

Article for *Friends*

Visiting Valleys and Tunnels of Death

Harvey Broadbent visits Sevastopol on the Crimean Peninsula, Ukraine

Battlefield tourism may not be everyone's idea of a rewarding travel experience, but for history buffs three striking places in and around Sevastopol, on Ukraine's Black Sea coast make for memorable visits. They provide fascinating insights into three distinct and important of historical episodes—The Crimean War, The German invasion of the Second World War and the ensuing Cold War. Sevastopol was at the centre of all three.

The nearby harbour of Balaclava gave its name to the famous Crimean War battle fought on the heights behind the small harbour. It also, of course, provided the name that survives to this day for a woolly headgear, initially worn by British and French troops to counter the harsh winds of the heights. It was on these heights that the one-armed British general, the Earl of Raglan, who also gave his name to an article of clothing, watched in horror as the famous Light Brigade made its notorious and futile charge along the Valley of Death, as the poet Tennyson famously dubbed the place.

A must-visit place then is the museum park area on the heights above the valley to stand where Raglan and his staff perched on their steeds to look down over the valley. It does not take much imagination to put the 670 or so men of the Light Brigade (Tennyson's 600 was poetic licence) into your view as they were led to decimation by the vain glorious and dandy Earl of Cardigan (and yet another name for an article of clothing entering the English Language). It is essential, though, to take a copy of a map of the Charge, with Russian and Anglo-French positions marked to make sense of the terrain in the context of the battle. As no such map was available locally to your correspondent on either of his two visits, photocopying a relevant page from a book provided a solution.

The museum park on the Balaclava Heights is also the location of the memorial and 2nd World War artefacts relating to the German invasion and seige of Balaclava in 1942. Lots of tanks, aircraft, artillery, wartime vehicles and other hardware are lined up throughout the park—a bit of a blokey place perhaps and not to everyone's taste.

But even hardened anti-war-place travellers would be fascinated by the highlight of a visit to the town of Sevastapol itself—the renowned Siege of Sevastapol Panorama.

Housed in a handsome baroque-style circular building, with other references to Russian military history etched on to its facade, the building and the Panorama within was attacked and badly damaged by the Germans during the 2nd World War seige. Up to twenty artists worked on its restoration between 1945 and its re-opening on the 100th anniversary of the Crimean War seige in 1954. Originally conceived and painted over a three year period by Russian panoramic and battle artist, Franz Alekseevich Roubaud (1856-1923), known as “Rubo”, it was housed in the present building and originally opened on the 50th anniversary of the seige in 1905.

The interior consists of a huge 360 degree panorama depicting the chronology of the seige over a four hour period from the first assault by Anglo-French forces to their later halting of the assault. Given the Panorama’s genesis as a monument to the heroism of the defenders, the point of view and prominence is naturally enough Russian.

Rubo’s bust welcomes you in the vestibule where the genesis of the Panorama and is presented. You then climb a few stairs to emerge in front of the first section of the panorama—a 14 metre high 180 degree view from the ramparts of the town of the harbour of Sevastopol with sunken ships, massive numbers of soldiers, smoke and artillery explosions. Its impact is striking as you are enveloped in the event. You then follow the seige around the complete 150 metre circle encountering vivid images of battle, some featuring the personalities of the defence—generals, admirals, and even Count Leo Tolstoy—and, according to the guide, over four thousand faces.

The striking visual effect of all this, apart from the finely executed and authentic colours of battle, is created by the use of reflected exterior light and the fusion of 3D foreground sections with the huge painted circular panel. These foreground sections, starting 30 cms in front of the viewer and stretching back 3 metres to the panel, contain life-size three-dimensional constructions of guns, trenches, ramparts, and other battle paraphernalia. The effect is delusionary in that the 3D seems to continue

onto the flat panel itself. So while you cannot actually enter the scene you feel you are part of it.

However, the reality of entering an historical space can be experienced back in Balaclava harbour, where the English fleet was stationed during the Crimean War. Here you go back in time, not so far this time, to the era of the Cold War. Cold maybe, but this was a distinctly hot spot. The Naval Museum Complex was the main submarine base of the Soviet Black Sea Fleet. Along with nuclear submarines, it also housed their nuclear missiles, was supposedly top-secret and is now open to visitors.

Sitting in one of Balaclava's pleasant cafes on the waterside side none of this is evident. However, that large rock you can see, Tavros Rock, dominating one side of the picturesque harbour, is the shelter for the former underground base with its wharves, plants, fuel storage tanks, autonomous climate system, dormitories and mess-rooms for the several hundred personnel and arsenals. Constructed underground between 1957 and 1961, deep under the rock, which rises to a height of 126 metres, the base was built to withstand a direct hit from a nuclear bomb and to continue operations.

With assurances that the complex is radioactively clean (your correspondent's first question) the visitor is led from one of the two camouflaged entrances over the submarine channel then through a series of long tunnels for the uncanny underground journey. The guide dutifully explains the encounters along the one kilometre way such as the narrow railway for carrying the deadly munitions, the 120-ton sealed doors that enclosed each area, the submarine wharves and channels and, for that time, the state of the art workshops. The tunnels are so high that no one in the party suffered a feeling of claustrophobia, merely one of fascination and wonder at how they would deal with working long hours in such a place.

The plant ceased operation in 1993 and, after the fall of the Soviet Union and the establishment of an independent Ukraine, began its life as a Naval Museum in 2003. It also encompasses installations that depict the history of Balaclava itself, maritime vessels of all kinds and Ukraine's modern navy.

The Crimea or, more accurately, The Autonomous Republic of Crimea, Ukraine, offers more interest for the museum enthusiast in Yalta with its Tsarist Summer Palace and Chekhov Museum. Black Sea countries, then, such as the Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria, Georgia and Russia are increasingly opening up to visitors. Like their southern neighbour, Turkey, which has been developing its museum base for decades now, their museums will play a major part in offering incentives to visit these countries.

Postscript: Other enduring lines from Tennyson's poem in addition to the *Valley of Death* are:

Theirs not to reason why,

Theirs but to do & die

the jaws of Death

the mouth of Hell

Noble six hundred

And apart from names for articles of clothing the Crimean War resulted in other morsels of phraseology entering the English language. A brief selection:

the thin red line - 93rd Highland Regiment at Balaclava with their red jackets and kilts

the lady with the lamp - Florence Nightingale

the sick man of Europe – term used to describe the declining Ottoman Empire

cigarette – French expression for “paper cigars”, emanating from observing Ottoman troops, rolling tobacco in newspaper, and adopted by British and French troops when their cigar-leaf rolling tobacco ran out or dried and crumbled.

Finally a famous quote by French Marshal Pierre Bosquet, observing the Charge of the Light Brigade, "*C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas la guerre.*" ("It is magnificent, but it is not war").

