

## A WAR OF NATIONS OR GENDERS? A LIFE TO REMEMBER: FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE AND THE CRIMEAN WAR

GÖNÜL BAKAY

Cemiktopuzlu Caddesi. No:75 Göztepe, Göztepe Park Residences İstanbul, Turkey

### ABSTRACT

“—Every historical fact needs to be explained in human terms.”-Leo Tolstoy

In 1853, Tsar Nicholas I stated his views regarding the state of the Ottoman Empire saying: “We have a sick man on our hands, a man gravely ill, it will be a great misfortune if one of these days he slips through our hands especially before the necessary arrangements are made” (14). The same year Russia occupied Danube, Moldavia and Wallachia, the region North of the Danube. On October 5<sup>th</sup>, the Turks declared war against Russia. The Russians were “using explosive shells for the first time in history” (reference 21). The battle of Sinop caused great havoc in British press; which called it “a massacre”. Finally, France and England decided to declare war against Russia on the 28th of March, 1854. Most of the war took place in Crimea, the southern tip of Ukraine. In 1856, both Russia and Ottoman Empire came to an agreement concerning the cessation of all military activity on the Black Sea and thus the war came to an end.

**KEYWORDS:** A Life To Remember: Florence Nightingale and the Crimean War

### INTRODUCTION

During the war, many soldiers died due to the hard conditions of the battlefield; not only from wounds but also from various diseases like typhoid, dysentery, cholera and malaria. The nurses who tried to help and give solace to the soldiers had to fight against both the harsh conditions of the war and against gender discrimination as many conservative minded people resented seeing women near battle sites. Nurses aimed to improve the overall condition of hospitals, a task which was certainly a huge challenge. Against this backdrop, the aim of this paper is to draw attention to the nameless heroes and heroines who contributed immensely to the outcome of the Crimean War with emphasis on the contributions of Florence Nightingale who was a remarkable pioneer in the field of health and nursing.

When an epidemic started in Crimea (1855 year), Florence Nightingale offered her help and arrived at the battlefield with 35 nurses. She found the conditions of the battlefield appalling. There was dirt and gore everywhere. Under these conditions, the wounds did not heal; infections started. Nightingale tried to improve sanitary conditions despite the fact that military doctors did not approve of the improvements and changes proposed by her. Refusing to give up, she published a harsh criticism regarding the state of the military hospitals with the help of the editor of the Times magazine, John Delane. As a result of her struggles, Nightingale was eventually given the chance to improve the sanitary conditions of the hospitals.

Mary Seacole was another heroine of the battlefield. She was an expert in the treatment of the cholera. When she heard that there was a cholera epidemic (in Alma, Balaclava, Sebastopol, 1855 in Ukraine), she offered her help but was refused because of the prejudice against women. Later, Mary offered her help to Florence Nightingale and was once again

refused. However, she was a woman who wouldn't accept defeat. She started a business selling food and drink to the soldiers near the battle field. With the money she earned from this enterprise, she started treating the wounded soldiers right on the battlefield.

Florence Nightingale was the second daughter of Fanny and William Nightingale. In the 1820s, Europe was celebrating the end of the Napoleonic wars and was full of travellers going from one place to another. The Nightingales were likewise traveling around Europe with their daughter, Parthenope. Their second daughter was born in a villa they had rented in Florence and was named after the city: Florence Nightingale. From the start, Florence was an unusual child: obstinate, unhappy and restless. Florence's mother was a reckless and extravagant woman who did not know how to deal with the restlessness of her daughter. As the years went by, Florence's restlessness increased as she was deeply engaged in finding her true purpose in life. The rich, smooth life of Embley was distasteful to her. Like many sensitive children, she escaped into the world of imagination. After much soul searching on her part, she decided on her calling in life: she would devote herself to the caring of the sick.

In a private note dated February 7th, 1837 she wrote that God spoke to her and called her to his service. "It was not an inward revelation. She heard, as Joan of Arc heard, an objective voice, a voice outside herself, speaking to her in Human words" (Smith, 12). Florence's mother, Fanny, was thinking of making some alterations in her home and the Nightingales decided to travel around Europe for eighteen months. From Genoa they moved to Florence, and France and London. The girls were introduced to society in London and embarked on a very active life full of parties, and dinners. In the end, they returned to Embley. Florence was disappointed because God had not spoken to her since. She decided that it must be because she spent her time in society, enjoying parties and balls and had not given a thought to her calling. She decided that if she wanted to hear God's voice once more, she must forget about her "desire to shine in society" (22).

After their return to their home, it took Florence fourteen years to finally devote herself to her vocation of nursing. There were two reasons for this: one was because it had taken Florence five years to decide that her calling was for nursing the sick. The other factor was that she had to convince her family. At first, Fanny and William Nightingale were pleased about the progress of their daughter's interest in caring of the sick and did not realise their daughter's problems, but Florence, once decided was very happy. The family believed that this was a passing phase. At the age of twenty-two she was already becoming a popular figure in the intellectual world. A woman's showing interest outside domestic duties was the reason for her popularity in intellectual circles.

The year 1842 was a difficult year for Europe and especially England. Florence was struck by the misery and suffering she saw around her. By this point in time, she knew that she wasn't interested in comfort and social life. She was deeply moved by the starvation, sickness and poverty observed in England and France. Florence observed in a private note: "My mind is absorbed with the idea of sufferings of man, it besets me behind and before... all that poets sing of the glories of this world seems to me untrue. All the people I see are eaten up with care or poverty or disease" (Smith, 31). Around this time, Florence started to spend more and more time visiting cottages and tending the sick. She wanted to remain in Lea Hurst tending the sick but her mother would not hear of it. Just at that time a friend of Florence's died at childbirth and left behind a daughter. Florence insisted on caring for the child at least for some time but her mother objected. It was high season in London and she wanted her daughter to go to balls and parties but when refused, Florence became ill and in the end her mother had to give in.

Around the year 1844, Florence decided that her calling was caring for the sick in hospitals. In the meantime, she

had received a marriage proposal from Henry Nicholson which she refused. She also took care of her grandmother and her old nurse Mrs. Gale until their deaths and had presided in difficult births. These experiences left her with the idea that one should be trained to be a nurse. Up to that time the only requirement for becoming a nurse was to be a woman, but Florence Nightingale knew that this had to change. Florence had nursed her great aunt in her illness and after that her mother finally agreed to turn her aunt's home into a nursing home. But this wasn't enough for Florence: she went to Germany for training several times and finally became the superintendent of nurses at the institution for the care of sick gentlewomen in distressed circumstances in London.

Several years before going to Scutari barracks Florence Nightingale had witnessed with her own eyes the terrible condition of the nurses: most were drunkards and prostitutes. The conditions they were working under in the hospitals were abominable. There was no hot water and the nurses observed no rules. Miss Nightingale aimed to change all that. It was already five years since she had attempted to enter Salisbury infirmary with no success and she was no longer a young girl but a woman of thirty. She had observed once in 1847: "resignation, I never understood that word" (Smith, 56). Following a period of self-inquiry and an evaluation of her past life, she came to a momentous decision about her life. She had already refused Henry Nicholson's marriage proposal and heard that he was drowned years later. His mother wanted Florence to come to visit her—she wanted to be near the person her son had loved much. In the spring of 1851, she had met Richard Mincton Mills, who had also proposed to her and waited nine years for her final decision. He was quite cool towards her and soon announced his engagement to another. All these events precipitated Florence's desire to take decisive steps. She went to London and from July 13 to August 12, supervised the alterations in the institution (hangi institution bu) she was going to take over. This is how her life as the head of the institution started. There were many problems at the institution: The accounts were in a mess, the wards were dirty and chemists were sending wrong supplies. They were also reluctant to take in Catholic patients. Florence Nightingale changed all that. In 1853, she wrote to W.E.N, "I am now at the hayday of my power" (77).

In March 1854, Britain and France declared war on Russia after Russia invaded areas of Ottoman Empire and the Crimean war started. The British believed that the army which had defeated Napoleon could not be defeated. But things had changed. Already by now, the battle of Waterloo was a faint memory. When the army was leaving for Crimea, there was a confusion about provisions of food, clothing and medicine for the soldiers. The importance of supplies for the health of the soldiers and their success was overlooked. But Crimea was not to be the first step; before that British troops would try to take back Silistre, then belonging to Turks, from Russian soldiers. A base was established in Scutari, (Üsküdar) where British soldiers would be treated. However when a cholera epidemic broke out, Turks had to fight against the siege of Silistria on their own.

The main objective of the war was to destroy the naval base at Sebastopol which was constructed by the Russians. Finally, the English and the French had won the battle of Alma, but all hospital equipment was left behind. There was a cholera epidemic and a thousand cholera cases were sent back to the Scutari barracks. The British public back home had very little knowledge of the sickness and suffering of the soldiers at the hospital in Scutari. The sick and the wounded were carried across the Black Sea on ships hardly equipped to carry the wounded soldiers. It was thanks to the efforts of William Howard Russell of *The Times* that the world found out about the horrors of the hospitals. In several instalments, Russell described the real condition of the hospitals, shortage of nurses, equipment, dressing for the wounds, etc. The times demanded to know "why have we no sisters of charity?" At the end of the year 1852, Sidney Hebert was appointed as the secretary

of War and was seriously upset with what he had read in the Times. He wrote a letter to Florence Nightingale stating that there was a lack of nurses and equipment at Scuderi. Up to that time only male nurses had been admitted to military hospitals.

On November 5<sup>th</sup> 1854, Florence Nightingale came to work at the Barrack hospital with 34 nurses in her company. Winter was approaching and there was a shortage of supplies. The soldiers had been ordered to bring with them knives, forks, spoons and a change of cloths but most of them had left their small bags at the battlefield. Miss Nightingale was told “you will spoil the brutes” and soldiers were described with words such as “animals”, “blackguards”, “scum”. Officers felt no responsibility towards their men. Florence Nightingale’s visit was not welcome by the officers at first. In addition to their troubles, here was a lady coming to interfere with the reorganization of the barracks with demands for clean sheets, towels, dressings and linen for the sick. The men believed that of all government follies this was the worst. Yet they knew that Florence Nightingale had high connections.

Only three months after her arrival, Florence Nightingale implemented groundbreaking changes on the hospital grounds. She had decided that the reason for the destruction of the army was not losses at the battle but sickness. On the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 1854, she wrote a letter to Mr. Herbert saying that a lot of items were missing and asking whether these could be supplied from England. Enclosed in the list were demands for socks, drawers, flannel, shirts, plates, tin drinking cups, bedpens, etc... For many other demands the answer she received was “none in store”. At first, Florence Nightingale waited to receive an answer but when she realized that the conditions on the battle field were getting worse, she came to terms with the fact that she could not wait for outside help. It was January and snow had covered all the hills. It was reported in the *Times* that soldiers were walking in snow with no soles to their shoes. Before landing in Crimea, the soldiers had been ordered to leave their kits, so they lacked clothing and all eating utensils.

Despite all these trials and tribulations, Florence Nightingale never lost for a moment her main ambition in life: that of establishing the importance of women as nurses. Besides fighting with high authorities to obtain various facilities for the hospitals, she also had to fight members of her own gender. Mary Stanley was one of the nurses who became her adversary despite the fact that she was a friend. Although Mary Stanley herself believed in the importance of nursing as a vocation for women, she differed from her friend in certain respects. She was a supporter of the Kaiserwerth plan which advocated for the nurses the job of giving religious comfort to the soldiers. She had converted into Catholicism and encouraged by Cardinal Manning had led a second party of Catholic nurses to Scutari. After her arrival, Florence Nightingale’s authority was challenged.

Still, Florence Nightingale carried on with her mission of reforming the condition of the hospitals and improving the living conditions of wounded soldiers. She introduced radical changes in the hospital grounds and the management. She arranged coffee rooms for the soldiers where they could sit around, talk to each other and read, instead of taking to drink as they formerly used to do. She also arranged a system whereby soldiers could send their money home instead of spending all the money they could spare on drinks. Seeing that a lot of money was coming home from the soldiers, the authorities in England developed a postal system whereby soldiers could easily send money home. “Offices where Money orders could be obtained were opened at İstanbul, Üsküdar, Balaklava and the headquarters of the camp outside Sebastopol, and 71000 pounds sterling was sent home in less than six months” (Smith, 167).

Miss Nightingale called herself the mother of 50000 children. She arranged two recreation rooms for the soldiers to write their letters, and “the library of the British Museum could not have presented a more silent and ordinary

scene”(Woodham –Smith, 167). The arrival of Spring, 1856, saw the opening of four schools with professional schoolmasters running them. The soldiers listening to the lectures were so crowded that doors were taken out of the rooms to allow men to crowd in. Men also arranged a theater for themselves. Football and other games were arranged for the healthy and dominos and chess were popular amongst the sick (167).

Although Florence Nightingale converted the hospital to a modern place, people back home were mostly unaware of the difficulties she was experiencing. The welfare work was succeeding but, on other points she was failing. “The Depot in Barrack hospital had been condemned by the Sanitary Commission and the troops evacuated” (source 168). At that time, cholera broke out and Dr. Mc Gregor was one of the first to die. His successor did not allow nurses to administer medicine and ordered them only to change beds and feed the soldiers. There were also complaints about the nurses. One had been too kind to soldiers, allowing frequent visits from them at night, another got ill while treating the sick soldiers.

Many of the people who occupied governing positions, and who had been largely negligent, inefficient and indifferent, had been either promoted or decorated. This signified to Florence Nightingale the collapse and loss of cause she was fighting for. There were reports against her, criticizing her conduct in Scudery hospital. She was informed of the report against her by Lady Cranworth but refused her plea of seeing the report itself. In March 1856, she wrote: “I am in a state of chronic rage. I who saw the men come down through all that long, long dreadful winter, without any other covering than a dirty blanket and a pair of old regimental trousers, when we knew the stores were bursting with warm clothing, living skeletons devoured by vermin, ulcerated, hopeless, speechless, dying like the Greeks as they wrapped their heads in their blankets and never spoke a word... Can we hear the promotion of the men who caused this colossal calamity, we who saw it? Would that they could speak who died in the puddles of Calamity Bay?” (Woodham-Smith, 170). Miss Nightingale became aware of the report against her through Lady Cranworth. She had also written to the War Office complaining of Sir John Hall’s sending Mother Bridgeman to Balaclava. She needed the support of Sidney Herbert to inform the War Department to know the military and medical authorities in Crimea.

In a letter to Sidney Herbert, she wrote: “The War office gives me tinsel and plenty of praise, which I do not want, and does not give me the real business like efficient standing which I do want... The War Office sent me here. And surely it should not leave me to fight my own battle... If they do not think I have not done my work well, let them recall me. But, if otherwise, let them not leave me to fight for myself, in an ever recurring and exhausting struggle for every inch of the ground secured to me by the original agreement”(172). Sir Herbert answered her stating that it looked as if the new commander in chief, Sir William Codrington, like General Simpson, was unaware of her position. She was invited by Sir John Hall, to bring ten nurses to Land Transport Corps. She accepted this, but did not realize the importance of it. However, before she left she received a dispatch, which would bring her great happiness and establish and reinforce her position once and for all.

Colonel Lefroy had become “the confidential adviser to the Secretary of War on Scientific Matters”. He would report to Lord Panmure about the conditions of the hospitals. He had the greatest admiration for Florence Nightingale. He defended her case with fervour and said that Sir John was jealous of her. A battle started between the supporters of Nightingale and her enemies, resulting with Nightingale’s triumph. A formal note was issued stating that “Miss Nightingale is recognized by her Majesty’s government as the General Superintendent of the Female Nursing Establishment of the military hospitals of the Army. No lady, or sister or nurse, is to be transferred from one hospital to another or introduced

into any hospital without consultation with her” (174). This was a big triumph for her.

Her struggles were almost over, so was the war. In Paris, a peace conference was meeting. The hospital was being evacuated. The last patient left the Barrack hospital on July 16, 1856. After her return from Crimea, “Florence Nightingale never made a public appearance” (183). Many people thought that she was dead. She did not give interviews, accept appointments, she led a quiet and secluded life. But unexpected pleasures were awaiting her. She started to write to experts who knew of the problems in Scutari soon after her return to England. Then she was informed that the Queen wanted to have a private talk with her. The Queen admired her and was very pleased with their interview. However, the Queen and the Prince could not initiate action on matters concerning the war and needed the support of Lord Penmore, the secretary of war. The Queen invited Lord Penmore to her palace and after talking with Miss Nightingale, he was enthralled. A Royal Commission that would examine the real condition of the British army was going to be formed and under her guidance and inspection. Miss Nightingale set herself to work and produced a work of nearly thousand pages titled *Notes on Matters affecting the Health, Efficiency and Hospital Administration of the British Army*. In six long chapters she discussed the causes behind the terrible conditions of the hospitals, and gave tables, figures, plans, diet sheets showing how things could be improved.

It is hard to compile into a few pages a person’s life, especially when that person was one who crammed so many major events into her life. After her return from Crimea, Nightingale wrote two books titled *Notes on Hospitals* and *Notes on Nursing*, that sold very well and increased people’s knowledge regarding the true condition of hospitals and the life of nurses. After completing these two works, she knew time had come for her to do something with the money collected in the Nightingale Fund. She founded the Nightingale School of Nursing and it is because of her achievements that nursing became a respectable profession. She also wrote a 2023 page long report on the sanitary conditions in India. She stated that the British should not treat India as a place to further their commercial interests but should rather aim to improve the living conditions in the country. Influenced by the microbiological experiments of Louis Pasteur, works of Joseph Koch and Joseph Lister, she was “brought over to the theory of germ theory of disease” (Harvard University Library). She wrote an entry to *A Dictionary of Medicine* that explained germ theory and the importance of sanitation in the transmission of diseases.

To conclude, the world owes Florence Nightingale so many innovations regarding the state of hospitals including the correct designing of hospitals with a lot of windows for ventilation, the importance of sanitation for the well-being of the sick and the establishment of nursing as a respectable and honorable profession. Perhaps it will be better to end this paper with a poem that pays tribute to her memory.

### **FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE**

On far Crimean Fields the war was waged  
 Drenching with human blood the country fair;  
 Brave as the beasts, like beasts the armies raged.  
 The British Lion and The Russian Bear.  
 But through the fire and carnage of the strife,  
 Beside the soldier’s cot –the soldier’s grave-

To succor pain and rescue mortal life  
A woman moved, whose mission was to save.  
Dead now the rulers of those sovereign States  
Dead now the leaders of those warring bands;  
But still in honoured age the woman waits,  
Reaping the harvest rising in her hands.  
In every Christian land her name is blessed,  
Her work shall live when she has laid it down.  
We each, who serve the sick and the distressed  
Increase the eternal glory of her crown- ([Sherman, 601](#))

## REFERENCES

1. Bostbridge, Mark. *Florence Nightingale* London, New York: Penguin Books Ltd., 2009.
2. Hamilton, Lynn M. *Florence Nightingale, A Life Inspired*, Massachusetts: Wyatt North Publishing Company, 2010.
3. Kerr, Paul. *The Crimean War*, London and Oxford: Macmillan Publishers: 2000.
4. DO Malley, I.B. *Florence Nightingale 1820-1856 A Study of her Life down to the end of Crimean War*. London: Butterworth Ltd., 1931
5. Sherman, R.B. "Florence Nightingale." *American Journal of Nursing*, Vol, 8, No:8 ( May 1908). 601
6. Smith, Cecil Woodham, *Florence Nightingale 1820-1910* New York, London, Toronto: Mc Graw-Hill Book company, Inc. 1951.

