

To what extent was Britain successful in the Crimean War 1854-6?

The Allied side won the Crimean War and was celebrated for it at home therefore it can be said that the British had a significant amount of success, however, there are other factors that play a part. This includes many failures and issues such as battles which demonstrate shortcomings like a lack of consensus between the British and French leaders and also other issues such as health and hygiene problems, the administration lacking in clarity of structure, the lack of supplies and the transport also not being of an adequate standard and also the care for soldiers' wellbeing from the leadership, or more precisely, the lack of it.

Britain started well and had a significant amount of success during the Battle of Alma at the River Alma on the 20th of September 1854. 5700 Russian troops were killed and lost their strong position at the Great Redoubt while the British and the French captured it and only lost about 2500 troops in total during the course of the battle. This can be considered an important success of Britain during the Crimean War 1854-56. Another significant success of Britain was the Battle of Balaclava in October, 1854, whereby the Allies were able to defeat the Russian forces who had a much bigger manpower – 78 guns, 6000 cavalry and more than 20,000 infantry – and had to flee their position as the 800-strong Heavy Brigade led by General Scarlett was successful enough in their offensive actions to reach their aims. Historian Alan Farmer argues this was one of the most impressive battles of the British of the last 80-odd years at the time. Therefore we can see that Britain had important successes during the Crimean War 1854-56.

However, several issues have to be mentioned that take away from the successes of Britain. The Siege of Sebastopol was a great failure of the Allies (and so Britain), mainly caused by a lack of consensus not only inside the British leadership, but between the British and French leadership as well. There was a contrast of opinion between Raglan of the British Army and Canrobert of the French army, more precisely: Raglan suggested an aggressive, immediate attack, but Canrobert insisted on waiting and more care. This led to a sequence of massive failures, not only because by October 17 the Allies had only about 130 guns facing the Russians with more than 300 guns, but because it led to the Russians being able to prepare for following attacks and patch up their defences. Another very important issue that limits Britain's successes is the lack of effective transport. This can be contributed to the lack of a Transport committee and a muddled administrative hierarchy. Supply ships would often stand unloaded in, for example, the Balaclava port, without anyone assigned to take care of unloading it. Supplies would rot and not reach the forces therefore. There was also no organised way of getting the supplies from Balaclava to the siege lines which was also seriously harmful to the health and efficiency of the men. Therefore we can see that Britain had serious problems during the Crimean War, limiting its success.

Also, a very important, widespread and widely-publicised issue of Britain during the Crimean War was the lack of hygiene and also serious health problems, more precisely infections like gangrene, typhoid and typhus amongst others. This especially intensified during the winter of 1854-55. This is proven by the statistic that by February 1855, 52% of men in the hospital of Scutari had died of infection. It is also a fact that more soldiers died during the mentioned period from infection than from fighting the war. These health and hygiene problems were such a widespread issue that not only volunteering nurses like Florence Nightingale and Mary Seacole went to help but the newspapers – like “The Times” – periodically wrote about the terrible conditions in the Crimea. Also, not only not enough money was allocated to alleviate the issue, but leaders – especially Raglan – seemed to not care about the soldiers enough, not only during the mentioned intensified infection crisis – which is verified by primary sources – but all throughout the war, also referred to by historian Alan Farmer mentioning Cardigan after the Charge of the Light Brigade going and boarding a yacht to drink champagne. So we can clearly see that Britain had several issues and shortcomings during the Crimean War.

To conclude, it is clear that Britain won the Crimean War and was victorious – and celebrated as such – while also being efficient to the point that an 800 strong brigade could defeat tens of thousands of Russian men. It is also clear that Britain was not successful at managing the issues with health and hygiene, organising transportation, reaching a consensus on the type of offensive that should be launched and the lack of genuine interest from the side of leadership about the wellbeing of their own soldiers also limited its success overall.