

Russian nursing in the Crimean war

Although the practice of military medicine and surgery goes back to antiquity, the British date the proper care of the wounded from the arrival of Florence Nightingale at Scutari in Turkey on 4 November 1854. The 140th anniversary of her work in that winter of the Crimean war is being celebrated by an exhibition at the Florence Nightingale Museum, 2 Lambeth Palace Road SE1 7EW, from 1 December 1994 till 30 April 1995. For the first time in this country it will tell a little of the other side of the story—the exploits of Russian nurses in caring for the casualties from both sides in the conflict—which is the subject of this article.

At the centre of that stage were the Sisters of Mercy of the Community of the Cross, founded on 6 November 1854 (24 October 1854, according to the old Russian calendar (ORC)) by the Grand Duchess Helena Pavlovna (1806-1873). Born Frederika Charlotta Maria, Princess of Wurtemberg, she was married to the Russian Prince and Grand Duke Michail Pavlovich; after her marriage, she was rechristened Helena Pavlovna and received the title of Grand Duchess. (Table 1).

The Grand Duchess was dedicated to the well-being of Russia and founded many charitable institutions such as schools and clinics. Among them was the Community of the Cross (Krestovozdvizhenskaia Obshchina: literally, the community to raise the cross) which later ran a hospital and free school but was born of the Crimean War and the Grand Duchess' desire to improve the care of the wounded. The Emperor Nikolay I (1796-1855) was sceptical because in those times 'nowhere were women sent to the battlefield', but he gave in to her requests and consented to an unprecedented experiment. She immediately summoned to her help Nikolay Ivanovich Pirogov (1810-1881) 'Russia's top surgeon and a European celebrity'. He had volunteered in September 1854 to go to the battlefield where the wounded were dying in their thousands in Sebastopol. His request was still circulating around official bodies and he was losing hope of success when he received a sudden invitation to visit the Grand Duchess.

They met at the beginning of November 1854, 'at that unforgettable time'—as Pirogov himself wrote—'when every heart in St Petersburg was beating hard and awaiting the outcome of the battle of Inkerman with trepidation . . . To my great satisfaction she announced to me that she had taken upon herself the responsibility of granting my request. She expounded her great plan to arrange organised care for the sick



Fig 1. Grand Duchess Helena Pavlovna (1806-1873). Oil painting by K Brulov in the Arkhanglesk Art Museum, Archangel, Russia.

and wounded on the battlefield by women and invited me to enrol medical personnel and head the entire project. Never before had I seen the Grand Duchess in such a distressed state as on the day of that memorable audience she granted to me. Tears in her eyes and her face flushed . . . she strode up and down the room saying in a loud voice: "Why didn't you turn to me first? Your wish to assist on the battlefield would have been accomplished long since and my plan would now have come true!"

By the evening of the same day the Grand Duchess appealed to the patriotic feelings of Russian women and to all those wishing 'to carry out the highly honourable and difficult duties of the Sisters of Mercy at dressing stations and mobile hospitals at the Crimean battlefield'. On 6 November 1854, the day after the battle of Inkerman, she founded, with her own means, the Community of the Cross of the Sisters Caring for the Wounded and Sick Warriors. By the next day the orders for the activities of the Community had been adopted.

The Community of the Cross united patriotic

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Table 1. The dates of the main events referred to in this article (Gregorian/old Russian calendars)

28/15 March 1854	Outbreak of the Crimean war. Britain and France declare war on Russia.
14/1 September 1854	The allied French and British troops land at Eupatoria in the Crimea.
20/7 September 1854	Battle of the river Alma. Darya (from Sebastopol) provides care on the battlefield.
17/4 October 1854	The allied bombardment of Sebastopol begins. Start of the long siege.
21/8 October 1854	Florence Nightingale leaves London for Scutari (Turkey).
4 November/22 October 1854	Florence Nightingale arrives in Scutari.
5 November/23 October 1854	Battle of Inkerman.
6 November/24 October 1854	Foundation of the 'Community of the Cross of Sisters caring for the wounded and sick warriors' of the Grand Duchess Helena Pavlovna (the CoC).
7 November/25 October 1854	Adoption of the rules of conduct of the CoC.
10 November/28 October 1854	N I Pirogov leaves St Petersburg for the Crimea.
By 18/5 November 1854	The first detachment (28 sisters) of CoC leaves St Petersburg for the Crimea.
12 December/29 November 1854	The first detachment of the CoC arrives at Simferopol in the Crimea.
13 December/30 November 1854	The CoC begins activity in the Crimea.
The end of 1854	'The compassionate widows of the Empress' arrive in Simferopol.
26/13 January 1855	The second detachment (13 sisters) of the CoC arrives in Sebastopol.
30/17 January 1855	The third detachment (eight sisters) of the CoC arrives in the Crimea.
10 April/28 March 1855	The fourth detachment (19 sisters) of the CoC arrives in the Crimea.
9 September/27 August 1855	The end of the defence of Sebastopol. Transportation of the wounded.

Russian women of many social groups: the well educated, such as the wives, widows and daughters of titular councillors, collegiate councillors, nobility, landowners, merchants and officers of the Russian army and navy, and a few poorer semi-literate women.

On 10 November 1854 Pirogov set out for the Crimea with two doctors and a doctor's assistant. By 18 November they were followed by the first detachment of Sisters of the Community of the Cross consisting of 28 nurses, headed by Mrs Alexandra P Stakhovich, widow of a captain and the first lady-in-chief of the Community. The first detachment of sisters arrived at Simferopol on 12 December 1854 and the next day started work in the Crimean hospitals. By this time several thousand had been wounded at the battles of Alma and Inkerman, and Simferopol had had its first bombardment. 'The miserable men lacked any care and were crowding the houses. Many of them were lying without mattresses, in dirty underwear, on the dirty floors without any care and attention. The air was foul, the wounds were inflamed and malodorous. There was a lack of both minds and hands to get all that great chaos into some degree of order'. In a letter to his wife in St Petersburg, dated 19 December (6 December ORC), Pirogov wrote: 'About five days ago the Community of the Cross of Helena Pavlovna . . . arrived here and zealously set to work; if they continue in such a manner, they will undoubtedly be of great help. Day and night they visit hospitals in shifts, assist during bandaging and surgery, distribute tea and wine among the sick and watch over the servants, ward-keepers and even doctors. The presence of a woman, neatly dressed and eagerly helping, makes it a

lot easier to bear a great deal of suffering and disaster. The sisters were on duty day and night rendering aid to soldiers, officers and prisoners of war'.

However the sisters of the Community of the Cross were not the first on the scene. Pirogov arrived two weeks ahead of them and found local women from Sebastopol caring for the wounded: 'Every day during the time of dressing one can see three to four women; one of them is the famous Darya, another one is a daughter of some official, one is a 17 year old girl, and one is the wife of a soldier. Also, I met here another lady of middle age . . . the wife of a sailor who distributes tea which is her own or donated by other people. Darya wears a medal on her dress granted by His Majesty, Emperor Nikolay I, who ordered his sons, the Princes Nikolay and Mikhail (who had been sent to Crimea in order to "raise the spirit" of the troops) to kiss her and donate to her 500 roubles as a present and 1,000 more for her wedding day . . . Her noble inclination to help the wounded first revealed itself at Alma when she did the laundry. She also assists at surgical operations'. Darya, the orphaned daughter of a Black Sea navy sailor was one of the first Russian women to care for the injured on the battlefield.

When the Allied forces landed in Eupatoria (14 September 1854), she followed the Russian troops and under enemy fire during the battle at the river Alma (20 September 1854) bandaged the wounded to the best of her abilities, so creating the first 'dressing station' at the battlefield. From then until March 1855 she cared for the wounded and sick warriors at the dressing stations, hospitals and infirmaries of besieged Sebastopol and it was for those services that the

Emperor awarded her the medal and a golden cross with the inscription 'Sebastopol'. She thought of joining the Community of Sisters of Mercy, but soon after the war she married a retired sailor and settled down in the city of Nikolayev.

Other local women had cared for the wounded well before the arrival of the Sisters of Mercy of the Grand Duchess. One of the sisters wrote from a hospital in Sebastopol on 22 December 1854: 'There is a nurse Marpha here who was at the dressing station in Sebastopol and then at the head military hospital here; for around two months she has been dressing the wounded and displaying surprising sympathy and compassion to the patients who like her very much'. These women of Sebastopol began to provide long-term care of the wounded on their own initiative from September 1854 and laid the foundation for the more organised work of the Sisters of Mercy.

A third group of women arrived in Simferopol by the end of 1855. Known as the 'compassionate widows' they were residents of widows' homes in St Petersburg and Moscow under the patronage of the Empress Alexandra Feodorovna. Trained to look after patients, they cared for the 'defenders of the strongholds' 'with mother-like care and deference'. 'Despite the great many sick and wounded people admitted to hospitals after the battle of Inkerman and those still there after the battle of Alma, they vigilantly cared for each sufferer; following their instructions, they supervised the quality of food, the change of clothes, the bandaging of wounds, the administration of drugs: in other words, they maintained the whole household and medical order. . . The most vivid example of their unselfish devotion is the fact that 12 of the widows had died in Simferopol from exhaustion and infection during hard hospital work'.

During this time more and more women in St Petersburg and Moscow were setting out for the Crimea and the battlefield. On 26 January 1855 the second detachment of 13 Sisters of Mercy, headed by sister Maria Merkulova, the daughter of a landowner, arrived in Sebastopol; four days later the third detachment of eight Sisters of Mercy, headed by sister Ekaterina Bakunina, arrived there. A fourth detachment of 19 sisters of the Community of the Cross, headed by sister Budberg, came to the Crimea two months later, on 10 April 1855.

For the first time in the history of military and field surgery, all nursing sisters and doctors were, on Pirogov's orders, put into functional groups. The first group was in charge of sorting out the wounded according to the type and degree of severity of disease or injury, and of registering their money and belongings. During the Crimean War, in Sebastopol, when the injured were taken to the first aid stations by their hundreds, Pirogov was the first to plan and execute triage—the assortment of the wounded into four groups: the hopelessly sick and deadly wounded were entrusted to the care of the Sisters of Mercy and



Fig 2. Nikolay Ivanovich Pirogov (1810-1881). Photograph from the period of the Crimean War. From the Pirogov family collection.

priests. The seriously wounded who needed urgent surgery received it at the emergency dressing station in the Building of the Assembly of Nobles; the less seriously wounded were transferred for surgery the next day; those with minor injuries were given immediate treatment and returned to their regiments.

The second group of sisters took over the wounded from the first group for emergency surgery and returned them to the adjacent hall of the dressing station. They not only dressed the wounds but also assisted doctors during surgical operations and treatment of wounds. On the days of great battles when hundreds of soldiers were killed and thousands wounded, surgical operations were performed simultaneously on three operating tables; about 80-100 major operations were performed each day, some only with the assistance of the sisters. Pirogov could amputate a leg in seven to eight minutes. In his letter from the Sebastopol battlefield to his colleague at the St Petersburg Academy of Medicine and Surgery, the famous surgeon Karl K Seidlitz, Pirogov wrote: 'It is possible to carry out 10 big amputations within an hour and 45

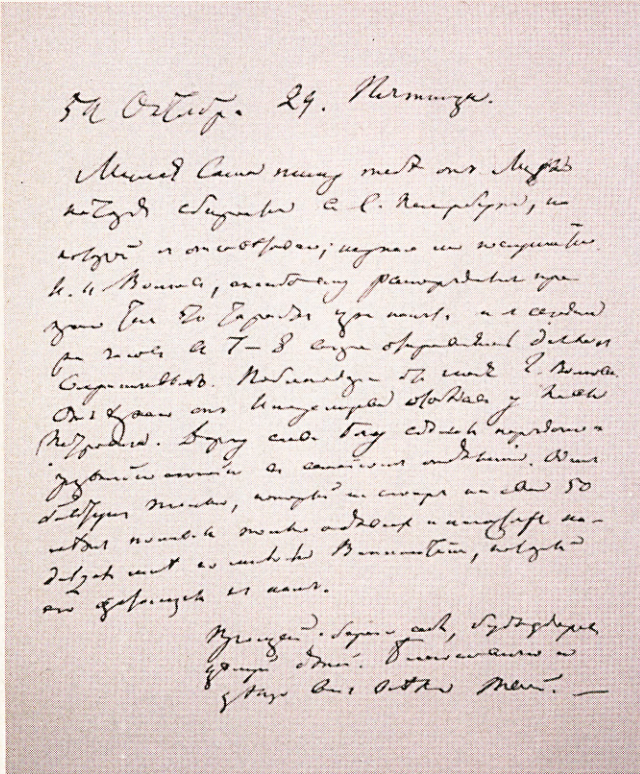


Fig 3. Facsimile of Pirogov's letter from Sebastopol dated Friday 29 October 1854 (Old Russian Calendar: 11 November 1984 Gregorian Calendar).

minutes, even with the help of not very experienced assistants. If operations are performed simultaneously on three tables by 15 doctors, it is possible to carry out 90 amputations in six hours and 15 minutes, and a little over 100 in seven hours'.

Pirogov divided the patients who had undergone surgery into a clean and a suppurative group—

another first in the history of military field surgery. The latter group of patients were placed in special gangrene wards, which Pirogov called 'memento mori'.

The third group of sisters dealt with the wounded who were to have their operations the next day. The fourth group consisted of sisters and a priest who cared for the terminally ill and dying, rendering them terminal care and consolation. In addition, there were household matrons who kept the wards clean, provided fresh underwear, distributed meals and were responsible for the general upkeep and management of the wards. Later, a special mobile band of sisters was formed in order to escort the wounded during long journeys.

When this type of management had become established at the dressing stations, cases of fainting among the staff stopped, the foul smell in the halls disappeared and it became possible to help many more wounded in an organised manner. Thus, during Easter week 1855 at the Nikolayevskaya battery, about four thousand wounded were taken care of by three sisters, one doctor and two doctor's assistants. 'We haven't eaten or drunk for two days'—wrote sister A Krupskaya in her memoirs—'there was no possibility to interrupt the work for a single moment'.

Some sisters gave help to the wounded during night attacks and bombardments. One of the sisters 'a common and uneducated woman, attended our fortifications at her own will and became a heroine. She helped the wounded at the bastion, under the direct fire of the enemy's cannon'.

Pirogov described war as an 'epidemic of trauma'. He was convinced that 'not medicine, but administration plays the major role in the task of helping the wounded and sick at the battlefield'. In March 1855, due to an administrative fault, about 2,000 wounded had to spend the whole night outdoors after an artillery barrage at the bastion of Kamchatsky because

Fig 4. Pirogov's departure from Sebastopol. Saying goodbye to the Sisters of the Community of the Cross. Painting by P Buchkin. Pirogov House Museum. Vinnitza (town), Ukraine.





Fig 5. A group of Sisters of the Community of the Cross. Photograph, Sebastopol 1855. Reproduced from *The Russian Art Newspaper* edited by Timm.

there was no transport and the sisters had to carry them to the barracks at the northern side. Many necessary items were often lacking, especially in winter, and the barracks and the sisters' lodgings were damp and cold. That is why the sisters and Pirogov together passionately fought against 'the insatiable rapacity of the hospital administration' and 'the stupidity of the official medical personnel', and they tried their best to organise efficient medical help for the wounded on the battlefield. They found that feminine tact, sensitivity, moral standing and independence in the face of official obduracy often had more influence on the abuses of hospital administration than any official audit commission.

Altogether, 161 sisters of the Community of the Cross served on the Crimean battle front. Before being sent to the Crimea they underwent training at the St Petersburg Academy of Medicine and Surgery. Their expenses were paid by the Grand Duchess Helena Pavlovna. The Community also had at its disposal large sums of money; donations for the wounded and sick came from many private individuals and organisations, including members of the Emperor's family. Hospitals received gifts of clothing, footwear, tableware, tea, sugar, berries and broth for the sick, wine, drugs, dressing materials etc.

The sisters of the Community of the Cross concentrated their selfless work on the besieged city of Sebastopol but small detachments of sisters also worked at ten other Crimean cities. 'Day and night, enduring without complaint all the hardships and dangers and sacrificing themselves to achieving the goal they had set . . . they served for the sake of the wounded and sick'. Almost all of them suffered from typhus fever or other epidemic diseases; some of them were wounded. By March 1855 'six sisters out of 20 died in Simferopol . . . , seven out of 18 who were work-

ing in Sebastopol fell ill and two of them had died'. Altogether, 17 sisters of the Holy Cross community died during one year while fulfilling their duty in the Crimean war. Their names are listed in *The historical review of the Community of the Cross*. After the war, 68 nursing sisters were awarded the medal 'for the defence of Sebastopol'.

Especially highly-esteemed was Miss Ekaterina Mikhailovna Bakunina (1812-1894)—'an exemplary Sister of Mercy'. She worked in the operating theatre as hard as the surgeons and for equally long hours 'with a handful of ligatures, ready to respond to the appeal of doctors'. 'When bombs and rockets shot over or fell short and were flying around the Building of the Assembly of Nobles (the main hospital), she and her confederates displayed an astonishing spirit that could hardly be associated with feminine nature and which distinguished the sisters till the very end of the siege',—with such words Pirogov described Miss E M Bakunina. During the evacuation she was the last to quit the hospital and on 9 September 1855 she was the last Sister of Mercy to leave Sebastopol across the bridge to the northern side.

Bakunina was born into the noble family of a governor of St Petersburg. She passed her youth in travel, musical classes, drawing, amateur theatre performances and balls where she danced with great pleasure. In 1854 she was 42 years old. She was one of the first to volunteer and step into the unknown. Her desire to become a Sister of Mercy had met with strong opposition from relatives and friends. To her first official application she had received a very reserved response from St Petersburg, to which she replied: 'When a daughter of Bakunin who was Governor of St Petersburg and a grand-daughter of Admiral Ivan Loginovich Golenitchev-Kutusov, wishes to care for the sailors, it seems strange to refuse her'. So she was



Fig 6. Nikolay I Pirogov in his old age. Oil painting by I Ye Repin in the Pirogov House Museum.

admitted. To test herself, she paid daily visits to 'the most disgusting of Moscow's hospitals'. In St Petersburg, she received an invitation to attend the court of the Grand Duchess Helena Pavlovna and stayed at her apartments. She was made responsible for a detachment of eight sisters. While preparing for their future duties, they attended surgical operations in the clinic. 'Some doctors laughed at me' wrote Bakunina in her memoirs 'and said "What Sister of Mercy is this who drives to the dressings in a royal carriage?"'. On 23 December 1854, after the liturgy and a blessing from the Grand Duchess, they started out for the battlefield and on 3 February the third detachment of sisters entered the barracks of besieged Sebastopol. In February 1855, Ekaterina Bakunina was appointed lady-in-chief of the whole Community (Table 2). She drove around all the military hospitals of the Crimea. On four occasions she accompanied transportations of

the wounded from the besieged Sebastopol. 'In large boots and a sheep-skin coat she trudged by foot in deep mud and accompanied the carts packed full of the sick and wounded. She took care of the suffering as long as it was possible and spent nights on duty in cold huts together with them'. She became an example of patience and hard work for all the sisters of the Community.

'One must possess excellent health, selflessness and steadiness of temper to perform such an act of mercy, not for flattery and fuss, but one which is vitally beneficial to the distressed sick', wrote Pirogov, 'Let the future generations judge to what degree the Community at the very beginning of its activity has implemented the blessed idea of its imperial patroness and made itself worthy of the aim of its foundation'. 'I am proud to have led their blessed activity'.

Comments

Thus, during the Crimean War of 1854-1856 it was the Russians who for the first time in history (November-December 1854) created and organised a voluntary nursing service to care for the wounded and sick soldiers in field conditions. This selfless activity was carried out by the Sisters of Mercy from the Community of the Cross, the Compassionate Widows from the imperial widows' homes and the local women from Sebastopol and other parts of the Crimea.

At the same time, on the other side of the front line, among the allied troops, Florence Nightingale (1820-1910) began her activities. She left London on the night of 21 October 1854 together with 38 nursing sisters and arrived in Scutari on 4 November to help the wounded and the sick soldiers of the allied armies. The soldiers called her the 'Lady with the lamp' and as such she is remembered and esteemed in Great Britain.

What conspired to cause this fortunate coincidence whereby women from different countries whose armies were engaged in war on opposing sides, were moved to help the wounded and sick soldiers on the battlefield? There was still no Red Cross banner, but the humanitarian ideas of that movement were already being realised. It was during the Crimean War that the seeds of the future Red Cross Society were sown and the ideals created which inspired its founder Henri Dunant after the battle of Solferino.

The words of the Russian surgeon Christian Gyubbenet are as relevant to present conflicts as they were to the Crimean campaign: 'Let us recall our past. At the Alma about 1,600 Russian and British wounded soldiers were left lying on the battlefield for three or four days. How many died there?! How many could have been saved if there had been timely help and the necessary means... Those who are guilty of that war should have been invited there, to those dressing stations, in order that their hearts might be filled with a peaceful spirit or accord'.

Table 2. Ladies in chief of the Community of the Cross

Mrs Alexandra Stakhovich	November 1884-January 1885
Mrs Ekaterina Khitrovo	January 1885-February 1885
Mrs Ekaterina Bakunina	February 1885-1860

Source material

Please note that all the below are Russian publications. If further reference details are required, Professor Sorokina's original manuscript is available on request to the Publications Department at the Royal College of Physicians.

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