

# Introduction

When in the spring of 1854 British and French troops set off for the East to support the Turks in their war against the Russians, the allies expected the war to be over within three weeks. What came to be known later as the Crimean War lasted until March 1856 and resulted in a horrific bloodletting, a loss of life which would not be exceeded until World War I. The most famous siege of the war was fought in Sevastopol, the great Russian naval base in the Black Sea. Anyone who visits Sevastopol today is immediately struck by the numerous and very beautiful monuments commemorating the heroes of that siege. There is even a monument to the 'drowned ships', as the Russians call the battleships they sank at the entrance to the harbor in order to deny the allied fleet access. The harbor or bay of Sevastopol divides the city into a northern and a southern section. British, French, Turkish, and latterly Piedmont-Sardinian armies eventually captured the south side. The north side however never fell, and there, throughout the bitterly fought siege, the Russians buried 127,583 men who were killed defending the city. The ordinary soldiers lie in mass graves of fifty to a hundred; the officers have individual graves with their names and regiments written on them. It is a sobering sight. It is estimated that another 125,000 Russian soldiers, sailors, and civilians were killed in the long siege. The war was fought in many other places besides the Crimea, and for the whole war it is thought that Russian losses amounted to 500,000–600,000.

The allied losses were huge, but pale beside those of the Russians. There are no figures for the Turkish army but in round figures the French lost 100,000 out of 300,000 men, the British 20,000 out of 100,000, and the Piedmontese, who did not arrive in the Crimea

until May 1855, 2,000 out of 18,000. Unlike the Russian memory of the war as one of brilliant, innovative, and heroic feats of arms, in France and Sardinia the Crimean War was unpopular from the beginning. By contrast, in Constantinople public opinion was eager for war. In Britain, people were keen on war with Russia. Still today, in English-speaking countries, the war is usually remembered as a rather senseless and unnecessary war which the British government stumbled into and the army bungled, most famously in the Charge of the Light Brigade. In popular memory Florence Nightingale's superhuman and successful efforts to improve military nursing were the war's only redeeming features. Indeed the massive blood loss provided many opportunities for improved medical and nursing practice, and, for the purposes of this book, it was the first war in which governments officially employed secular women to provide some of the nursing. It is a curiosity that Nightingale's mission is so well remembered and yet historians of nursing have largely ignored highly successful nursing in other British hospitals where she did not direct the nursing services. There are also no studies of the very different, but equally or even more successful, nursing in the Russian, French, and Piedmontese armies. This book seeks to redress these major omissions in the historiography of the Crimean War.

The way the war began and the way it was conducted had a major impact on how well army medical departments were able to function. The Russians did not expect the invasion to begin until the following summer and therefore their medical department was on a peacetime footing when the first two battles were fought. In Britain there was something to be said for the assessment that the war was senseless and unnecessary. Lord Aberdeen, Prime Minister from December 1852 through January 1855, was anxious to keep the peace and genuinely believed war was avoidable. On the other hand, Lord Palmerston, Home Secretary at the time, was violently anti-Russian and pro-war. He was also a vastly experienced and skillful politician, who understood the need to cultivate the press and how to appeal to the public in simple terms which they could understand. As the press took advantage of an underlying British Russophobia and inflamed it with stories of the horrible conditions under which British soldiers were fighting in the Crimea, Aberdeen lamented, 'An English Minister must please the newspapers. The newspapers are always bawling for

interference. They are bullies and they make the government a bully.’ Lord Clarendon, the British Foreign Secretary in 1854, thought the British were ‘drifting’ into war, and in a sense they were. When war was finally declared, Aberdeen told the Queen that Palmerston, with the support of the press and public opinion, had dragged him into it.<sup>1</sup> The British government habitually, at least until the twentieth century, found itself going into wars for which it had made very little preparation, but the results were not usually as spectacularly disastrous as was the case in the Crimean War. The medical department was ill-equipped to deal with what would be a new kind of war, one in which industrial power and more effective medical and nursing practice would make enormous changes. Adding to its lack of preparedness, the British army had not fought in a European war since 1815. By contrast, the French initially sent troops from Algeria who were hardened veterans of the contemporary colonial wars, and an efficiently functioning medical department. The Piedmontese were badly beaten by the Austrians in their first War for Independence in 1848–49, but nevertheless that war gave their army recent experience which it used well in the Crimea.

The war began ostensibly over religious issues between Russia and Turkey but what was really at stake was what was known as the Eastern Question – the long-standing international problem of the disintegrating Ottoman Empire and how the Great Powers might absorb what remained of it, or in the British case, how to prevent its dismemberment. The Russian long-term goal was clear: free access to the Mediterranean. The Russians had been making steady inroads into Turkey since 1783, when Catherine the Great seized the Crimea, and in two wars in 1806 and 1828 they conquered more Ottoman territory. However, once war broke out in 1853 and the British and French joined forces with the Turks in 1854, the Russians were placed on the defensive. The Suez Canal had not yet been built, and the British felt Russian expansion would threaten important land routes through the Levant to India. They were therefore committed to maintaining the integrity of the Ottoman Empire as a bulwark against the Russian southward push. In July 1853 a Russian army occupied the Danubian principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia (which correspond roughly to Rumania before its expansion after World War I). These provinces were not strictly speaking Ottoman territory, but rather protectorates

of the empire. The Russians claimed they were occupying them temporarily to put pressure on the Sultan to settle the religious issues. In fact the Tsar would have liked to appropriate the principalities as well as part of Bulgaria, and he hoped for control of Constantinople and the Turkish Straits as well. Interestingly, the occupation of the principalities was not the immediate cause of the war. However, it did make war more likely because it was at this point that the French and British put their fleets on a war footing.

After repeated fruitless attempts on the part of the other Great Powers to mediate, on 4 October 1853 the Sultan, pushed by public opinion in Constantinople and by his assumption that the British and French would support him, declared war on Russia. Five months later, in March 1854, Russian troops crossed the Danube into Bulgaria and laid siege to the Turkish fortress of Silistria. Because Bulgaria was real Ottoman territory, not an Ottoman protectorate, on 27 and 28 March 1854 the British and French officially declared war on Russia. The new allies expected the principal scene of action to be the lower Danube and therefore sent troops to Bulgaria to support the Turkish army. But on 22 June 1854, just as British and French troops were landing in Bulgaria, diplomatic pressure forced the Russians to lift the siege of Silistria and evacuate the principalities. The allies were left in Bulgaria with no enemy to fight. With an army and fleet so close to Sevastopol, the British cabinet decided to use this opportunity to destroy Russian naval power in the Black Sea—a political, not a military decision.

The war aims of the Russians and British after April 1854 were clear: both governments were protecting their empires. The French goals were somewhat diffuse. Napoleon III thought an alliance with the British could bring France out of the diplomatic isolation which the 1815 Congress of Vienna settlement had imposed and could re-establish her as a major European diplomatic power. Furthermore, if war did occur, he did not want to lose his share of the spoils as a result of not having participated. He was not interested in power politics in the Black Sea but went along with the British plan of attacking Sevastopol in the hope of winning a glorious military victory which would restore the reputation of the French army in Europe, and might make his much more limited Second Empire look more like Napoleon I's First Empire. Military victory might

also help shore up his not entirely secure throne. The fact that the aims of the two traditional enemies who were now allies were not aligned would make their conduct of the war more difficult. This was compounded by the fact that there was never a unified command: the British and French generals consulted, but the two armies always acted independently.

As well as the Danubian campaign, the Sultan was also fighting the Russians in the Caucasus, the traditional second front in all the Russo-Turkish wars – the Russians had been fighting the mountaineers almost continuously since the time of Peter the Great. A skillful leader of the Caucasian Muslim tribes, an imam named Shamil, emerged in the 1820s and would cause the Russians considerable trouble in 1853 and 1854. Both the British and French governments sent arms and ammunition to the mountaineers. Contemporaries called the Crimean War the Eastern or Russian War – these are really better names, because the Crimean campaign was only one of many. As well as the fighting in the Caucasus, Crimea, Black Sea, and along the Danube as mentioned above, the war was fought in the White Sea, Barents Sea, North Pacific, Baltic Sea, and Sea of Azov. However, it was in the Crimea that the heaviest fighting took place and where nursing came to the forefront. Therefore this book deals primarily with the Crimean campaign.

What do these political, diplomatic, and military events have to do with nursing in the Crimea? A very great deal, and it is the aim of this book to show why and how military affairs, cultural assumptions, and the political and economic structure of each of the five countries involved shaped the beginning of female military nursing and, in the English-speaking world, female nursing in general. There are many excellent histories of the Crimean War and multiple studies of Florence Nightingale, but there is no book on Crimean War nursing as such, and no adequate international investigation of nursing in the five armies. Yet the Crimean War saw the birth of modern nursing in four of those five armies, a significant event in both nursing and military history. The great Russian military surgeon Nikolai Pirogov described the introduction of trained female nurses into his army's medical department as a revolution. He and his surgeons became highly dependent on these women and attributed much of their success to them.

The imperialist aims of four imperial governments and a fifth minor expansionist power were certainly the cause of the war, but imperialism had no impact on the military nurses. Scholars of imperialism, colonialism, and post-colonialism have criticized the 'white man's burden' of the British or the '*mission civilisatrice*' of the French as a rationalization for exploitation and racism in the pursuit of self-interest. This is justified in many instances, and is precisely what the Russian armies fighting contemporaneously in the Caucasus were doing. Aggrandizement and Russification were primary goals there. By contrast, in the case of the nurses in the Crimea, there is nothing to support these historians' interpretation of nurses as agents of empire, imposing economic policies and Western medicine and values on foreign peoples.

Susan Armstrong-Reid has pointed out that recent post-colonial scholars have persuasively contested this binary framework because it fits so poorly with the complex, cross-cultural, humanitarian challenges transnational nurses faced and the way they had to constantly negotiate and contest their professional space.<sup>2</sup> In her most recent work, Armstrong-Reid studied Western nurses who worked side-by-side with Chinese nurses, but in the case of the Crimean War, even if they had wanted to, neither the allied nor the Russian nurses had any opportunity to work with or impose their values on the other armies or Russian civilians. They remained isolated in their own camps and none of the nurses in any of the sources used here ever expressed or even mentioned imperialist aims in any context. Florence Nightingale was disappointed that the allies did not pursue the war further and in later years became rather a jingoist. However, in her enormous correspondence during the war she never expressed any imperial hopes or goals, or any wish to foist British nursing practices or values on the other armies' medical departments. At the same time, like Armstrong-Reid's nurses in China, the Crimean nurses were indeed constantly contesting and negotiating their professional space in terms of class, gender, and nursing knowledge. British nurses struggled against a rigid sense of class which demeaned working-class women and an ideology of separate spheres which dictated an unrealistic role for women; the French army found it difficult to recruit male soldier nurses because nursing was considered a feminine pursuit; Piedmontese nurses had their letters censored because of the Prime

Minister's difficult political situation; a corrupt Ottoman government failed to give Turkish orderlies either the training or the resources they needed to nurse effectively; and, when the war ended, a corrupt medical department stripped the Russian nurses of the powerful position they had succeeded in gaining in military hospitals.

*Beyond Nightingale* treats medicine and nursing as international disciplines, which shared many commonalities in the five armies but followed rather different courses in each. In the following chapters, the book will examine the various historiographical debates regarding the Crimean nurses and the value the armies placed on their contributions. The historiographical arguments are complex, and easier to understand when the reader has some grasp of the events which caused the controversies. Because it takes a transnational perspective, comparing the medical and nursing services of the five armies, this book is divided into three parts. The first studies British nursing, a politically driven nursing service that the government forced on a medical department which did not want female nurses. The second part looks at the religious nursing Sisters in the British, French, and Piedmont-Sardinian armies. The third part is devoted to nursing services which doctors directed in the British navy and in the British and Russian armies. At the end of the war each army's nursing service had developed differently, reflecting its own national culture and political and economic structure. However, whether badly or well organized, smoothly functioning or damaged by political and sectarian infighting, well funded or severely underfunded, or working under almost impossible conditions, in every case – even that of the Turks, who had the least effective medical department – the nurses relieved some of the suffering of the sick and wounded.

### Notes

- 1 Figes, *Crimean War*, pp. 122, 147–50, 159–60; Baumgart, *Crimean War 1853–1856*, pp. 13–16.
- 2 Armstrong-Reid, *China Gadabouts*, pp. 268–9.