

Like Losing Three Sardinias
by Barbara Haas
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Sergei guided our sedan down through the low-slung valley of Balaclava, formidable site of a battle during the Crimean War, circa 1854. One glance made obvious how perfectly formed this basin was for large-scale 19th Century campaigns and full-squad maneuvers. It had the quintessential elements—high ground, promontories for staging artillery, redoubt-ready ridges and a wide-open panorama that showcased terrain features of the basin with almost cinematic clarity. A floodplain and a flat-bottomed valley floor looked enticingly designed for clashes of cavalry, rifle brigades and horses. Columns of men could form up and march. Squadrons could outflank an opposing army's right wing. Roman generals would have salivated over a place like this.

Meadow flowers blurred the contours of rocky outcroppings on the soft-shouldered slopes as we descended into the valley. Swaying in the wind, slender grasses camouflaged spots which through the eyes of war were strategic perches for well-positioned cannons. Poppies dotted the landscape, as if naturalized here and there

into swathes of wild rye. Wind tore at the flame red blossoms and jerked the thin stems. I had asked Tatyana while ago if she wanted me to roll the car window up, and she'd shook her head, saying from the backseat, "I love the wind." The poppies were in constant motion, a twitch of red at the periphery of my vision.

We skimmed down toward the swooping low point of the valley, what Tennyson had famously described as "the mouth of hell" in his poem "Charge of the Light Brigade"—*theirs not to reason why, theirs but to do and die*. Before Matthew Brady documented our American Civil War with his photos, Roger Fenton had done the same for the Crimean War, lugging a camera, tripod and a portable dark room with him over this rugged topography. Fenton was the first photographer ever embedded with an attacking army, the British in this case. Altogether the UK had assembled an alliance which included in its fight against Russia the Ottoman Empire, France and eventually even the little Kingdom of Sardinia, a remote island republic off the coast of Italy.

Fenton printed murky photographs which captured the brooding cataclysm of war here. Processing the prints required albumin and silver nitrate salts, all cutting edge development techniques of that era, a step above Daguerreotype plates more typical before then. In Fenton's work I had seen the haunted gaping aftermath of devastation wrought in this valley—chunked out knobs of earth, pulverized stone, ravines strewn with cannonballs, at rest and rusting.

The detail of rust in particular stopped me. It underscored the solidity of those weighted iron spheres, known as "round shot" in military parlance. The rust surface created a fine lace on the metal, like lichen growing on a tree trunk. Weirdly, war had brought more oxidizing agents into forced contact with the ground and its moisture. Rust chose no sides in the conflict of course but merely represented natural environmental processes which were ongoing and continual regardless of the madness of war, regardless of the concussions and blasts—and not interrupted by them either. Oxidation riffed on the after-effects of battle. In a peculiar twist, a type of turn-about symbiosis, war gave rust more work to do.

In creating more surfaces on which rust could form, like cannonballs left lying haphazardly in trenches, war also created more items and objects to defend. A battlefield became a reliquary of abandoned weaponry. When fresh recruits from the Ottoman Empire fled their Balaclava redoubts in panic and deserted, they left undefended all the artillery and cannons in those redoubts, all the Big Ticket items. The

next day Russian heroes paraded those guns through the streets of Sevastopol—souvenirs of victory, proof of tactical advantage, high value tokens taken off the gameboard.

The pitched battles of the 19th Century were tricked out as elaborately as Broadway productions. Drummers, buglers and even a color guard ensemble, who bore the official standard, moved along with the troops. Soldiers needed to gain ground, naturally, and protect the lives of fellow combatants, certainly. They also had to secure heavy equipment, plus watch out for the unarmed ensemble escorting the flag, for instance, or the guy tapping out a tattoo on a drum. It wasn't enough merely to defeat the enemy where he stood and leave the dead to lie where they fell. Soldiers had to protect all the furnishings of war, all the trappings—and prevent the seizing of trophies.

I stared out the car window at Balaclava and felt as if time had been a mirage for this valley, as if little had changed in the land since that morning when the battalions clashed and the ground shook underfoot. Vineyard-encrusted terraces dominated the slopes now, just as they had back then, symmetrical rows positioned on ledges and rocky hillocks, all of the gnarled rootstock tethered to stakes and supports. Vines grew right up to the edge of cliffs and seemed to float above the raw rock. Foot soldiers had in fact sought the rows and alleys out for strategic cover, poking their gun barrels through the vines. The wounded had crawled between the rows, sometimes to die there.

Low-lying like this, the valley was very fog-prone in the morning, dew-rich and misty. I could imagine the ethereal look at dawn, the vineyard's canopy fog-shrouded, barely a ghostly suggestion of the rows and alleys. The terroir here produced an acidic, zesty grape for the nearby Inkerman Winery.

In fact, Tatyana, Sergei and I were on our way to that winery right now, ready to take a tour and then treat ourselves to a tasting. Towering massifs of limestone and calcareous karst dominated the Inkerman area, and the winery itself utilized caves in the karst for cellaring the enoteca in perfectly controlled temperatures. Tatyana had described the Inkerman Winery as the kind of establishment that would start you off with a prosecco-style bubbly during a tasting and then build up toward complex but approachable reds, finishing everything off with a port the color of blackberries.

“Theirs is a low intervention process,” she had explained from the backseat. Wind combed through her hair, swirling a few strands across her forehead, and she brushed the strands away. “They even ferment the wine from wild yeasts produced actually right here in these vineyards.” She pointed out the window at the rows.

Known for impeccably structured whites, the Inkerman vintners grew a varietal of red-stemmed grapes specifically here on Balaclava’s slopes. This was the *rkatsiteli* strain, Russia’s nearly unpronounceable word for “red-stem,” which Greek colonists had first introduced to Crimea during the sixth century B.C. This was the valley where *rkatsiteli* performed especially well. The pale grapes dangled from trellised vines, gorgeous orbs of sunlit truth.

Inkerman’s stewards hand-harvested these Balaclava clusters when natural sugars reached 20% and then macerated the fruit in oak vats for long periods with the skins. Sometimes they even crushed the red stems with the fruit, too. This created a wine the color of topaz and produced a bouquet redolent of violets. Pearl of Inkerman hit the tongue with a splash of glistening wet-stone minerality. That first mouthful embodied exactly the terroir and conveyed a direct incarnation of the vineyard itself. The flavor was very expressive of Balaclava, its spirit and physiology, the way grapes and culture had entwined here for millennia. The flavor bundled within it even that day in 1854 which included indelibly the tragedy of war.

I leaned back in the passenger seat right now and let that sink in.

Sinking in along with it was a solemn sense of how freighted this place was with the weight of history—not Balaclava exclusively but Crimea in totality. The peninsula had been a resort destination of renown for so long that personal indulgences and surface frivolities had thrived alongside the kind of globally shattering events which had always kept an intense grip on this land. During the imperial period, Russian women on holiday sought trysts with Tatar gigolos here. Married men conducted clandestine liaisons. In fact, Chekhov’s most famous short story “The Lady with the Pet Dog” documented the prevailing mind-set exactly. Part of Crimea’s terroir included one-night stands, and one-night-stands in Crimea were never just one night only. They were turbocharged. Supersized. They launched like three-stage rockets. One-night-stands lasted many, many nights—as if people had lost count really: was it one night? Was it seven?

Add to that atmosphere the classic indulgences like Champagne, oysters and caviar, all locally plentiful—and then top those off with more contemporary indulgences like deep marble soaking tubs, icicle-clad frost bars, eucalyptus-vapor saunas—and all of the native pleasures began to rub up against each other and macerate with the heaviness of consequential geopolitical events. They macerated with acts of cataclysmic carnage and the kind of reckoning that obliterated borders, trampled national sovereignty and ultimately redrew the map of the world. A glitzy club scene of easy living on Crimea’s southern coast had the power to recalibrate the weight of history, soften it somewhat, balance out its bitterness.

Tatyana had described the plates of prosciutto and gorgonzola which the Inkerman Winery offered between flights of wine. “Artisanally crafted meats and cheeses for clearing the palate,” she told me. “All of them produced on Balaclava-area farms.”

As she spoke, I could imagine the tang of salt on my tongue—and my mouth even began to water—but I could not imagine the taste of salt without also blending into it and binding with it what was grim and what was grave here.

Drinking the wine meant drinking *it* in. Savoring the meat and cheese meant swallowing *it* down.

The improvident acts of delusional statesmen or sultans or war-mongering autocrats had rooted deeply into the soil, the ecosystem, the microclimate. Those acts had attenuated the feel of this place. The soil, ecosystem and microclimate were not passive recipients of these contributions but factored them into the overall gestalt. Like rust on iron, terroir had a certain organic logic. That logic had fed this place since antiquity. That logic had fueled its heritage. Both rust and terroir were predictable in their unyielding processes, untouched by human acts of war, undeterred, triumphant even in their own trajectories. Noble.

I stared out at the vineyards as we drove across the flat-pan flood plain of the valley. Sergei had slowed for the view, his version of Sunday driving. Poppies still bounced on the wind. From the backseat, Tatyana mentioned the “Charge of the Light Brigade.” She recited a few lines—something about the thin red line, the jaws of Death, theirs not to ask why. Her words scattered on the wind.

Regardless of Tennyson’s metaphor, regardless of the moniker he had laid on Balaclava, for most of its existence it had not been the mouth of hell at all. For most of

its existence winemaking families descended of those original Greek colonists had cultivated and protected the vines, grafted and modified the rootstock and tended the grapes assiduously. It was difficult to see how a place could be plucked up from its peaceful rural mundanity over the course of one single day, one 6-hour battle in 1854, and then claim its eternal spot on history's bookshelf. It was difficult to imagine the amount of energy expended all at once—men, horses, ordnance—all of it so suddenly funneled down into an earthen bowl whose soft-shouldered slopes seemed tailor-made to contain the mayhem, just as an insulated crucible contains a white-hot alloy. Detonations convulsed across the grand sweeping scene. Shells whistled past. A hail of bullets rained down. Blunders and miscalculations coalesced over the battlefield in a whirlwind of pomp, splendor and wild trembling horse flesh. Death and desperation clasped hands here.

Men fell forward—not sprawling flat on their backs as artists often depicted the dead in paintings of battle. French war correspondent Louis Noir said the Russian dead had “a look of fierce hatred,” a look that appeared frozen at the moment of death. Face down and mouth agape, they seemed to have sunk teeth-first, as if “biting the dirt.”

Trellised vines now rose from that dirt, so orderly and regimented, laid out in east-west rows so that the sun-sides of the grapes could flourish under canopies perfectly coiffed to shade them. Growers had paid strict attention to this *rkatsiteli* crop, this red stem. They had smelled, handled, measured and nurtured it. Legend claimed that the French monks who first tended the Burgundy vines of Bordeaux had even tasted the soil, chewing it slowly and savoring it, in order to learn the appellation. Balaclava's vineyards had the look of something that could inspire such dedication. Even squinting really hard—and with all due respect to Tennyson—I could not see hell in this.

The innocent agrarian scene carefully disguised how versatile it nonetheless was, especially if wartime expedience called upon it, if wartime expedience tapped it, if General Menshikov sent an aide-de-camp to Lord Lucan with an attaché message that noted the day and the time of engagement. Balaclava's vineyard period right now, its vineyard look right at this very instant, marked a period of consolidated resources for plants, soil and microbes alike, an in-gathering time of sugars and starches and photosynthesis cycles as the valley awaited an important day again—perhaps in the distant future, perhaps tomorrow—when it might become once more an arena for both

the grandest of human spectacles and the sorriest, a theatre of courage and also a killing field.

“Men, remember,” British Army officer Sir Colin Campbell had said. His Highlanders were the vaunted thin red line. When seen from an escarpment above Balaclava, their defensive formation looked like an ominous bloody streak across the valley floor-- tipped with bright shining steel, the silver flash of their bayonets. “Remember,” he had told them, “there is no retreat from here.” Thundrous volleys struck up dust and gravel for hours, blinding the troops. The sky grew murky, choked with the stench of Cordite. Cannonballs tore through advancing regiments of dragoons. Grape-shot ploughed into the earth around the horses’ hooves. “You must die,” Sir Colin told his men, “where you stand.”

The losses on that October day had been brisk—at a clip of 275 per hour, altogether 1650 casualties, almost evenly distributed between both sides, allies and Russians alike, plus a loss of 400 horses. Military historians ever since then had declared the outcome of Balaclava indecisive, but Russia held the high ground when the smoke cleared that day, thus staving off an immediate siege of Sevastopol. That siege ultimately would happen, but it would take another year of pitched battles like this one, another year of casualties too horrific to enumerate, the dead biting the dirt. That year would include the difficult winter months of 1855 when Russia’s most reliable commanders would be in charge—General January and General February.

By spring of that year the Kingdom of Sardinia had jumped into the fray. The island republic off the coast of Italy had a civilian population of no more than 180,000, but Vittorio Emanuele II mustered 15,000 conscripts and ordered them to Crimea. That signaled a hefty expansion of the scale and the scope of the campaign.

Russia surrendered to the Allies a few months later, reeling. The loss of 530,000 men altogether in the conflict proved catastrophic beyond measure. More than a half million men from any single nation anywhere on earth was a staggering blow—generational in scope. That was three times the number of people who actually lived in the Kingdom of Sardinia at that time.

It would be hard enough in the 19th Century to lose one Sardinia—the equivalent of 180,000 casualties. Plagues culled populations to that degree from time to time, always historic in proportion, and also pestilence and famine, too.

Tennyson’s metaphor therefore merely stated the obvious.

Hell. As in “mouth of.” Yes.

Even if wartime expedience never tapped Balaclava again and even if this valley did nothing more than peacefully produce casks of floral and herbaceous wine from now until the end of time, the doom and fire that had fused here would remain. Once hell, always hell.

Later today, while sitting in dappled shade under a leaf-draped arbor, I found it hard to focus on the sommelier’s words as she curated the tasting for us, because my heart had not quite caught up just yet. A flight of different wines stood before me, their contents running an inviting gamut from golds to ambers to ruby reds, like color-coded landscapes displayed in glasses and goblets, and I so wanted to rise to the occasion. I so wanted to give myself to the festivities, wanted to indulge, but my heart was not ready. My heart had not left the valley.

Tatyana and I lifted our stemware and clinked.

With even that first sip, as Pearl of Inkerman rolled across my tongue and its grassy astringent notes registered, I felt the intimacy. This was a substantial mouthful, earthy, unpretentious, integrated. Swallowing meant consent. Swallowing meant to give permission. Something in me would yield, as if in invitation, as if in submission, and something would fill that space. I drained my glass fast. The slight burn at the back of my throat was the alcohol making its presence known. Soon enough a tingle of heat zipped through my limbs, followed by that pleasant feeling of sand sifting into my muscles, a buzz forming.

Other guests at the tasting were more measured, more discerning. They swirled their glasses toward the light, evaluating the brightness and hue, allowing the wine to breathe a bit. They savored tiny mincing sips, nibbled on a cracker or two and then licked their lips.

Yes, there were plates of prosciutto and gorgonzola. Shallow bowls of artichoke hearts and olives figured into the array of small bites, too, and also crunchy *zakuski*s like pretzels and homemade bread sticks. On account of this mix of snacks, every sensation stayed delectably in that tipsy-only range, that happy range, never veering toward drowsiness or blurred vision and slurred words, or anything more than a delightfully manageable rush. This was the hell of it, this was the heaviness of it—in my mouth, in my body—and it was such an indulgence, such a treat to rest in a dapple of

uncomplicated shade like this under a leafy arbor with the kind of connoisseurs who knew that terroir didn't always mean terroir—sometimes it just meant terroir.

The sommelier noticed my empty glass and poured out a little more for me.

(Balaclava vineyard photo by Barbara Haas)