

# WOMEN'S MEMOIRS

about the Russo-Ottoman War 1877-1878

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During the Russian-Ottoman war 1877-1878 for the first time women with special training in medicine were allowed to take direct part in the war to care about wounded and sick soldiers and officers. For the first time in the Russian history with the permission of the Tsar 36 women graduated the Course of Women Doctor were sent to the front to work as doctors and paramedics in the army. Around 1514 nurses were mobilized to work in the military detachments hospitals and in the hospitals to the Red Cross. Their duties, functions and activities during the war were described by Ilinskij whose book was published immediately after the war – in 1879, and this was the first documental book devoted to the participation of women in this war. In Russia after 1991 the problems concerning the history of the initiation and activities of the nurse communities to the Red Cross were researched in details. In these researches the participation of women in the wars including the Russian-Ottoman War 1877 – 1878 was analyzed. But in the Russian scientific space the women's memoirs about the Russian – Ottoman War have not been an object of special research. In the course of the War and immediately after its end memoirs, correspondence, and diaries of the participants in the war were published. This is the first war in which war correspondents were present to reflect the war in the press and specialized journals like "Newspaper Europe", "Russian antiquity", "Russian newspaper" and others. Authors who took direct part in the War published their materials. The social position of the authors was different – from common soldiers, officers to the representatives of the Head Quarters. Unlike the enormous amount of male memories about the war (hundreds of volumes) the published female memories are only 17. They were not individuated in a separate volume or book. Most of these memories were shaped as correspondence to the relatives and friends or diaries written during the course of the War. Especially interesting are the notes of N. Dragnevich, who was a doctor in 63 field hospital and assistant of the world famous surgeon N. V. Sklifasovski around Pleven . The earliest female memoirs are from 1878 and they are only 5, the latest is the memoir of Sofija Alexandrovna fon Kenig published in 1916 in the "Historical newspaper" . The rest were published on occasion of the anniversaries of the war.

After the end of the War still no unified ideological pattern was imposed on the War memory and this explains the fact why the women's memoirs were published mainly in the first years after the end of the war. Later a male, heroic and nationalistic narrative scheme about the War became dominant in Russia which was resistant to the different female memory.

In Russia after 1917 these female memoirs were further marginalized, they were not published again, they were not translated in other languages which is explainable since the War was considered as imperialistic War of Tsarist Russia. In Bulgaria the memoirs also were not translated nevertheless most of them concern the life of the nurses and doctors on Bulgarian

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territory. After the democratic changes in Russia the female memoirs about the Russian – Ottoman War are again silenced – they are not issued, not made popular by art, not included in the school textbooks only specialists of the War episodically mention them as illustration of certain thesis related to the national narrative of the War. These memoirs have never been object of separate research.



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*The nurses from  
Gabrovo hospital*

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## SOURCES

### Source 1.

*The magic world "war" was pronounced. Russia was shaken, donations were cumulated, and everybody who was able joined the lines of the defenders of the sacred mission. I wanted to pay tribute to the common mission. But how and where? This question disturbed me during the winter of 1877. At the end I have the chance to happen upon the Nurse Community of St. George. The time before the beginning of the war I spend in practical and partly theoretical training on all which should learn nurses....Strange is the human nature. At the beginning I could not wait the minute of my departure, but when it happened it seems my heart was hurting. I felt pity to leave my native home, to leave my family, my old mother. I remember everything which happened yesterday, in a foggy mood I wandered all the morning of my departure; I remember the farewell tears, the usual cries and the hurry on the railway station; I still hear the last ring of the bell. .. I was scared when thinking of what might happen. Will I be strong enough for the mission I am going to join.*

*(Олга Николаевна Юханцева, Из путевых записок сестры милосердия 1877 и 1878 „Русский вестник“, 1878, т. 139, с. 553 )*

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### Questions

- *What were the motives of the nurse Olga Juhantseva for joining the war?*
  - *What emotions she experienced before leaving for the front?*
  - *Is there any contradiction between her desire to join the war and her feelings before leaving for the front?*
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*Meeting the Russian soldiers in Gabrovo  
(Альбом Русско-турецкой войны в европейской Турции 1877-1878, Санкт Петербург, 1881)*

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## Source 2.

*The road from Tarnovo to Gabrovo is admiring. We stopped in Drjanovo, a small town between Gabrovo and Tarnovo. I cannot find a proper words to describe the delight of the Bulgarians when seeing the first Russian women. The crowd surrounded us and everybody suggested to stay with him. We entered the closest house. You have to witness the joy of the hosts: youngsters and older ones came in our room to greet us and to say their "Welcome!" They wondered how to suit us and to feed us. They covered the floor with carpets and cushions and many other things but I could not write more: a bell was ringing, I heard noise on the street, people were speaking. I went to the window and saw our Bryansk unit to go to the peak "St. Nikolas" to help our poor Orlovtsi. Our soldiers quietly passed by the church where from the bell was ringing, they took off their hats and made the sign of the cross many times. So solemn was this moment that involuntarily tears shed on my eyes*

София Александровна Енгелхард , Письма сестры милосердия,, Сборник военных рассказов, С.- Петербург, 1878, т.1,78

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### Questions

- *What made the strongest impression on the Russian nurses?*
  - *Find another pictures and texts related to the meeting of Russians at the beginning of the war.*
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*Gabrovo monastery  
where nurses lived. Next  
to the monastery was  
the hospital where they  
worked*

*[http://www.gabrovo.bg/  
bg/news-article/1792](http://www.gabrovo.bg/bg/news-article/1792)*

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### Source 3.

*After several minutes of our arrival all the people of the town knew about this. The nuns of Gabrovo approached us and started to plead to stay with them in the monastery. The district commander offered us accommodation in the town but we preferred to live in the female monastery, the more so as it is situated on several steps from the hospital. Satisfied, the nuns with shining faces took us to their lodging. All of the people went out to meet us, they spoke and shouted something but we could not understand anything. The monastery is not big but very beautiful. In the middle of the yard there is thick, fresh, green grass covered by splendid flowers, in the center – not big but joyful church with silver dome. How many times after that in the moonlight nights we admired the miraculous look of this dome. Around our room there is a small fountain covert by vine. The noise of the water falling day and night stilled our souls. The monastery buildings surrounded the yard. To our room the doctor and the student were accommodated who were allowed to live in the cloister because of the war. ... We met the abbess – a good, memorable granny, and started a livable conversation. Our interpreter was the mother of*

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*the coachman, who spoke a comparatively good Russian (she has lived a half a year in Kiev). For a long time the granny was relating about the Turkish horrors and at the end with trembling voice said: The Heavenly Savoir came to save the human race, the Emperor Alexander came to save us, poor Bulgarians – our earthly savoir” /Енгелхард..., 79*

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### Questions

- *Why the monastery made such impression on the nurses?*
  - *What was their attitude to the abbes?*
  - *Why the monastery in Gabrovo was destroyed in 1956?*
  - *Was the Russian-Ottoman war only religious war?*
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*Field hospital in  
Zimnitsa (Hronika)*

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### Source 4.

*One of our patients, wounded in the head, was very difficult. He laid with no memory and nevertheless of our efforts he did not take any food and groaned without a break. The doctor said that agony has already started. He obviously suffered terribly: it was so pity to see his pale, good, martyr face and to feel that you don't have a strength to help him, to console him. In such pain*

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*this martyr lived three days...O my God, how terrible was the look of the patients: hungry, tormented, they brought more than 500. We put on the prepared beds only the weakest ones, the rest just laid on the floor of our big hospital. All the corridors were full of people. After making them feel as comfortable as possible we started to feed them. We brought two big caldrons, one with soup and the other with tea, and started to distribute them...I took off the bandage and saw a wound as a small plate and two smaller ones around it all full of small worms. Seeing this frightening picture I was about to faint. I have never seen something similar. I have heard that in the wounds worms could survive but such enormous quantity I could not imagine. For a long time I could not believe to my eyes but the more I saw the more I realized the pity truth. I did not know how to clean up the mess and ask for a help doctor Pelshinskij. He was also terrified not less than me but showed me how to get rid of the uninvited guests. I worked more than two hours. I was seized with despair but thanks to my patience I succeeded to exterminate all the worms. You had to see the joy of my soldier, tender word of gratitude as a true reward for my work.*

/Енгелхард...,73, 95, 96/

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### Questions

- *What were the duties of the nurses?*
  - *How do they serve their duties?*
  - *What was their attitude to their patients?*
  - *What was the non heroic face of the war?*
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### Source 5.

*Before I go to the war I told to myself that I will never take care of the Turks, but here I should admit I became attached to them with all my soul. They seemed to me so unhappy, helpless, looking wildly as if scared of something. At the beginning they did not trust me and reluctantly allowed me to bandage their wounds but the tobacco I was carrying to them soon made us friends. You have to witness their joy when seeing the tobacco. They got up from their beds and joyfully said: "Midhamed – Badzhu" (nurse). Among them there were some very weak especially one who was very young. He laid silently and even the look of the tobacco did not make him happy; he did not want to eat anything except chocolate. Generally speaking the Turks love anything sweet and even when I was carrying to them pieces of sugar they took them with great enthusiasm..... You should not speak like that, remember what our Savoir demanded, how we should treat our enemies /Енгелхард, 80/.*

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### Questions

- *Why did the nurses threaten in such way the Turkish patients?*
  - *Find in Internet information about the international contract of threatening prisoners of war.*
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### Source 6.

*Indeed, you get very depressed when listening to the stories of the poor Bulgarians about the atrocities of the Turks. At that moment a young girl approached us; she is hardly alive, saved by a miracle from the Turkish volunteers who cut off the heads of 400 Bulgarians on the field during a harvest....A crowd of Bulgarian women surrounded us trying to explain their hopeless situation, everybody searched help and some even suggested to take their children with us in order to save them from starving. Everybody had a killed father, mother, brother or sister. But they spoke about*

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*them without a particular pain and without tears. It is unexplainable how a nation could get accustomed to such pain which makes your heart bleeding....All the nights we could not close our eyes. How to sleep when your soul is suffering; I was about to cry. In the yard the noise did not stop – the loud speech of the refugees could be heard, the cry of the babes – poor babes, our soldiers have found them on the road, embraced them and took them to the monastery. In a touching manner they caressed and cradled them but the little ones did not soothe. /Енгелхард, 107/*

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### Questions

- *Where from the refugees came? Why did they arrive in Gabrovo?*
  - *What was the attitude of the nurses and soldiers to the refugees?*
  - *What were the consequences of the war for the civil population?*
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### Source 7.

*I had to prepare for leaving 28 patients. To make for one evening 28 bandages of which 6 on the hips was impossible and I talked about this with the doctor I worked with. He agreed with me but*

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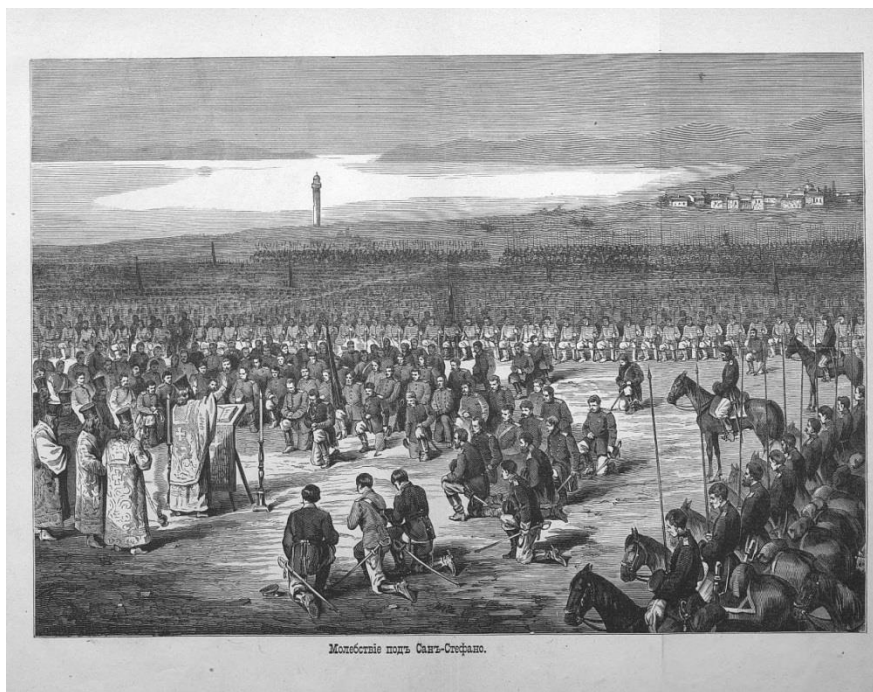
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he called a student to help me and did not take any part in this job. He sat on the bed, absently watched how I was doing the bandages, and in a broken French he asked me questions not related to my job. His laziness and full indifference made me so angry. Suddenly on the corridor male steps directed to our room could be heard. My doctor rushed, throw down the cigarette, he took off the bandage from my hand and said loudly: "Permit me to take the bandage, because our boss is coming" and started to bandage eagerly. At that very moment the door opened and doctor Sklifasofski entered the room and asked: "Is there a lot of work?" Not embarrassed at all our doctor started explaining that this is the seventh bandage he is doing and 20 more are left. I was so surprised of his words and could not understand how a man could lie so arrogantly in the presence of sanitarian staff, patients, and nurses. /Енгелхард, 99/

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### Questions

- Why were the nurses critical to the doctors they were working with?
  - Find other examples about the problems of everyday life at the rear of the front.
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### Source 8.

At the end at 9 o'clock a military parade started and the whole division of 12 thousand people sang mightily "Our Heavenly Father". The singing flowed as fascinating wave, each soul was trembling and involuntarily joining the common prayer...It happens now – when seeing a dying

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man you stay in front of him and unwillingly ask questions: Who is this man? Where from? Does he have a wife and children who loves? Did he manage in his thought to say good bye to them in his last hour? Poor martyr. There is no loving person around him to take his blessing and last words. The hero dyes honestly served his duty far away from everything native and precious. Nobody will feel pity for him, nobody will pray for the serenity of his soul. Just closed his eyes and the hospital attendants came, they put him in a stretcher and bring him to the church. There he lines up with another similar victims. On the other day the priest will served dirge. If there is a grave they will put him in it, if not they will take up him to a cart where 8 more corpses lie and bring him to the graveyard, where they bury them in a big common grave. /Енгелхард, 100/

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### Questions

- What is the relation between heroism and death?
  - How did the religion influence the experience of death in war time?
  - Were the nurses critical to the war which causes so much suffering and death?
  - Make a discussion about the benefits and damages of the war.
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### Source 9.

We walked on the burned streets and faced an outrageous picture: what the fire and the Turks were spared, now our soldiers and our Bulgarian brothers were taking away. Everybody robs what he can. At some remains our guards saved from robbery the rest of the grain and maize so needed for the starving population of the town. Passing by one kiosk we were surrounded by a crowd of Bulgarians who loudly spoke and argued about something and pointed to the kiosk. We went and saw - in the middle of the kiosk, on the floor a barrel with wine was situated and by the barrel a soldier was lying with blue face, hardly breathing and still continuing to drink from the barrel. We took him away by force and gave him to the guards. /Енгелхард, 109/

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### Questions

- Why did the nurses write about the negative sides of the war?
  - Find other examples of corruption during the war.
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