

"A ministering angel with the heart of a woman and the manners of a lady": images and wartime daily life of women in the memoirs of female participants in the Crimean War (1853–1856)

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Abstract.

Purpose. The study aims to reconstruct female images in wartime conditions. The authors do not intend to analyse the course of military operations or the state of military medicine of that time. The scientific interest is focused on the socio-cultural reactions of society to the participation of women in the conflict, their subjective perception of the war, and psychological reactions to stressful situations. **Methodology.** The methodological framework is built at the intersection of historical anthropology, gender studies, and new cultural history. This approach allows for a departure from the traditional description of war as a sequence of battles and focuses on the subjective experience of the individual. **Scientific novelty.** Based on the analysis of ego-documents (memoirs, letters, diaries), the socio-cultural images and the specifics of the wartime everyday life of women participating in the Crimean War (1853–1856) are explored. Through the lens of new cultural history and historical anthropology, the experiences of representatives of various national and social groups are reconstructed: from the British aristocrat Florence Nightingale and the Jamaican entrepreneur Mary Seacole to Irish nuns and Russian Sisters of Mercy of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross Community. **Conclusions.** The study identifies and classifies three fundamental models of female participation in the conflict: state-reformist, professional-religious, and private-entrepreneurial. Special attention is paid to the process of destigmatisation of women's medical work and the role of the contemporary press (in particular, *The Times* newspaper) in the formation of a new "heroic myth" of the woman-saviour. A comparative analysis of the participants' motivations revealed an ideological dichotomy between the principles of universal Christian humanism on the side of the coalition and the concept of imperial patriotism on the side of the Russian Empire. It is proven that the Crimean War became a turning point in the destruction of patriarchal stereotypes regarding the exclusively masculine nature of war and laid the foundation for the professionalisation of nursing and further gender emancipation.

Keywords: Crimean War, Florence Nightingale, Mary Seacole, ego-documents, Sisters of Mercy, historical anthropology, wartime everyday life, professionalisation of medicine, gender identity.

«Ангел-служитель із серцем жінки та манерами леді»: образи та воєнне повсякдення жінок у спогадах учасниць Кримської війни (1853–1856)

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Анотація.

Мета дослідження полягає у реконструкції жіночих образів у воєнних умовах. Автори не ставлять за мету аналіз перебігу бойових дій чи стану тогочасної військової медицини. Науковий інтерес зосереджений на соціокультурних реакціях суспільства на участь жінок у конфлікті, їхньому суб'єктивному сприйнятті війни та психологічних реакціях на стресові ситуації. **Методологічна основа** вибудована на перетині історичної антропології, гендерних студій і нової культурної історії. Такий підхід дозволяє відійти від традиційного опису війни як послідовності битв і зосередитися на суб'єктивному досвіді особистості. **Наукова новизна** полягає у тому, що на основі аналізу еґо-документів (мемуарів, листів, щоденників) досліджено соціокультурні образи та специфіку воєнного повсякдення жінок-учасниць Кримської війни (1853–1856). Крізь призму методології «нової культурної історії» та історичної антропології реконструйовано досвід представниць різних національних та соціальних груп: від британської аристократки Флоренс Найтінґейл та ямайської підприємниці Мері Сікол до ірландських черниць та російських сестер милосердя Хрестовоздвиженської общини. **Висновки.** У процесі дослідження виявлено і класифіковано три засадничі моделі жіночої участі у конфлікті: державно-реформаторську, професійно-релігійну та приватно-підприємницьку. Особливу увагу приділено процесу дестигматизації медичної праці жінки та ролі тогочасної преси (зокрема газети «The Times») у формуванні нового «героїчного міфу» жінки-рятівниці. У ході дослідження проведено компаративний аналіз мотивації учасниць, що дозволило зафіксувати ідеологічну дихотомію між засадами універсального християнського гуманізму на боці коаліції та концептом імперського патріотизму на боці Російської імперії. Доведено, що Кримська війна стала поворотним моментом у руйнуванні патріархальних стереотипів про виключно маскулінний характер війни та заклала підґрунтя для професіоналізації медсестринства й подальшої гендерної емансипації.

Ключові слова: Кримська війна, Флоренс Найтінґейл, Мері Сікол, еґо-документи, сестри милосердя, історична антропологія, воєнне повсякдення, професіоналізація медицини, гендерна ідентичність.

Research problem. The introductory section of your article is exceptionally well-written. It establishes a strong conceptual framework, seamlessly connecting contemporary military gender dynamics with the foundational historical context of the Crimean War.

Here is the refined text, polished for flow, stylistic precision, and academic tone while preserving your original content and formatting.

In historical research, armed conflicts have for centuries been viewed as an exclusively masculine sphere, in which women played only secondary or supporting roles. However, the experience of modern wars shows that the role of women has undergone a significant transformation, moving beyond established historiographical stereotypes. In particular, following the start of the full-scale invasion in 2022, tens of thousands of women joined the ranks of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. In today's world, women carry out a wide range of both civilian and military functions, directly influencing the future of the nation and the state.

In the broader history of warfare, one of the earliest precedents for women's direct involvement in providing medical care for wounded combatants was the Crimean War (1853–1856). In this conflict, the Russian Empire faced a coalition comprising the Ottoman Empire, Great Britain, France, and the Kingdom of Sardinia, with the Crimean Peninsula becoming the primary theatre of military operations.

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This conflict brought together women from diverse social and national backgrounds: the British aristocrat Florence Nightingale, the Irish nun Mary Aloysius, and the Jamaican entrepreneur Mary Seacole. The latter recorded her experiences in the first autobiography in British history published by a non-white woman (Seacole, 1857). Their paths crossed in the hospitals of Scutari and Balaklava. Meanwhile, on the opposite side of the front line, Katerina Bakunina, Alexandra Krupskaya, and dozens of other women carried out similar life-saving work, driven both by patriotic convictions and a profound sense of compassion.

An analysis of sources and recent research. The study of women's experiences of the Crimean War has evolved from the romanticised accounts of the 19th century to contemporary critical studies. The first researchers to explore the topic were fiction writers, who shaped the enduring cultural image of the “ministering angel”. In particular, Lizzie Alldridge¹ provided a detailed account of Florence Nightingale's life, emphasising her work on the peninsula itself (Alldridge, 1885). Articles on Nightingale were included in the seminal collections by C. Horne and S. Williams, in which she was placed on a par with Queen Victoria (Horne, 1894; Williams, 1885). S. Williams established her status as a symbol of humanity in “the darkest of times” (Williams, 1885, p. 109). In the eyes of her contemporaries, Florence Nightingale came to be regarded as a national symbol of England; her name was placed on a par with Lady Jane Grey, the German astronomer Caroline Lucretia Herschel and the French artist Rosa Bonheur. The cultural canonisation of her image also took place within the poetic tradition, notably through Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem “The Lady with the Lamp”. Nightingale's biography became an integral part of the didactic material in educational publications aimed at fostering Christian virtues². In American public discourse of the time, her authority and social standing were equated with the significance of Abraham Lincoln and other prominent statesmen of the United States.

The current phase of Western historiography is characterised by a shift towards scholarly demythologisation. Mark Bostridge's work, based on family archives, aims to distinguish real historical facts from later legends (Bostridge, 2008). Research by M. R. Paradis, E. M. Hart and M. D. O'Brien reveals the organisational challenges faced not only by English but also by Irish groups of Sisters of Mercy (Paradis, Hart, O'Brien, 2017). Even in popular culture, particularly in Trina Robbins's graphic novel, there remains a sustained interest in this subject (Robbins, 2007).

For a long time, the institutional approach dominated Eastern European discourse. Women's activities were viewed primarily through the prism of the functioning of the Holy Cross Community or the development of field medicine. Images of women often appeared as “elements of a kaleidoscope” within the broader context of events. A rare example of personalisation is the work of Anna Valuyeva-Munt³, who, drawing on memoirs, reconstructed the image of the noblewoman Katerina Bakunina at the front. Contemporary Ukrainian researchers, notably V. Orekhovsky, are studying the activities of the Sisters of Mercy in detail; however, the question of women's subjective perception of the daily realities of war still requires more in-depth examination.

An analysis of the historiography reveals a certain imbalance: whilst the Western tradition tends to exaggerate the roles of individual leaders, the Ukrainian tradition predominantly focuses on describing collective structures without paying sufficient attention to the personal experiences of the participants. This confirms the relevance of our study, which aims to compare the experiences of women on both sides of the front line, drawing on their personal accounts.

The source base for the study consists of first-hand accounts by direct participants in the conflict: the memoirs of Kateryna Bakunina, Mary Aloysius and Mary Seacole, as well as the correspondence of Florence Nightingale. In addition, works by 19th-century fiction writers have been drawn upon, enabling us to trace the transformation of the image of the “Sister of Mercy” in the literary discourse of the time.

The geographical scope of the study covers key locations where military hospitals were established: Sevastopol (the site of Russian troop deployment), as well as Balaklava and Scutari (centres where the forces of the European coalition – Great Britain, France, the Ottoman Empire and the Kingdom of Sardinia – were concentrated). The narratives of both opposing sides attest to the women's shared humanitarian mission: fighting to save the lives of combatants and providing spiritual care to the dying. Although women did not take direct part in combat operations, they often fell victim

¹ Little is known about the author. Miss Lizzie Alldridge had an interest in art, was probably a non-conformist, travelled around Europe and visited Paris.

² See, for example: Forsaith Josephine L. *Lessons from life*. Dayton, O., Press of United brethren publishing house, 1893. 239 p.

³ Anna Petrovna Valuyeva-Munt – a children's author and teacher. She lived in Katerynoslav for a time. There, she ran a Sunday school attached to a two-class school and was an honorary member of the Society for the Care of the Children of Katerynoslav Railway Employees. She is the author of a number of biographies, including those of US presidents such as Washington, Franklin, Lincoln and others.

to the war through epidemics and shelling. The memoirs used are distinctly emotional and subjective in nature, which is valuable for detailing the microhistorical context and illuminating the emotional world of the individual under extreme conditions.

The aim of the study is to reconstruct images of women in wartime. The authors do not set out to analyse the course of military operations or the state of military medicine at the time. The academic focus is on society's sociocultural reactions to women's participation in the conflict, their subjective perception of the war, and their psychological responses to stressful situations.

Research methodology: The methodological framework of the article is built at the intersection of historical anthropology, gender studies and new cultural history. This approach allows us to move away from the traditional description of war as a sequence of battles and to focus on the subjective experience of the individual.

An anthropological approach is used to analyse “everyday life at the front” and to reconstruct the emotional world of women. The focus is not on state institutions, but on the individual in extreme conditions: their fears, reactions to stress (such as artillery fire) and everyday survival strategies.

The gender approach allows us to examine war as a space for the transformation of social roles. It analyses the process of transition from patriarchal stereotypes about “women's auxiliary role” to the formation of a new professional identity as a nurse and a leader.

The microhistory method involves examining a global event (the Crimean War) through the prism of individual life trajectories (F. Nightingale, M. Seacole, K. Bakunina). This allows us to view the “big picture” of history through the “small” destinies of individual participants.

Among specialised historical methods, the hermeneutics of ego-documents plays a leading role, aimed at identifying ideological layers and subjective assessments in memoirs. The comparative method has made it possible to contrast British, Irish and Russian experiences, revealing discrepancies between the coalition's humanistic motivations and Russia's imperial patriotism. The application of the method of scholarly demythologisation helped to distinguish women's actual experiences from later ideological constructs such as the “ministering angel” or “sacred duty”.

Main Body. The participation of women from the European coalition in the Crimean War was an unprecedented phenomenon, within which the life paths of a socially diverse group of women – comprising members of the aristocratic elite, nuns and professional nurses – converged within the shared space of a military hospital. The decisive factor in transforming a private initiative into a large-scale social movement was the press of the time, which, for the first time in history, became a powerful instrument for shaping public opinion and mobilising English society. In particular, “The Times” newspaper regularly published detailed reports from its own correspondents directly from the heart of the action, transforming the military conflict into a humanitarian crisis of national proportions. Every issue of the newspaper was filled with descriptions of the horrors of war and the suffering of the wounded, who were effectively left without proper care, creating a powerful informational and emotional impact on contemporaries. To contemporaries, the situation in the hospitals seemed catastrophic: “The sick were cared for by the sick, and the dying by the dying” (Alldridge, 1885, p. 20). It was these publications that provided the decisive impetus for the personal decisions of the future participants in the mission.

Mary Seacole read in the news about the Battle of Inkerman, where Allied forces were facing a vastly superior Russian army, and the hospitals in Scutari were overflowing. The horrific reality that “hundreds were dying, those whom the Russian bullet and sword had left alive” became a call to action for her (Seacole, 1857, p. 75). An additional incentive was the presence at the front of her acquaintances from the 97th and 48th Regiments, who, in her words, were fighting an “enemy worse than yellow fever or cholera” (Seacole, 1857, p. 74).

Mary Aloysius, referring to the “Reports on the Condition of the Wounded at Alma and Inkerman”, noted that what she had read evoked “horror in humane hearts, and tears in tender hearts” (Mary Aloysius, 1897, pp. 12-13). These reports clearly demonstrated not only a shortage of medical supplies but also a critical need for professional care.

In response to the news coverage, women began actively seeking ways to assist the army, asking themselves the fundamental question: “Can women remain idle in the face of this terrible emergency?”. The response took the form of specific voluntary and organisational initiatives. In particular, the widow of an Irish nobleman, Lady M...F..., hired and financially supported three nannies at her own expense, expressing her willingness to personally escort them to the East (Mary Aloysius, 1897, pp. 12-13).

The analysed material suggests that the Crimean War marked a “breakthrough” for women's agency into the public sphere. Thanks to the press, the war ceased to be merely a “male affair” of strategies and manoeuvres, acquiring a distinct anthropological dimension. Women's response to the challenges of war was not merely an act of charity, but a conscious step towards the professionalisation of care for the wounded and the breaking down of class barriers, which subsequently laid the foundations for the modern nursing system.

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Florence Nightingale came to symbolise a fundamental shift in society's attitude towards nursing, which in the first half of the 19th century was considered such a marginal occupation that “no respectable woman of any rank could engage in it”, whilst for domestic servants, such a career choice was associated exclusively with a “loss of character” (Alldridge, 1885, p. 6).

However, the government mandate for the organisation of medical services, formulated by the Minister of War, Lord Herbert, effectively legitimised this social role, elevating it from the realm of dubious private practice to that of high public service. Nightingale's appeal to the Minister coincided with the implementation of the government's plans for a radical reform of the army's medical provision. In his reply, Lord Herbert emphasised the exceptional nature of her role and his awareness of the scale of the challenges ahead: “As far as I am aware, there is only one person in England capable of organising and managing such a scheme, and I have repeatedly sought to ask you whether you are prepared to make such an attempt. No one knows better than you how difficult it will be to establish a corps of nurses” (Alldridge, 1885, p. 20).

Nightingale's work in Scutari and Balaklava transformed her into a national symbol, an image that sculptors captured in monuments as the “female minister”, whose “clothing is the simple attire of everyday life... In one hand she holds a nurse's night lamp, whilst with the other she shields the patients' eyes from the light... In every line you can see how attentively and wisely, with such clear-headedness and tender femininity, she reflects on what she sees” (Alldridge, 1885, p. 6). Despite considerable difficulties, caused not so much by a shortage of volunteers as by the high professional standards required of candidates, Florence Nightingale managed to assemble an expeditionary corps of 34 nurses. An important aspect of her work was the public legitimisation of financial support for the mission: Nightingale opened a bank account in “Messrs. Coutts” to collect charitable donations. The Times, acting as a media intermediary, noted: “Miss Nightingale does not solicit donations, yet she does not refuse generous offers” (Alldridge, 1885, p. 21). This approach signalled a shift from traditional charity to transparent public funding of humanitarian initiatives.

Representatives of Irish religious communities also joined the mission¹. Due to the critical need for qualified personnel, the British War Office officially appealed for assistance to the Mother Superior of St Joseph's Convent in Kinsale – Mother Mary Frances Bridgeman. Accompanied by her, a group of nuns from Kinsale, Cork, Charleville, Carlow and Dublin travelled to Crimea. The nuns' participation introduced an element of professional religious care into the wartime discourse, drawing on their long experience of service.

At the same time, the organisational structure of the women's relief effort was marked by internal institutional conflicts. F. Bridgman, as the leader of an autonomous group, had a strained relationship with F. Nightingale. The latter initially denied the need to involve the Irish sisters and later attempted to place them under a single administrative centre. This led to a de facto division of spheres of influence: at the end of January 1855, F. Bridgeman, together with ten nurses, moved to the hospital in Kulali, and by October 1855 her community was running the hospital in Balaklava, maintaining administrative independence from Nightingale (Cosgrove, 2023).

News of the dispatch of the corps of nurses to the front spread instantly through the British press, taking on cross-border significance. These publications served as a powerful incentive for noblewomen in the Russian Empire, inspiring them to undertake similar service. An important ideological emphasis in the media of the time was the highlighting of Nightingale's secular status. Readers were informed that she was not a qualified doctor, but was presented as “a young, exceptionally graceful and talented lady – wealthy, with a position in society, who, not emotionally, ‘in a moment of national fervour’, but consciously, decided to help her suffering compatriots” (Alldridge, 1885, p. 22).

Of particular academic interest are the subjective descriptions of key figures of the war, as recorded by their contemporaries. A rather vivid portrait of Florence Nightingale was painted by a contemporary who met her before she left for the front: “Miss Nightingale was then extremely graceful in appearance, tall and slender, very quiet and composed. At first glance, her sincere face seemed cold; but when she began to speak, she became very animated, and her dark eyes shone with a marvelous, star-like radiance” (Alldridge, 1885, pp. 22-23).

An even more romanticised and idealised image emerges in S. Williams' account, who, quoting Turner, elevates Nightingale to the status of a spiritual chosen one: “She is one of those whom God creates for great purposes. You cannot hear her speak a few sentences, or even look at her, without feeling that she is an extraordinary being. Simple, intelligent, kind, full of love and charity, innocent – she is a captivating and perfect woman. She is tall and pale. Her face is extraordinarily beautiful; but best of all is the radiance of her soul, which shines so joyfully in every feature. There is nothing sweeter than her smile. It is like a sunny summer's day; ... Through all her movements breathes that

¹ In 1831, Catherine McOley founded the Sisters of Mercy in Dublin, Ireland.

lofty intellectual serenity which is God's patent on nobility and the true seal of the most illustrious aristocracy – the seal of the mind and the soul!" (Williams, 1885, p. 110).

Such glorification testifies to society's readiness to accept a new role for women, provided it was presented through the prism of exceptional Christian and aristocratic virtues. Ultimately, this idealised image of an "angel" came into direct conflict with the harsh realities of a military hospital.

On 5 November 1854, the very day the Battle of Inkerman took place, a ship carrying the Sisters of Mercy arrived in Scutari. Lizzie Alldridge noted an important visual detail: "their neat black dresses stood in stark contrast to the clothing of the ordinary hospital staff" (Alldridge, 1885, pp. 23-24). This emphasised the distinctiveness and organisation of the women's contingent amidst the chaos. The hospital in Scutari, housed in a Turkish military hospital, proved to be a real ordeal: the two buildings accommodated up to four thousand people, and the wounded lay in the corridors so densely packed that two people could barely pass one another. And all these people were entrusted to the care of Florence Nightingale's nurses (Alldridge, 1885, pp. 23-24).

Despite her position as head nurse, Nightingale shared all the risks associated with the service: in the spring of the following year, she worked at the field hospital in Balaklava, where she contracted "Crimean fever", from which she "nearly died" (Alldridge, 1885, pp. 27-28).

The press, notably "The Times", cemented her mythologised status: "Wherever the disease rages in its most dangerous form ... there is that unsurpassed woman ... She is, without any exaggeration, a 'ministering angel' in these hospitals; and as her slender figure glides quietly down every corridor, the face of every poor sufferer softens with gratitude at the sight of her. When all the medical officers have gone for the night, and silence and darkness descend upon those poor bedridden patients, she can be seen alone, with a small lamp in her hands" (Williams, 1885, p. 117). This image of the "Lady with the Lamp" became not only a poetic metaphor but also a real embodiment of the concept of "moral treatment", which the sculptor later captured in a corresponding monument.

The work of the Irish Sisters of Mercy brought a different emphasis to the overall picture. Mary Eloisius emphasised their discipline and outward asceticism: "F. Nightingale's nurses seem very attentive to their patients and fully deserve the name they bear – Sisters of Mercy. They are dressed from head to toe in the deepest black; even their heads are carefully covered. The only highlight in this sombre attire is a double string of beads hanging from their belts" (Mary Aloysius, 1897, p. 71). She emphasised the importance of experience: "The Sisters of Mercy have a novitiate lasting four and a half years, during which they carry out various works of mercy; so for them, it was nothing new to encounter illness and death" (Mary Aloysius, 1897, p. 53).

This contrasted the nuns with lay women, who often "regretted their lack of experience and relied on us in every difficulty", as many of them "had left luxurious homes and were not at all accustomed to such work; some of them had never seen dead men before" (Mary Aloysius, 1897, p. 53). The nuns' heroism was devoid of unnecessary grandstanding, but came at a high price: in Balaklava, during the cholera epidemic, the community lost Sisters Winifred and Mary Elizabeth, whose graves became symbols of selfless service, for which they sought "no reward, except that which God mercifully promised for what is done even for the least of His children" (Mary Aloysius, 1897, pp. 3-4). The cost of this service was high. In the preface to her memoirs, Aloysius wrote: "The graves of Sisters Winifred and Elizabeth, which still stand on the heights of Balaklava, speak with moving pathos of the nature of their heroism" (Mary Aloysius, 1897, pp. 3-4).

However, Mary Seacole's path proved to be a thorny one, due to bureaucratic refusals and probable racial prejudice. She noted bitterly: "Doubts and suspicions arose in my heart for the first and last time, thank God. Could it be that American prejudices against skin colour had some root here? Did these women refuse to accept my help because my blood flowed beneath skin that was slightly darker than theirs?" (Seacole, 1857, p. 79).

Despite the refusals, M. Seacole demonstrated exceptional initiative by travelling to Crimea at her own expense. Her visit to Scutari and her meeting with F. Nightingale left her with profound reflections on the true cost of war and the suffering of ordinary soldiers. She noted: "One thought would not leave my mind as I walked through those dreadful miles of suffering in that vast hospital. If this is how it is here, what must it be like on the battlefield, where the poor wretches suffer from epidemics or Russian bullets, and must endure hellish days and nights before a woman's hand can dress their wounds" (Seacole, 1857, p. 88). In implementing her own model of care, Seacole seamlessly combined the direct provision of medical care with logistical management, focusing on transporting the wounded from the front line to hospitals as quickly as possible.

For Mary Seacole, this encounter marked a clash between two different paradigms of women's presence in war: the official, state-sanctioned model and the private, voluntary one. She left a perceptive verbal portrait of the head of the nursing corps: "a slender figure, in a nurse's dress; with a pale, gentle and confident face, which rests easily in the palm of one white hand, whilst the other hand supports her elbow, giving her face a sharp, inquisitive expression, and a rather distinctive one"

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(Seacole, 1857, p. 90). This was a meeting of two models of the “female perspective” on war: whilst Nightingale embodied discipline and hierarchy, Seacole embodied flexibility and maximum integration into the harsh realities of frontline life at Balaklava, where she ensured an anthropological closeness to the soldiers' needs.

Seacole's central project was the “British Hotel”, in which she invested considerable funds: “It cost no less than £800. The buildings and grounds covered at least an acre of land and were kept in the best possible condition. The hotel and store were housed in a long iron-framed room with counters, cupboards and shelves...” (Seacole, 1857, p. 114). “In Seacole's shop, one could buy everything – ‘from an anchor to a needle’” (Seacole, 1857, p. 114). This indicates the creation not merely of a hospital, but of a complex social institution that provided a level of comfort atypical for the front line.

The period of the ceasefire opened up a new facet of Seacole's activities – the opportunity to travel across the peninsula and interact with the former enemy. Her excursions to Simferopol and Bakhchisaray provide valuable material for imagology (the study of images of “the other” in culture). A curious incident, in which her companions attempted to present her to the Russians as Queen Victoria or her cousin, illustrates an ironic attitude towards national identity and the use of masquerade as a means of communication in the post-war environment.

However, the conclusion of this story highlights the economic vulnerability of a female entrepreneur in the aftermath of the war. The winding down of the campaign led to the collapse of her business: Seacole was forced to sell her property for a pittance, as “the Russians wanted to get all of it for free and plunder it, which is exactly what happened”. Her return to Britain as a bankrupt, despite her successful activities during the war, highlights the lack of state support for private voluntary initiatives, in contrast to the official Nightingale corps.

The case of Mary Seacole demonstrates that women's roles in the Crimean War extended far beyond that of “ministering”. She represents the model of the “mother-entrepreneur”, who managed to integrate capitalist logic into a humanitarian mission. Her memoirs are a unique first-hand account, documenting not only the medical aspects but also the economics of war, racial prejudices and the complex dynamics of human relationships at the moment of transition from conflict to peace.

An examination of the experiences of women on the other side of the front line – in Sevastopol and Crimea – reveals both typological similarities with European volunteerism and significant differences in ideological and organisational foundations. The process of drawing Russian women into the war was driven by a combination of external informational influences and internal state paternalism.

Just as in Europe, the press served as a powerful catalyst for action, reporting not only on the course of the fighting, but also on the active participation of the Sisters of Mercy from Great Britain and France¹. However, whilst the British movement bore the hallmarks of a civic initiative (“a grassroots movement”), in the Russian Empire the organisation of the women's medical service was strictly centralised and controlled by the state, represented by Grand Duchess Elena Pavlovna.

Alexandra Krupskaya noted that Grand Duchess Elena Pavlovna, having received the Emperor's approval, called upon women of all social classes to undertake medical service, guided by a sense of compassion for the wounded (Krupskaya, 1861, p. 7). This initiative laid the foundations for the establishment of the Holy Cross Community of Sisters of Mercy. Despite high-level patronage, the institutionalisation of women's aid was met with resistance from traditional society. Katerina Bakunina remarked: “At the time, this was quite a novelty, and many were opposed to it” (Bakunina, 1898, p. 132).

The nurses' training had a distinctly military and patriotic character, which included not only intensive courses in surgery, but also the taking of a military oath and prayer services. O. Krupskaya recalled: “On 22 November, we were all gathered, on the Grand Duchess's orders, at the Mikhailovsky Palace, where, after the prayer service, the Grand Duchess outlined our duties to us, encouraged us with her blessing, and we set off” (Krupskaya, 1861, p. 10). In total, the Holy Cross Convent sent 120 sisters to the front.

An analysis of the social composition of the units reveals the empire's attempt to unite the nation around the throne. The core consisted of noblewomen and the intelligentsia, though the idea of “serving the Fatherland” also attracted women from other social strata. K. Bakunina wrote of this social mix: “Among us were some who were quite simple and illiterate, some not particularly well-bred, and some very well-bred. I think there were those who, before joining, had never heard what Sisters of Mercy were or what they were supposed to be, yet everyone knew and remembered the words of the Saviour... And everyone worked, sparing neither their strength nor their health” (Bakunina, 1898, p. 151).

¹ The Sisters (or Daughters) of Mercy of Saint Vincent de Paul served as nannies in the French armed forces on a permanent basis.

The initial scepticism of the military command was absolute. A woman in the theatre of war was perceived as an anomaly or a subject of ridicule. In the obituary for E.P. Kartseva, it was aptly noted: "The very idea of admitting women to the theatre of war provoked not only opposition but also mockery of their future role, and it took a whole year of unceasing heroism, a year of self-sacrificing service to the wounded, for people to finally understand and appreciate how much good the nurses had brought and could bring on the battlefield" (E.P. Kartseva, 1898, p. 899).

Doctors, too, were initially sceptical. O. Krupskaya recalled: "Our doctors initially regarded us with suspicion: it seems they did not expect to find in us capable and useful colleagues for their work, but when they saw not only our eagerness but also some ability to care for the sick – which undoubtedly made their work easier – all mistrust vanished and everyone welcomed us very warmly and hospitably" (Krupskaya, 1861, pp. 17–18).

Of particular interest are the inner motivations of the women of the elite, of whom Katerina Bakunina was a typical representative. Her journey was a transition from "society life", music and balls to the harsh reality of the front line. The outbreak of the war came as a personal shock to her: "I shall never forget that evening when we received the newspapers bearing the news that the French and the British had landed in the Crimea. I could not have imagined that this beautiful corner of our shared homeland could become the theatre of a brutal war (we spent 1849 and the summer of 1850 in Crimea, as my sister had been prescribed sea bathing. How lovely and peaceful it was there!)" (Bakunina, 1898, p. 133).

As in European countries, letters from the front and reports of the horrors in the hospitals became a catalyst for decisions. Bakunina's brother, Alexei, brought a letter describing the situation following the Battle of Alma: "It described all the horrors following the Battle of Alma and the appalling overcrowding in the hospitals with both typhus patients and the wounded. But he knew me well and did not argue; having read the letter, he said: 'But I know you – now you will want to go there even more'" (Bakunina, 1898, p. 135). It is interesting that Bakunina herself acknowledged the motivating influence of the "enemy's" example: "How eagerly we snapped up the newspapers back then; and so, I read that French nurses had gone to military hospitals; then Miss Nightingale went to English hospitals with ladies and nurses. And what about us? Surely we would have nothing? That thought would not leave me" (Bakunina, 1898, p. 134).

The journey to Sevastopol took about six weeks, and unlike the British sisters, who were supported by society, the Russian women were met with ignorance on the part of the local people. Near Kharkiv, they were surrounded by peasants for whom the sisters were a baffling phenomenon: "Our purpose remained unknown to the peasants, so they each began to speculate as to why we were travelling to Sevastopol: some said we were doctors, others that we were going to fight, others that we wished to establish some sort of convent, and so on, and so each of them looked upon us with particular respect" (Krupskaya, 1861, p. 12).

The reality of the hospitals in Simferopol proved to be grim: most of the staff had been struck down by typhus. O. Krupskaya wrote: "To bear such a burden, to achieve our goal and then die in vain suffering – this thought horrified us all" (Krupskaya, 1861, p. 15). Bakunina confirmed: "When I arrived, four nurses had already died; others were recovering, whilst still others were very ill, and the head of this department herself—who was also the leader of the entire community – Alexandra Petrovna Stakhovich, was still confined to bed" (Bakunina, 1898, p. 141).

The behaviour of the women in the combat zone revealed a complex range of psychological reactions – from panic to heroism. O. Krupskaya described their reaction to the cannon fire: "Some of the sisters, in keeping with their feminine nature, began to weep in the face of danger; others, more imbued with a spirit of self-sacrifice, began to persuade them: that once they had resolved to sacrifice themselves, there was no point in weeping for their lives, and that the benefit the sisters could bring must outweigh all their fears" (Krupskaya, 1861, p. 16). There were also instances of nervous breakdowns during artillery barrages, when the sisters would hide under their beds, screaming, "Am I alive? No! A bomb has already blown my head off" (Krupskaya, 1861, pp. 27–28).

The tension gave rise to paranoia about spies and absurd rumours. Bakunina recalled how the sisters were accused of signalling to the enemy through a small window or of intending to flee to the French whilst bathing in the sea (Bakunina, 1898, p. 151). Daily life was a mixture of tragedies and curiosities. A telling example is the story of Paraskeva Ivanovna, an "uneducated woman", who used to go to the bastions, joke with the soldiers and receive paper "medals" from the officers: "Once she came and asked one of the sisters to buy her some silk fabric for a dress... However, the poor woman never managed to show off this dress; shortly afterwards, both her legs were blown off as she was walking to the bastion, and she died instantly" (Bakunina, 1898, p. 169).

There were also comical incidents that served as a kind of psychological relief. K. Bakunina recalled a sister who, during the roar of a shell, sat down on the ground and opened "an umbrella over her head for protection" (Bakunina, 1898, p. 153). O. Krupskaya described the panic caused by a bottle cork popping, which was mistaken for a bomb hitting the building: "To everyone's surprise,

instead of a bomb, they found a cork on the floor, which, due to the pressure of the gas in the bottle, had popped out, hit the window and, bouncing off it, fallen to the floor. As frightening as it was, we couldn't help but laugh" (Krupskaya, 1861, p. 30).

The heroism of the nurses – such as Bakunina's refusal to leave the hospital whilst it was under fire – was recognised even by government officials. However, the price was exorbitant: typhus, cholera and nervous exhaustion were decimating the ranks of the nurses. O. Krupskaya described the losses in detail: "Five of them contracted typhus, and, despite all the efforts of the excellent doctors, two nurses died... Ms. Merkulova subsequently developed encephalitis, and I contracted typhus" (Krupskaya, 1861, pp. 25–26). In reconstructing the tragic life story of Sister Golubtsova as an example of the extraordinary hardships of wartime daily life, Katerina Bakunina emphasised the chain of fatal events that began with the overturned carriage and broken ribs, continued with a debilitating bout of typhus involving several days of unconsciousness, and ultimately culminated in her death from cholera during a summer outbreak in the hospital (Bakunina, 1898, p. 148).

Towards the end of the war, the community was joined by "compassionate widows" and local women – officers' wives and female sailors. A. Valuyeva-Munt emphasised their self-sacrifice: "Under a hail of shells, the officers' wives and ordinary female sailors carried food to the bastions for their husbands and for those lonely soldiers who had no one to look after them. There they tended to the wounded, tearing their own underwear into bandages" (Valuyeva-Munt, 1904, p. 112).

In conclusion, O. Krupskaya frames the women's experiences within the context of imperial ideology, where personal tragedies are overshadowed by the grandeur of the state: "Memories of the hardships of war are painful for many... However, for everyone, these memories are sacred: both our grief and our meagre joy pale before the grand idea of duty to the Fatherland" (Krupskaya, 1861, p. 8).

Conclusions. The analysis thus demonstrates that the Russian model of women's service was deeply integrated into the state system. While in the West the Crimean War provided a powerful impetus for the professionalization of nursing, in the Russian Empire it served as a mechanism for the sacralization of "duty to the Fatherland," where the nurse functioned not only as a medical professional but also as a living symbol of the indomitable imperial spirit. At the same time, the subjective memoirs of those involved deconstruct this official rhetoric, laying bare the fear, the epidemics, and the true anthropological cost of war.

It is worth noting that the declared "emotional and subjective nature" of Russian ego-documents enters into a complex interplay with imperial discourse. A. Krupskaya's grandiloquent statements regarding "sacred memories" and the priority of state duty over personal grief should be viewed not merely as an expression of patriotism, but also as a consequence of ideological pressure and self-censorship. The conditions governing the publication of memoirs—in particular Krupskaya's 1861 work—demanded strict adherence to state doctrine, under which female participation at the front was legitimized solely as a means of reinforcing imperial power. The ideologeme of "sacred duty" served as a mandatory interpretive framework that allowed female authors to integrate into the masculine space of war in the eyes of a conservative society.

The application of a hermeneutic method enables us to "peel away" these ideological layers and reveal the participants' authentic experiences beneath the outward pathos. Despite censorship restrictions, the descriptions of fear, filth, and debilitating illness in these personal narratives deconstruct the official myth, revealing the true horrors of war concealed behind heroic constructs. Thus, the "patriotic rhetoric" of the Russian nurses does not represent a denial of subjectivity, but rather a specific form of its expression under imperial authoritarianism, where personal experience could gain public visibility only by being subsumed into the "common cause" and service to the throne.

To summarise the examination of the various forms of women's participation in the Crimean War, it is useful to categorise them according to key organizational and ideological parameters. This allows us to identify four main models of service that operated on both sides of the front (see Table 1).

A Comparative Analysis of Models of Women's Assistance

Name	Type of Organisation	Training	Motivation
Exaltation of the Holy Cross Community	State-run, centralised	Accelerated training, oaths	Duty to the State
F. Nightingale's Nursing Corps	State-run with public oversight	Nursing and administration	Christian humanism
Sisters of Mercy (Kinsale)	Religious, autonomous	Extended novitiate	Religious calling
Mary Seacole's Model	Private initiative	Practical experience	Personal mission and private enterprise

As we can see, each of the models presented demonstrates a different degree of women's autonomy – ranging from full incorporation into the imperial state apparatus (the Russian Empire) to the creation of an independent humanitarian business project (Mary Seacole).

Based on the analysis of personal documents and the socio-cultural context of the Crimean War (1853–1856), the following conclusions can be drawn: women's presence in the war was not homogeneous and took the form of three fundamental models, each of which had a unique impact on society.

The state-reformist model (F. Nightingale) demonstrated the possibility of synthesising aristocratic status with rigorous administrative management. This enabled nursing to be elevated from a marginalised sphere to the realm of high public service, where women acted not only as practitioners but also as architects of medical logistics.

The professional-religious model (nuns and Sisters of Mercy) demonstrated the advantages of long-term institutional training. Thanks to a systematic “novitiate”, nuns proved to be psychologically more resilient to the anthropological catastrophe of war than lay female volunteers, confirming the need for specialised professional training to work in extreme conditions.

The private-entrepreneurial model (M. Seacole) represented an autonomous female agency. Seacole's case demonstrates that private initiative, combined with business logic, is capable of overcoming systemic racial and social barriers, providing humanitarian aid where the official state apparatus proved sluggish.

The Crimean War served to legitimise women's intellectual and physical labour in the military sphere. Thanks to media support (notably from “The Times”), the stigma attached to caring for the sick was lifted. What had previously been regarded as a sign of “a lack of character” was transformed into a national ethos through the figure of Nightingale. This laid the foundations for the modern system of nursing as an independent profession with its own standards of ethics and professionalism.

An analysis of ego-documents reveals a deep mental chasm between the parties to the conflict. Western discourse (the coalition) centred on the ideas of Christian humanism and charity, aimed at alleviating the suffering of the individual regardless of their status. Russian discourse (the Empire) was based on the sacralisation of “duty to the Fatherland”, where a woman's personal feat was viewed exclusively as a means of legitimising imperial power. This difference in motivation reflects fundamental differences in the understanding of the value of human life and the role of the individual within the state.

The war shattered the stereotype of women as merely passive observers. The image of the “female heroine”, shaped by the media and memoirs, became a new moral benchmark. First-person accounts (by Bakunina, Krupskaya and Eloisius) deconstruct the outward “pathos” of heroisation, laying bare the true cost of everyday wartime life – illness, filth and psychological exhaustion. This testifies to the emergence of a new female identity, combining empathy with rational resolve and a readiness for independent action.

Thus, the Crimean Campaign acted as a catalyst for the definitive deconstruction of the masculine canon of military history, becoming a starting point for a new ethic of solidarity and the recognition of women as full participants in the historical process, whose experiences remain a relevant guide for contemporary challenges.

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