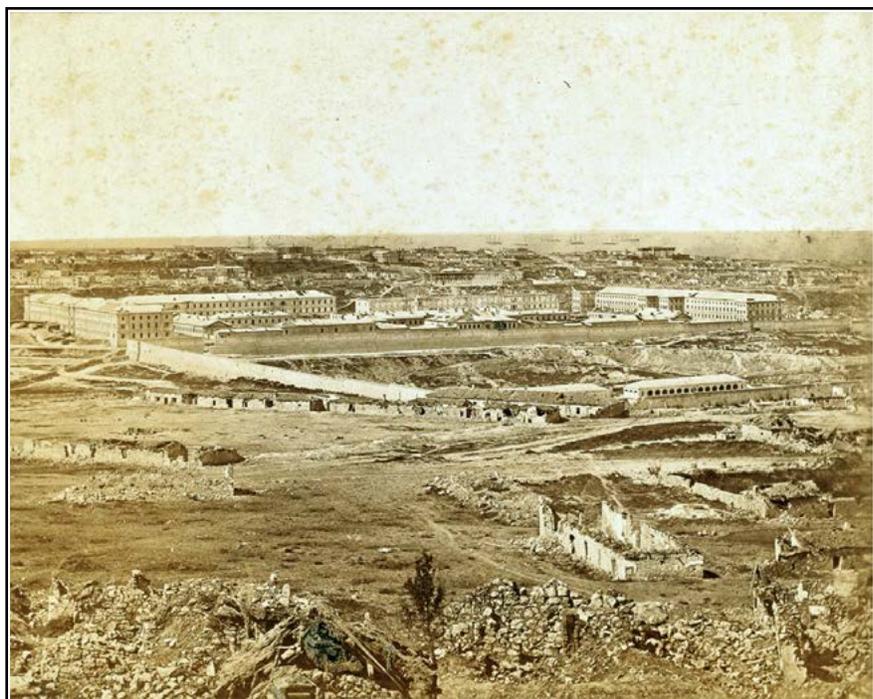
Davis needed information to modernize US military equipment, strategy, and tactics at a time when the country was rapidly expanding in physical territory but hamstrung with an army numbering just 10,400 men in 1853, most scattered in forts across the frontier. Davis was looking for ideas and opportunities to improve the quality and preparedness of the army, recognizing that in a republic still wedded to the Jeffersonian principles of limited government and a suspicion of large standing armies, significantly increasing the size of that fighting force was out of the question.

Delafield, Mordecai, and McClellan had engineering backgrounds and had graduated first or second in their West Point classes (1818, 1823, and 1846, respectively). They examined everything they could while in Balaklava and Sevastopol,

especially rifle arms, ammunition, ordnance, field artillery, gun emplacements, and fortifications.

Apparently, the French commander balked at the US officers’ presence and would not allow the commissioners to see anything in the French camps. As a result, according to Delafield, “The Commission confined its examinations to the camps, depots, parks, workshops, etc., of the English, Sardinian, and Turkish armies, never entering the French camps in the Crimea, except on visits of courtesy.”

The gun emplacements and fortifications at Sevastopol were of particular interest to the commissioners, perhaps especially for Maj. Mordecai, then serving in the Ordnance Corps and commandant of the Washington Arsenal. Mordecai was considered the US Army’s foremost expert in



Robertson panorama of Sevastopol, taken from the Malakoff Redoubt, 1855. (Source: Luminous-Lint)

artillery at the time and had published his book, *Arsenal for the Land Service of the United States*, in 1841.

Of all the reports submitted by the group, Mordecai's contained some of the most interesting special sections out of any of officer's separate reports. He provided a complete listing of "specimens of arms and equipment," books, drawings, maps, and photographs the commission brought back from Crimea. These included "Photographs of Sebastopol [sic]...31 sheets," a reference to Robertson's images after the fall of Sevastopol. Even today they are haunting images of an epic, 11-month siege that left 128,000 dead on the Allied side and caused over 100,000 Russian casualties.

Delafield also drew attention to Robertson's photographs in his report, which included woodcut copies

of some of the images, while making laudatory reference throughout to the photographs' ability to facilitate accurate documentation. Delafield wrote, "No language can give greater accuracy of detail than these photographic views taken on the spot." In yet another case, he maintained that through "photographic art, reliance can be placed in the most minute accuracy of details, as representing the condition of things at a particular moment," before admitting he could "offer no language to convey to the mind a more perfect description."

The commission's use of Robertson's photographs to analyze the gun emplacements at Sevastopol marked the first instance of the US Army employing photographs as military intelligence.

Lessons Not Learned

Unfortunately, the commission's insights would not be shared, at least in written form, until the US was on the brink of civil war. McClellan's report was not published until 1857, Mordecai's not until 1860. Delafield's *Report on the Art of War in Europe* was not published until just before South Carolina militia fired on the US Army's Fort Sumter in April 1861, and it was suppressed during the war to conceal details of fortifications from the Confederate army. Davis, who as secretary of war had championed the commission, had left to become a US senator in 1857 before throwing his support behind succession.

Delafield, who served three stints and a total of 12 years as superintendent of the US States Military Academy at West Point, predicted this result in his own report: "...Yet with blind indifference, professing at the same time to be all powerful, our people neglect the many calls and statements of those they appoint to study this subject, leaving us at the mercy, in the first years of a conflict, of either of the naval and military powers of the Old World." Delafield's thoughts were prescient; despite advances in war-making equipment in the run-up to the Civil War, "Old World" Napoleonic tactics continued to dominate, only gradually falling out of favor in the last two years of the conflict.

As for James Robertson, an exhibition of his Sevastopol work was held in London in December 1855. Finally, a month after the peace treaty was signed in March 1856 and before public interest in the conflict waned, Robertson and Roger Fenton held a joint exhibition

of their Crimea photographs. Some of Robertson's photographs were reproduced as woodcuts and printed in the *Illustrated London News*. Robertson,

together with Felice Benato, would later document the British Army in India in 1857, but he appears to have given up photography and returned to

the Imperial Mint in the 1860s until he retired in 1881. Robertson died in Japan on April 13, 1888.



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