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INTRODUCTION

NURSING IN THE GREAT WAR: THE RUSSIAN EXPERIENCE

The Great War is salient in the history of warfare in a number of ways, including how women experienced the war. The pervasive nature of the hostilities generated an extraordinary degree of female involvement. Most notably, women were affected by and became involved in war on a level never before encountered in history. Russia's women, like those of many of the other belligerents, participated in the war effort on a mass scale, working in various capacities both at the front and in the rear. They joined numerous voluntary organizations created to meet wartime needs. Most of these women were not attached to the army but worked through civilian governmental and nongovernmental organizations such as the Union of Zemstvos and Union of Towns (organizations of local government bodies that provided a variety of services) and the Russian Society of the Red Cross. Women's groups around the country organized committees dedicated to "women's war work." The major women's organizations engaged in a variety of war-related endeavors, from military supply to caring for war victims, refugees, orphans, and prisoners of war. Thousands more women volunteered their time, energy, and resources in activities such as sewing soldiers' clothing and linens, cutting bandages, making care packages for troops, staffing travelers' aid stations for soldiers in transit, and working in shelters, soup kitchens, orphanages, and other facilities for the homeless and disabled. Women also performed a number of vital auxiliary services for the Russian armed forces. Peasant women were recruited to dig trenches for the troops. Women worked as

cooks, supply clerks, drivers, and scouts both behind the lines and in the advanced positions. Some women even managed to participate in combat.¹

Although women engaged in a variety of wartime activities, the most popular form of female service was nursing. The female nurse has been a fixture in modern warfare since Florence Nightingale made her famous entry into medical service during the Crimean War in the mid-nineteenth century, appearing frequently as a secondary player in war narratives dominated by male combat activities. While she was never the star, the nurse's supporting role was nonetheless essential to the military machines conducting the wars. Indeed, the participation of women in wartime nursing had become a standard feature of Western conflicts by the end of the nineteenth century. And while Nightingale became an international celebrity, the Russians quietly contributed hundreds of women to its military hospitals during the Crimean conflict, who engaged in service provision in more dangerous areas very close to the fighting, establishing an important precedent for the use of women in future conflicts.

During World War I the number of female nurses expanded exponentially, to match the scope and scale of the hostilities. All of the nations that engaged in the conflict mobilized large numbers of women to undertake medical care during the Great War, and Russia was no exception. There the wartime nurse became a figure of national prominence, the female equivalent of the patriotic male soldier, dedicated to the causes of tsar and fatherland. Engagement in wartime medical service was seen as an appropriate activity for women from every walk of life, from the empress herself and her daughters to the simplest peasant. In Russia women's participation in medical service came primarily through the auspices of civilian organizations mobilized to augment military medical services, which were woefully inadequate and needed extensive assistance to treat the millions of wounded and ill soldiers that resulted from the conflict. Without women's participation in medical services, the nation would have been unable to execute the war. Nurses also served Russia's civilian population, as the war precipitated a series of public health crises: epidemic diseases spread quickly through the war zone and the home front, millions became homeless refugees facing starvation and illness, and thousands of children lost their parents. By 1917 the number of women serving as "sisters of mercy," as Russian nurses were called, exceeded thirty thousand.² In fact, nurses carried out much

of the medical care during the war, outnumbering doctors more three to one. These numbers are only exceeded by those of combat medics and orderlies, which approached sixty thousand, but whose medical training significantly lagged behind that of nurses. Therefore, much of the medical aid provided to both the Russian military and its civilian population was carried out by women.³

Despite the vital contributions of these women to the war effort, they have largely been overlooked by the historical record. Partially to blame is the traditional perception of war and military activity as male preserves. Indeed, it has been argued that “the defining characteristic of war is its masculinity.”⁴ More specifically, after the conclusion of World War I, the construction of a “myth of the war experience”⁵ celebrated male achievements in what was seen as a specifically masculine endeavor to the great neglect of female participation. Over the past several decades, however, scholars of women and gender have worked to demonstrate the importance of women to war and of war to women. In particular, the wartime activities of Western women have received serious scholarly attention.⁶ The same cannot be said with regard to Russian participation, which has often been overlooked in favor of that on the western front. The problematic nature of the war in relation to the Russian Revolution, which brought to power a communist regime that could not celebrate the heroes of a “bourgeois imperialist” war, adds to the limited number of studies of Russia during World War I.⁷ In the words of Jane Marcus, this “historical repression of the Eastern Front in favor of the story of Western Europe in histories of the war” has meant that “the Eastern Front is the female ‘other’ of World War I.”⁸ The combination of female subject matter and the geographic location of that subject matter in Eastern Europe have increased the scholarly isolation of Russian women’s participation in World War I.⁹ Once again, Russian wartime nurses were upstaged by their Western counterparts; the writings of British World War I nurse Vera Brittain are widely known, but few know the stories of Russian sisters of mercy. Even works that specifically investigate medical service in Russia during this period overlook nurses.¹⁰ Although a number of publications have recently emerged in Russia that focus on sisters of mercy in general,¹¹ to date, there are no in-depth studies devoted exclusively to the phenomenon of Russian wartime nursing during the Great War.

To redress this neglect, this work presents an analysis of women’s wartime nursing experiences during the First World War in Russia. Focusing on the stories of Russia’s sisters of mercy of the Great War, it

establishes their relevance not only to the war narrative but also to a number of issues of historical development, including gender, nationalism, liberalism, feminism, and war. Specifically, this study investigates the motivations that spurred women to join the war effort as nurses; the nature and specific aspects of their service; the multiple structural and cultural factors that acted as determinants of experience; the relationship of women's medical services to the tsarist government, the military, and the civilian organizations responsible for wartime medical care; the interaction between nurses and the men for whom they cared and with whom they served; the ways that wartime nurses were perceived in popular imagination; and the international context of Russian women's wartime nursing service of the Great War. What is revealed through an investigation of these experiences is often striking, composed of heretofore untold and compelling stories, filled with danger and deprivation, excitement and opportunity, sorrow and trauma, scandal and controversy.

This book deliberately focuses on experience, treating the war period as a major transformative moment in Russia's development with intrinsic historical relevance, instead of as a prelude to or explanation for successive events, specifically the revolutions of 1917. This is especially significant considering the impact of the war in Russia during the war period itself, which was often more devastating and destructive than in other belligerents. Considering that the majority of the fighting was done on the eastern front, the majority of casualties, the most material damage, greatest dislocation of population, and largest and most deadly spread of epidemic diseases occurred there as well. Thus, while it does grapple with important questions such as why and how Russia was hindered in the provision of efficacious medical service and how this affected the war effort, the book does not approach these questions as an attempt to provide answers to larger inquiries that have dominated many historical studies of the war, specifically, that seek to use the war and Russia's failures therein to explain the 1917 revolutions. This is not to say that these are not worthy investigations, but they are different kinds of inquiries, and they often take as their departure point the assumption that the outcomes of tsarist collapse, and even the Bolshevik Revolution, were inevitable. As a result, aspects of the war that do not appear directly as causation factors are overlooked, creating a somewhat myopic view and failing to account for the ways that people actually experienced the war, people who did not have any knowledge of what the final outcome would

be. My attempt, therefore, is to present a study of war experiences as products of the war and of the particular historical context in which they were produced.

This work also presents an opportunity to add Russian voices to the literature on nursing and World War I, while highlighting the distinctiveness of Russian war experiences. Although it shared many features of women's medical service in other nations, and Russian sisters of mercy often reacted to wartime experiences in ways that were similar to their Western counterparts, Russian nursing during this conflict was profoundly different. Indeed, the entire Russian war experience diverges considerably from the conventional wisdom about the war shaped by the western front. Specifically, in contrast to the oft-stagnant warfare of the western front, with large stretches of immovable trenches and a fairly stable connected system of auxiliary support services, the war on the eastern front was very different. There, combat, and indeed nearly all related war activity, was highly mobile and it was often impossible to draw clear distinctions between "front" and "rear." The inadequacy of the static model of the First World War based on the western experience has been challenged by scholars of the eastern front in an attempt to demonstrate the vastly differently kind of war fought in Russia.¹² This corrective needs to be applied to the picture of wartime nursing as well. Officially, female medical personnel of the Russian Red Cross and its subordinate organizations were supposed to remain three to four miles from the actual fighting, as in Western nations. Such procedural regulations were completely impractical on the Russian front and thus rarely followed. It was necessary for many nurses to serve directly in the battle zones, in mobile dressing stations, ambulatory transport units, and flying columns (*letuchky*), described by nursing scholar Christine Hallett as "mobile hospitals housed in makeshift accommodation or tents, carried on cumbersome wooden horsedrawn wagons, but often moving almost as rapidly as an army."¹³ Thus, while most Western nurses were assigned to stationary hospitals located at a considerable distance from the battlefields, many Russian nurses served very close to the fighting and were subject to conditions similar to those of combatants. Although Russian sisters who served in rear facilities are not ignored, the focus of this study is on the experiences of frontline nurses. Moreover, Russian nursing should be differentiated from Western nursing in places such as Great Britain and the United States, in that it was not professionalized.

Rather, it remained a charitable and quasi-religious activity, characteristics that worked to shape Russian nursing experience throughout the war period.

The study of women's wartime nursing in Russia during the Great War is salient to a number of significant aspects of historical development and contributes to our understanding of the nature of war, gender, and Russian history in general. Perhaps most importantly, because both armed conflict and nursing are perceived as distinctly gendered activities, this study indicates much about the relationship between women and war and the dynamism of ideas about gender. Scholars have long considered the gendered implications of the Great War to be of primary importance. The debate over the impact of the war on gender roles covers a range of arguments, from an emancipatory experience for women to one that solidified the sexual division of labor and restored patriarchy.¹⁴ This work seeks to demonstrate the extent to which it is necessary to, in the words of Billie Melman, "take stock of the mutations in the borderlines of femininities and masculinities."¹⁵ Wartime nursing moved women beyond conventional gender conceptions into nebulous and even distinctly male realms, revealing porosity in the sexual divisions of labor. As sisters of mercy, women took on roles considerably more active than the passive binding of men's wounds. The red crosses they wore on their uniforms did not shield them from deprivations, danger, and even death. They experienced extreme cold, constant fatigue, infectious diseases, deadly artillery fire, and aerial bombardment. They took on public leadership roles, often in command of men. They came into contact with aspects of life considered inappropriate for women. In many ways, the experiences of female medical personnel share much with those of male combat personnel. Simultaneously, although wartime nursing was promoted as an appropriate service for women, predicated on notions of women's natural capacity for caring and nurturing, nurses' experiences reveal that such conventions were not always applicable, welcome, useful, or even possible within the context of frontline medical service. Thus, the experiences of sisters of mercy challenge the perception of nursing as a uniquely feminine endeavor shaped by essentialist notions. This, combined with their experiences at the front that mirror those of male soldiers, points to the shared humanity of the effects of war and indicate the fallacy of understanding the war as a primarily masculine experience and one defined by combat.

Such commonalities, however, should not lead to the assumption of a uniform “myth of the female war experience” that ascribes a single model to women’s wartime experiences. Rather, as this study seeks to demonstrate, factors such as class and social status, nationality, political ideology, and religion worked as determinants of wartime nursing experience, revealing significant differences in the ways women and war intersected and interacted. The stratified nature of Russian society, with clear divisions between the dominant and subordinate, the privileged and nonprivileged, was reflected among nursing staff. Yet wartime nursing also demonstrates the extent to which imperial social structures were in flux, allowing greater interaction between those of different social strata and identities, and how nursing worked to influence such flexibility.

While the exigencies of war may have allowed, even obligated, women to act in ways outside of normative femininity and appropriate roles for their sex, class, and social status, such behavior was not always welcomed, even temporarily, much less as a permanent feature of Russian society. Particularly, the operation of women in the very public, very male sphere of war was problematic for many, raising anxieties and tensions that were borne out in negative associations that would plague Russia’s sisters of mercy throughout the war. Ultimately, gendered dichotomies and associations were not completely subverted, nor were imperial social structures and cultural values overturned during the war. Indeed, the constraints of those factors seriously hindered efficacious service provision and contributed to Russia’s colossal problems in successful waging of the war. At the same time, the war offered new opportunities for action for women. Russia’s wartime nurses are thus exemplars of that nation’s larger struggle with modernity and indicate a central paradox of female wartime service, one in which the full participation of citizenry, including women, was required but not necessarily desired, and which caused considerable concern by demonstrating the extent to which conventional gender assumptions, social structures, and cultural norms had become unhinged.

SOURCES OF EXPERIENCE

In order to highlight experience, the sources consulted in this work consist largely of the writings of the women who served as sisters of mercy

themselves, as well as those who observed and commented on their activities, recorded in memoirs, diaries, reminiscences, and contemporary periodicals. The focus on experience dictates that the voices of the women who served as nurses themselves feature prominently. They are essential for describing their motivations for enlisting, the context and conditions of their service, the activities in which they engaged, their reactions to the war, their relationships with one another, and their interactions with the men for whom they cared and with whom they served. These records vary considerably, as indicated previously, and are dependent on a number of factors. They also, like all historical sources, suffer from some serious limitations and problems. Perhaps most importantly, they are not sufficiently representative of the diverse population that served as nurses. Despite the presence of women from a variety of social backgrounds in wartime nursing, because enlistment in the Red Cross was limited predominantly to literate women, most wartime nurses came from the educated classes. Therefore, the vast majority of their own recorded evidence about them comes from writing either by or about the women of Russia's upper and middle strata, and primarily from ethnic Russians. Not only does this apply to memoirs and other personal recollections, but also to periodicals. During the war, a number of published accounts of women's nursing experiences appeared in Russia and were generally integrated into official efforts to promote the war effort. The prowar journals of the period often featured stories about women serving as nurses. Yet these publications had a tendency to focus on the experiences of more prominent individuals and members of the elite. This does not mean, however, that their reflections or experiences were uniform. In fact, one discerns significant differences between those from well-connected aristocratic backgrounds as compared to those of the nonprivileged sectors and even the lower gentry. We are also fortunate to have a few examples from citizens of other nations who served in Russia, providing different perspectives.

Time and place of publication are also significant factors. Many of the records were produced during the war itself and published in Russia, which means they had been passed successfully through government censorship. Therefore, these sources tend to be very prowar, even propagandistic, and often formulaic. Names of individuals, places, and other information were often removed, ostensibly for reasons of military security. Moreover, nurses' writings published as wartime propaganda tended to focus on the men they cared for, rather than on their own experiences.

This makes them useful in providing information about nurses' interactions with and impressions of the men with whom they came into contact during the war. But they also omit many things, particularly negative portrayals of nurses or soldiers, or criticism of the war effort. Russian troops are uniformly strong, patriotic, stoic, and kindhearted, if at times simple and childlike. Officers are brave and chivalrous. Nurses are compassionate, dedicated, and competent, but the stories, in many cases, do not feature their experiences as much as they concentrated on the real "heroes," the men in combat.

The written sources on Russian wartime nurses are further delimited by the revolutions of 1917. After the war, unlike in Western nations, the publication of war reminiscences fell off sharply, as a result of the new Soviet government's stance against the "imperialist" war, which was not something to be celebrated in public memory. During the Soviet period, few postwar accounts of World War I nurses were published in Russia; rather, the majority appeared among the Russian community in emigration, which created its own "myth of war experience."¹⁶ Politically, this made a difference, as the émigré population was generally anti-Bolshevik, some even decidedly pro-tsarist. Some memories were recorded long after the fact, often by women who left Russia following the revolution and reminisced from abroad. Undoubtedly, the distance (both chronologic and geographic) from the event led to inaccuracies, omissions, and embellishments in the accounts. Moreover, some were kept as private records, never intended for public consumption, and were only published after the participant had passed away or was advanced in age. Some, in fact, were never published, retained in archival collections.

In addition to these firsthand accounts, this study also makes use of contemporary writings and images, particularly those found in periodicals published during the war, in an attempt to analyze the ways that sisters of mercy were conceived in the public imagination. Of primary importance are the numerous "illustrated" journals that carried photographs, artistic representations, stories, poetry, and other images of nurses. Other sources also contained representations of nurses, which reflected the opinions of members of Russian society about these women and thus entered the public discourse. Additionally, many other printed visual images of nurses, including those presented in posters, postcards, and *lubki* (illustrated broadsides), were produced as part of Russia's patriotic culture of the war, both those that reflected officially sanctioned views of nurses as well as those that were more controversial. These, too,

must be used with some care, as they reflect cultural attitudes and particular notions about gender and sexuality that did not necessarily reflect reality or have significant impact on nursing experience.

Despite such shortcomings, which require the use of scholarly caution, these sources are valuable as reflections of the experiences of women in medical service. In combination with critical analysis, to set these subjective experiences firmly within the historical context, this study also includes an examination of archival records concerning medical service during the war. These include the unpublished and published documents of the agencies that engaged in medical service provision during the war, primarily the Russian Society of the Red Cross and other organizations such as the Union of Zemstvos and the Union of Towns. These documents serve to corroborate some of the things written by the nurses themselves, disprove others, and reveal aspects that the individuals were unaware of, while providing a larger backdrop for their activities and allowing us to view their experiences as part of the general effort to conduct the war.

This book is arranged thematically, divided into eight chapters, plus an introduction and conclusion. Each chapter begins with a short vignette from the story of a nurse who served in Russia during the Great War, then moves to analyze specific aspects of wartime nursing. Chapter 1 establishes the context of Russian wartime nursing before the Great War, elaborating on the structural development of the activity from the mid-nineteenth century through the period immediately preceding the outbreak of World War I in 1914. Ideas about gender had decisive influence on the early development of wartime nursing, both in its promotion and opposition.

Chapter 2 describes the structural history of wartime nursing during World War I, examining the specific ways that women's medical service was mobilized, organized, and administered. The chapter is based primarily on the published and unpublished documents and records of the various Russian agencies, organizations, and individuals that engaged in or supervised medical services during World War I. This chapter also examines the way that structural features affected the actual provision of service and details the myriad problems faced by the Russian authorities in attempting to treat millions of soldiers and civilians during the war. Again, gender was a primary factor in shaping the mobilization and

organization of nursing service during the war, and it comes to the fore in the ways that women's medical service was conceived and implemented, in the ways authorities attempted to administer and control it, and ultimately, as an obstacle in effective service provision.

The next three chapters focus on the wartime nursing experiences of the women who engaged in this kind of service. Chapter 3 establishes who these women were, their social and economic backgrounds, their levels of education, their motivations for enlisting as nurses, and their expectations about wartime nursing. It then examines the experiences of these women as influenced by specific structural factors that were significant determinants, including class and social status, nationality, and religion. In so doing, it indicates the subjectivity of nursing experience while establishing the importance of shared structural factors, and it clearly demonstrates the inadequacy of a single model of female wartime experience. Ultimately, such an examination reveals that while wartime nurses continued to be shaped and constrained by the persistence of traditional structures of identity that could not be transcended even in the chaotic upheaval of the war, their actions worked to affect change on those very structures, as the war increased mobility, flexibility, and opportunity, giving women the chance to engage in activities and behaviors that were not usually possible under peacetime conditions in Russian imperial space.

Chapter 4 demonstrates the ways that the experiences of women's wartime nursing belies the masculine "myth of war" by examining the similarities between women's medical service in the war and male combat (and medical) service. It also reveals the blurring of boundaries between conceptions of masculinity and femininity and the contravention of conventional notions of womanhood associated with nursing by examining the ways in which women, as wartime nurses, engaged in nontraditional behaviors and activities. Moving this argument beyond corporeal experience into the realm of the psychological impact of the war, chapter 5 offers additional insights about the porosity of gendered divisions in discussing the limitations of women's emotional and psychological value as wartime nurses in the brutal context of modern warfare, and further demonstrates the close connections between female nursing and male combat experiences. These chapters rely primarily on the records left by the nurses themselves (which are less numerous and more difficult to locate than those of nurses who served with Western nations), using their own voices but analyzing them within the context of the war and

early twentieth-century Russian society. While recognizing the limitations and problems associated with such sources (lack of complete information, generalization, bias, intent, exaggeration, and time elapsed since the events, among others), these chapters attempt to examine the experiences, as the subjects' histories, in the context of both the historical circumstances of the war and the subjects' own understandings of what they experienced.

The intersections and interactions between female nursing personnel and the men with whom they came into contact during their wartime medical service are the focus of chapter 6. An examination of the writings of both men and women reveals the multiple ways that nurses constructed perceptions of the soldiers, officers, doctors, male nurses, and orderlies they encountered daily. The chapter similarly explores relationships between nurses and their patients, and between nurses and the male medical personnel who served with them. Additionally, the multiple ways in which men viewed and imagined nurses are analyzed, as well as the expressions of the explicit and implicit understandings of the nature and function of wartime nursing and women's roles within war.

Focusing on cultural representations of wartime nurses, chapters 7 and 8 examine the impact of their activities on those that observed and places them within the cultural context in which they were operating. In investigating how nurses were imagined in Russian society, these chapters look primarily at the cultural meanings of wartime nurses as expressed through the images and discourse that appeared in various media during the war. These include the prolific textual and visual representations of wartime nurses, which appeared in contemporary periodicals, brochures, posters, postcards, cartoons and caricatures, paintings, films, and *lubki*. Such an investigation reveals the complexities of such representations, which do not fit neatly into traditional ideas about the ways nurses were imagined, that is, as passive sources of comfort to wounded men. Chapter 7 focuses on the positive representations, largely expressed through official publications and other sources meant for public consumption, often with a clearly prowar intent. Chapter 8 explores the negative ways that sisters of mercy were imagined during the war, examining the "bad" nurses, those that were perceived as self-aggrandizing or dissolute women using wartime nursing for personal gain. These were not the images that appeared in sources of patriotic culture; rather, they were presented through rumor, speculation, and sources meant for private rather than public consumption. In so doing, the chapter attempts

to explain the creation and dissemination of such portrayals within the context of the war, class and social structure, and gendered assumptions.

The conclusion summarizes the development of Russian wartime nursing after the fall of tsarism in 1917. It offers some ideas about the meaning of Russian wartime nursing during World War I and the extent to which it established precedents for the future use of women in military medical capacities. Indeed, no serious attempt to wage war in the years following the Great War would be considered *without* the extensive participation of women.

All translations from Russian that appear in this text are my own, unless otherwise noted. In transliterating names from the original Russian, I have used the standard Library of Congress system, with the exception of conventionally Anglicized names of prominent figures such as Tsar Nicholas (instead of Tsar Nikolai). Names of personages are provided in as complete a form as I was able to locate, but contemporary reports often failed to include names of persons (particularly first names) and places or to give precise (or any) dates, and they frequently neglected to identify military units, often for reasons of wartime security. Thus, where only first initials or last names are provided in the text, it is because the full names were unavailable. Since nearly all the action described in this work took place prior to 1918, dates are given according to the Julian (Old Style) calendar that was in use in Russia during this period, which lagged thirteen days behind the Gregorian calendar used in the West. The various fronts referred to in the text are on what the Western powers labeled the eastern front, but in Russia they were designated the northern, western, southwestern, and Romanian fronts, stretching from Riga to the Black Sea. Geographical locations are given according to their contemporary Russian names, with more prominent places in formerly Russian-held areas followed in parentheses by their current, linguistically appropriate names, when these are known.

