

Paweł Krokosz

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9555-3801>

Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow

Following the Example of the Upper Classes – Russian Sisters of Mercy Serving on the War Fronts in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries (until 1918)*

Zarys treści: Artykuł jest poświęcony posłudze sióstr miłosierdzia, działających w ramach Czerwonego Krzyża, w konfliktach zbrojnych z udziałem (bezpośrednim lub wspierającym) Imperium Rosyjskiego od XIX w. do końca I wojny światowej. Podjęta w połowie XIX w. przez członków rodziny panującej i przedstawicieli rosyjskiej arystokracji inicjatywa utworzenia wspólnot sióstr miłosierdzia miała na celu zapewnienie pomocy ubogim, sierotom, wdowom oraz chorym. Wśród wymienionych kategorii byli również chorzy i ranni żołnierze wracający z frontu, którzy nie nadawali się już do służby czynnej w armii. Ci ostatni wymagali również pomocy bezpośrednio na froncie działań wojennych. W związku z powyższym z biegiem lat w Imperium Rosyjskim powstawały kolejne wspólnoty sióstr miłosierdzia, do których za przykładem kobiet szlachetnie urodzonych wstępowały również kobiety z innych warstw społecznych. Z chwilą wybuchu wojny kierowano je do frontowych szpitali i lazaretów bądź punktów opieki dla chorych i rannych żołnierzy na jego tyłach. Niejednokrotnie swoją służbę opłacały one chorobami, a nawet własnym życiem. Swobodna działalność tak istotnych dla całego społeczeństwa wspólnot sióstr miłosierdzia przetrwała w Rosji do czasu rewolucji październikowej 1917 r.

Outline of content: The article is dedicated to the participation of the sisters of mercy, operating within the Red Cross, in armed conflicts with (direct or supporting) participation of the Russian Empire from the 19th century until the end of the First World War. The establishment of communities of sisters of mercy, whose mission was to assist the poor, orphans, widows, and the sick, was initiated in the mid-19th century by members of the ruling family and representatives of the Russian aristocracy. This aid was especially critical for the ill and wounded soldiers on the front lines of military conflict. In addition to women of noble birth, representatives of other

* In order to standardize the chronology of the events described, this study uses dating according to the Julian calendar, in effect in Russia since 1 January 1700. Whenever double dating is used, dates according to the Gregorian calendar are provided in parentheses.

social strata also joined the rapidly growing Russian communities of sisters of mercy. During times of war, they were deployed to frontline hospitals and field infirmaries, where they carried out their ministry with selfless devotion, often perishing or succumbing to various illnesses in the course of their service. The unrestricted activities of vital communities of sisters of mercy continued in Russia until the October Revolution of 1917.

Słowa kluczowe: Imperium Rosyjskie, wspólnoty sióstr miłosierdzia, Rosyjskie Towarzystwo Czerwonego Krzyża, armia rosyjska w XIX–XX w. (do 1918 r.), wojny Rosji w XIX–XX w. (do 1918 r.)

Keywords: Russian Empire, sisters of mercy communities, Russian Red Cross Society, Russian Imperial Army in the 19th and 20th centuries (until 1918), Russia's wars in the 19th and 20th centuries (until 1918)

Until the mid-nineteenth century, all questions of warfare in Russia were the exclusive domain of the military's governing bodies. One of these questions was the medical care provided to soldiers directly at the frontline, and then in the rear, closer to or further away from the frontline, in infirmaries, hospitals, or shelters. As of the 1710s, matters concerning the medical care of soldiers serving in the imperial army were regulated by the provisions of *Peter I's Military Code of 1716*,¹ supplemented by later imperial decrees. However, until the Patriotic War of 1812, the Russian public, especially women, was not part of the military medical system.² This situation changed slightly during the reign of Emperor Alexander I (1801–1825), during the Patriotic War itself, as well as in the course of earlier and later military campaigns against Napoleonic France. At that time, the Russian Empire developed a vast number of charity institutions that aided the homeless, poor, and orphans.³ Furthermore, there was a spike in the interest in actions aimed to improve the daily lives of the sick, including the staggering numbers of wounded and disabled war veterans. Instrumental here was the tsar's own attitude, who was at the forefront of social policy. The emperor's approach helped increase the number of charity societies and private institutions established by residents of towns and cities, clerks, and estate owners, who donated their own money to charity work. Representatives of the imperial nobility and aristocracy were also involved in charity work. However, fundamental to the development of philanthropic activity in Russia was the attitude of members of the ruling family, as

¹ *Kodeks wojskowy Piotra I z 1716 roku*, ed. P. Krokosz, K. Łopatecki (Kraków–Oświęcim, 2016), pp. 115–116, 125–127, 338–340, 345.

² Н.Л. Лопатина, 'Сестринский уход в войнах России XIX–XX веков', *Медицинская сестра*, no. 3 (2017), p. 52.

³ See: B. Urbanek, 'Opieka nad chorym na tle teoretycznych koncepcji europejskiej i polskiej medycyny w I połowie XIX stulecia', *Analecta. Studia i Materiały z Dziejów Nauki*, vol. 5, no. 2 (1996), pp. 127–139.

representatives of the Romanov dynasty became involved in launching and running charitable societies, or else assumed patronage of already existing ones. A special role in this respect was played by women, empresses and grand duchesses. A prominent example was Maria Feodorovna, wife of Emperor Paul I (1796–1801) and mother of Alexander I, as well as the latter's wife, Empress Elizabeth Alexeievna.⁴

However, the establishment of the first institutions with legal authority to provide health care to the sick in the Russian Empire took place only at the close of the 1840s and in the early 1850s. The opportunity to observe this process and at the same time to be a direct participant fell to the then curate of St Catherine's Church in Sankt Petersburg, who as of 1862 was Archbishop of Warsaw, Father Zygmunt Szczęsny Feliński. The founder of the Catholic Congregation of the Sisters of the Family of Mary (1857), active in the Russian capital, recorded these events in his *Memoirs* as follows:

At that time, a fashion appeared in Petersburg for the spontaneous emergence of sisters of mercy. The first, as far as I know, who made such an attempt was Duchess Baratinska, who founded a women's association, composed of persons of all faiths, devoted to nursing the sick. This involved neither vows nor any fixed commitments; even a salary was paid to those entering the association, which could leave it at any time, but as long as one remained in it, one had to wear a special uniform and submit to the rules established for the Home. A second institution of this kind was set up by the Grand Duchess Maria of Leuchtenberg to treat the wounded during the Crimean War. The last society was set up by Grand Duchess Helena Pavlovna, with the help of her trusted lady-in-waiting, Baroness Raden, with whom she was almost inseparable. When they were both staying abroad, the Grand Duchess bade the latter to study in depth in Berlin the internal organisation of the Congregation of the Sisters of St Charles, which managed in an exemplary fashion one of the biggest hospitals of the Prussian capital. In an effort to fulfil this order as best she could, Baroness Raden moved in with the sisters and for a fortnight shared all their occupations, making detailed notes. Later, on returning to Petersburg, she used the notes to establish a Congregation of Sisters of Helena Pavlovna; their external organisation closely resembled that of the Catholic sisters of mercy, yet internally it was not a religious congregation, as it was not based on a specific call and vows.⁵

⁴ See more: E.A. Энгельгардт, *Императрица Мария Феодоровна в богоугодных ея заведениях*, transl. E. Ган (Санкт-Петербург, 1832); С.И. Гаврюшин, 'Императрица Мария Феодоровна и ее деятельность по созданию системы благотворительных учреждений в России', *Женщина в российском обществе*, no. 1 (2002), pp. 39–53; J. Kowalik, 'Dobroczynność w Rosji za panowania Aleksandra I Romanowa', *Meritum*, no. 8 (2016), pp. 131–144. In 1813, Empress Maria Feodorovna established in St Petersburg a group of women called the Merciful Widows, meant to help the poor and sick of the Marinsky Hospital. They thus became the prototype of the later sisters of mercy, see: Е.И. Жерихина, 'Сердобольные вдовы', *Труды Санкт-Петербургского государственного института культуры*, no. 184 (2009), pp. 375–378.

⁵ *Pamiętniki Ks. Zygmunta Szczęsnego Felińskiego arcybiskupa warszawskiego*, vol. 2: *Od roku 1851 do r. 1883* (Lwów, 1911), p. 91. See also: B. Urbanek, 'Kobiety w służbie chorych i rannych w Rosji w XIX wieku', *Medycyna Nowożytna*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2000), pp. 61–73.

Importantly, Father Feliński's short historical outline of the establishment of the first organised Russian communities (societies) involving sisters of mercy who offered disinterested aid to the sick sets in order, in a way, earlier relevant findings of historiography. In reality, the very first institution of this kind was the Community of the Sisters of Charity of the Liteyny District, set up in the nation's capital in 1843 under the auspices of Duchess Maria Feodorovna Baratinska. The community was tasked with running the Marinska Shelter for indigent women, founded by the duchess.⁶

The second institution of this type in the Russian Empire was the Holy Trinity Community of the Sisters of Mercy, founded in 1844 during a meeting of representatives of the aristocracy in the palace of Duke Peter of Oldenburg in St Petersburg.⁷ Instrumental in setting up this institution were the daughters of Emperor Nicholas I: Grand Duchess Maria (from 1839, wife of Duke Maximilian von Leuchtenberg), Grand Duchess Alexandra and Duchess Therese Petrovna of Oldenburg. The community's organising committee also included prominent philanthropic activists of the time representing the great families of the Russian aristocracy, e.g. duchesses such as the aforementioned Maria Feodorovna Baratinska and Sophia Alexeievna Shakhovska, as well as countesses Sophia Ivanovna Borch and Tatiana Borisovna Potemkina.⁸ Father Feliński mentions the Exaltation of the Holy Cross Community of the Sisters of Charity as the third institution, founded on 14(27) September 1854, the date of the Orthodox feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. Thus, both the name and the date of the community's establishment were not coincidental, as the great conflict between the Russian Empire and Turkey and its allies – France, Britain and the Kingdom of Sardinia – which came to be known as the Crimean War, was just beginning. In September 1854, allied forces landed in the Crimea and laid siege to Sevastopol, a city which was also a stronghold and a base for the Russian Black Sea fleet.⁹ The community was established under the auspices and with the financial resources of Tsar Paul I's daughter, Grand Duchess Helena Pavlovna. Later that year, the community's

⁶ The establishment of the first Russian Community of the Sisters of Mercy and the Marinskaya Shelter was linked to the death of Duchess Barantinskaya's daughter, Maria Kochuba, in 1843. See more: 'Община сестр милосердия во имя Христа Спасителя', <http://encblago.lfond.spb.ru/showObject.do?object=2824182068> (accessed: 25 Dec. 2023).

⁷ 'Устав Свято-Троицкой общины сестер милосердия', in: *Уставы и правила общин сестер милосердия* (Санкт-Петербург, 1879), p. 98. In his monograph on women's service in the Russo-Turkish War 1877–1878, Russian physician and publicist Peter Ilinski observed that the Holy Trinity Community of the Sisters of Mercy was the first institution of its kind in the Russian Empire, see: П.А. Илинский, *Русская женщина в войну 1877–1878 г.* (Санкт-Петербург, 1879), p. 2.

⁸ See more: 'Свято-троицкая община сестер милосердия', <http://encblago.lfond.spb.ru/showObject.do?object=2824182662> (accessed: 25 Dec. 2023).

⁹ 'Крестовоздвиженская община сестер милосердия', <http://encblago.lfond.spb.ru/showObject.do?object=2824182532> (accessed: 25 Dec. 2023).

provisional statutes were approved, and the ceremonial blessing of the first sisters of mercy took place in the church of the Mikhailovsky Palace. Soon, the 28 sisters,¹⁰ together with doctors Nikolai Pirogov (an eminent physician, chief surgeon of the Russian army, professor of surgery in Dorpat and St Petersburg), Alexander Obermüller and Vasilij Sochranichev, set off for Sevastopol to attend to the wounded and sick soldiers. Subsequently, five groups of sisters belonging to the community were sent to the war zone in the Crimea. In total, according to various estimates, between 120 and 250 sisters of mercy from different social strata took part in the Crimean War.¹¹ As noted by Nikolay Pirogov, the sisters of mercy serving in besieged Sevastopol – whether in field hospitals, infirmaries, or often directly in the zones of active combat (at the very frontlines of the Imperial Army) – were divided into three groups, depending on their assigned duties. One group was responsible for dressing and bandaging the wounded (assisting doctors and feldshers in preparing and applying bandages), another managed the pharmacies (preparing necessary medications for the sick), while the third oversaw logistical and domestic matters (monitoring the cleanliness of linens and supervising support staff).¹²

There are grounds to believe that the sisters of mercy of all three organisations indicated by Father Feliński were present on the frontlines of the Crimean War, not only on the Crimean Peninsula itself.¹³ It can confidently be stated that the daily life and medical services of the sisters were the main themes of Nikolai Pirogov's correspondence during the defence of Sevastopol in 1854–1855. Memories of their hard service and sacrifice, as they themselves went down with typhoid fever, sustained injuries and were killed in the war struggle, were accounted for in nearly every single letter of the prominent surgeon, who quickly made a name for himself as a legendary defender of Sevastopol and one of the Russian national heroes. Memories of their tough service and sacrifices found expression in almost

¹⁰ The community of sisters were headed by Ekaterina Bakunina, instrumental for the creation of the system of care for the wounded in Sevastopol, see: B. Urbanek, 'Kobiety w służbie', p. 64.

¹¹ П.А. Илинский, *Русская женщина*, p. 3; 'Крестовоздвиженская община сестр милосердия'. In accordance with the instructions of Grand Duchess Helena Pavlovna, information on the operation of the Prussian Sisters of Mercy, mentioned by Father Feliński, was compiled by the lady of her court, Baroness Edith Raden.

¹² [Н.И. Пирогов], *Севастопольские письма Н.И. Пирогова 1854–1855*, ed. Ю.Г. Малис (Санкт-Петербург, 1907), pp. 31–33, 42.

¹³ The participation of women affiliated to the Exaltation of the Holy Cross Community of the Sisters of Mercy at the front was confirmed in his diary by Duke Grigori Dolgoruki, who fought in the Crimean War and met the elderly Sister A.I. Travina in the warfare zone, see: [Г.А. Долгорукий], 'Крымская война. Из дневника князя Г.А. Долгорукого', ed. Н.Г. Малиновская, *Русский архив*, no. 3 (1900), p. 456. It is worth noting that the activities of these 'central' societies of sisters of mercy resulted in the establishment of similar institutions in other cities of the Russian Empire, see: Б.А. Ершов, 'Общины сестер милосердия и православная церковь русской провинции в XIX веке', *Вестник Воронежского государственного технического университета*, vol. 6, no. 11 (2010), pp. 204–209.

every letter of the eminent surgeon, who quickly entered the list of legendary defenders of Sevastopol and Russian national heroes.¹⁴

The participation of the sisters of mercy in the warfare on the Crimean Peninsula was further described by the eyewitness of and participant in the events, then artillery lieutenant - the eminent Russian writer Leo Tolstoy in *The Sevastopol Sketches*: “Here and there, amidst the blood-stained coats and shirts, making their way over the injured, the nuns were floating about with medicines, water, bandages, and wound dressings; their calm faces expressed not some idle, painfully tearful feminine pity, but active and practical compassion”.¹⁵ As Tolstoy noted, the sisters of mercy were of various ages; there was no shortage of women in their fifties, as well as girls in their twenties.¹⁶ In his memoirs, Dr Christian von Hübbent, a professor of surgery serving in the Sevastopol garrison in 1855, described the service of the Russian sisters of mercy as heroic, citing Sister Bachevskaya as an example, dressing the wounded and assisting in operations every day from dawn to dusk. Moreover, von Hübbent noted that the mental and physical capacities of the women offering medical care during direct warfare exceeded those of men performing the same services.¹⁷

The sacrifice and dedication of the sisters during the Crimean War operations led Tsar Alexander II (1855–1881), at the request of Grand Duchess Helena Pavlovna, to decide that the Exaltation of the Holy Cross Community of the Sisters of Mercy must change its previous status from temporary to permanent. This was combined with the granting of by-laws to the institution in May 1870, significantly expanding its activities, which officially included the service of the sisters of mercy to the sick and wounded in hospitals in the frontier zone.¹⁸

The next major war in which the Russian sisters of mercy played a significant role was the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878.¹⁹ Notably, at that time, the Russian Empire was still on its way to joining the International Committee for the Relief of Wounded Soldiers, which, in 1880, transformed into the International Committee of the Red Cross. The Russian Empire’s accession to this organisation was undoubtedly influenced by the self-sacrificing attitude of the women of the Exaltation of the Cross Community of the Sisters of Mercy, who ministered to the sick and wounded during the Crimean War.²⁰ Before this could happen,

¹⁴ See: [Н.И. Пирогов], *Севастопольские письма*, passim.

¹⁵ L. Tolstoj, *Opowiadania sewastopolskie*, transl. T. Łopalewski (Warszawa, 1986), p. 54.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

¹⁷ [Х.Я. Гюббенет], ‘Профессор хирургии Х.Я. Гюббенет и его воспоминания об обороне Севастополя 1854–1855 гг.’, ed. А.Я. Гюббенет, О.Я. Гюббенет, *Русская старина*, vol. 61, no. 1 (1889), pp. 75–99.

¹⁸ ‘Устав Крестовоздвиженской общины сестер милосердия’, in: *Уставы и правила общин*, pp. 1–2.

¹⁹ See more: П.А. Илинский, *Русская женщина*, passim.

²⁰ Л.В. Мельникова, ‘Крестовоздвиженская община сестер попечения о раненых как прообраз Красного Креста’, *Российская история*, no. 5 (2009), pp. 119–134.

however, in 1867, the leib-medec Philipp Jacob Karell took the initiative to establish a native institution called the Russian Society for the Care of the Wounded and Sick in War. The establishment and granting of its charter by the emperor took place later that year,²¹ thanks to the commitment of the ladies of the imperial court: Baroness Maria Fredericks and her friend, the music teacher of Alexander II's children, Marfa Sabinina (as a sister of mercy, she took part in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878).²² Although the society mentioned above was not yet officially affiliated to the International Committee of the Red Cross, its members engaged in hospitals, infirmaries or shelters were entitled to have the official external identification markings of the organisation - a white flag with a red cross and the same armbands worn on their sleeves (other Russian societies of sisters of mercy enjoyed the same right).²³ In the late 1860s and early 1870s, there was an evident rise in the number of members, and capitals of individual gubernias began to form local communities of the sisters of mercy, often led by the Ladies' Committees established there. The Russian Orthodox Church was also actively involved in organising the society. This is confirmed by the fact that the Moscow Committee of Ladies was headed at the time by the hegumenia of the local Ascension of the Lord (Voznesensky) Convent, Paisija Nudelska (Nudolska).²⁴ The Society's sisters of mercy gained frontline medical experience during the expeditions of the tsarist army organised in the following years in Central Asia. The Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871 proved to be a kind of training ground for caring for the sick and wounded, when 30 Russian surgeons, led by Dr Christian von Hübbent and the sisters of mercy, set out to work for the international Red Cross agency established in Basel. Their task was to provide aid to soldiers on both sides. At the same time, the society sent 16 humanitarian aid shipments to the frontline, including medicines, dressings, clothing, and other necessities for the sick and wounded, collected during community appeals.²⁵

Thanks to the increased activity of the Tsar's family, aristocracy, nobility, clergy, bourgeoisie, people of science, and representatives of other strata of society, before the outbreak of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878, there were 18 well-organised communities throughout the Russian Empire helping those in need during both peace and war. These were institutions (societies) run by the Russian Society for

²¹ *Полное собрание законов Российской Империи. Собрание второе* (hereinafter: ПСЗРИ–СВ), vol. 42, part 1 (Санкт-Петербург, 1871), nos. 44992, 44519.

²² For more on the life of Marfa Sabinina, see: Г.В. Рокита, 'Крымская история Марфы Сабининой', *Запад – Восток*, no. 8 (2015), pp. 96–110; *Марфа Сабинина, Записки. 1831–1860*, ed. О.В. Лосева, М.П. Рахманова (Москва, 2019).

²³ ПСЗРИ–СВ, vol. 42, part 1, no. 44519.

²⁴ *Основание Российского общества Красного креста и развитие его деятельности в период 1867–1875 гг. (Систематический сборник материалов)*, ed. И.Ф. Тупица, vol. 1 (Киев, 1881), p. 123.

²⁵ *Российское Общество Красного Креста. Исторический обзор деятельности* (hereinafter: РОККИОД), (Санкт-Петербург, 1902), p. 6.

Table 1. Number of members of the Russian Society for the Care of the Wounded and Sick in War, 1867–1875

Year	Number of members
1867 (May)	218
1867 (December)	2503
1868	7895
1875	10 047

Source: В.Ф. Боцяновский, *Исторический очерк деятельности Российского общества Красного креста* (Санкт-Петербург, 1896), p. 23.

the Care of the Wounded and Sick in War, the Holy Synod and the local bishops of the Orthodox Church, and private individuals, most often representatives of aristocratic families.²⁶ All indications are that the Russian authorities anticipated the outbreak of war with Turkey and, therefore, as early as the mid-1870s, in consultation with the Holy Synod, took appropriate measures to prepare the sisters of mercy for service on the war front. One clear example of this was the shortening of the preparatory course for the sisters of mercy from eight to six weeks in 1876, and the launching of an extensive training campaign, combined with the preparation of medical supplies by communities run by the Orthodox Church.²⁷

Approximately 1,300 sisters of mercy from various strata of Russian society took part in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878.²⁸ The first to be dispatched at the beginning of May 1877 were 32 sisters of the Exaltation of the Cross Community of the Sisters of Mercy, sent to Romania. They were soon joined there by 27 sisters of the Community of St George.²⁹

Women affiliated with the Community of the Holy Trinity of the Sisters of Mercy also set off for Bulgaria; these were 21 sisters of mercy and 11 volunteers representing the Russian aristocracy who had attended an 8-month preparatory course. This group included the young and beautiful Baroness Yulia Vrevskaya, who fell ill with typhus and died at the end of the war. She was the great love of the eminent Russian poet and publicist Ivan Turgenev, who paid a posthumous homage to her with his poem in prose titled 'In Memory of Yu. P. Vrevskaya', and she herself, a modest Russian sister of mercy, became at the same time a Bulgarian

²⁶ Л.В. Мельникова, 'Общины сестер милосердия и женские православные монастыри во время Русско-турецкой войны 1877–1878 гг.', *Российская история*, no. 6 (2016), pp. 34–35. As noted by Nikolay Pirogov, Russian associations gathering Sisters of Mercy differed from similar institutions operating in Catholic and Protestant countries in that they were not religious in nature, see: Н.И. Пирогов, *Военно-врачебное дело и частная помощь на театре войны в Болгарии и в тылу действующей армии в 1877–1878 гг.*, vol. 1 (Санкт-Петербург, 1879), p. 334.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 35–36.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 38–40.

national hero.³⁰ It is to indicate here that the sisters of mercy shared the vicissitudes of the warfare on a par with the servicemen, as they were often dispatched to the frontlines to attend to the sick and wounded immediately. This was the case, for example, during the Russian-Romanian storming of the Turkish fortress of Plevna in 1877.³¹ Still, whether they served in infirmaries in the rear or in dressing stations in trenches in advanced battle positions, the sisters were also exposed to fever or typhus. The sisters' frontline service is illustrated by their correspondence to relatives, excerpted by Dr Peter Ilinski, a participant in the war, in his work:

[...] the entire hospital was spread out over a ploughed field: and because of this, the mud was impassable and the soil was so sticky that if you took a few steps, you felt as if you were dragging some kind of heavy shackles behind you, and in the slightest rain it was so slippery there that you were constantly afraid to move. In winter, the hospital tents were covered with snow on all sides. The sisters caught colds as they had previously lived in yurts with hole-punched walls, through which the wind blew from all four sides, and rain and snow were regular, unexpected guests.³²

Sisters were also sent to help the sick and wounded in hospitals at the far rear of the war effort, for example, the posting of sisters from Yaroslavl at the end of the war to serve in hospitals located in Kharkiv.³³ Moreover, during the war, hundreds of special infirmaries and hospitals were opened in Moscow alone (27 in all; one of the largest was the 200-bed Lefort Hospital) to which soldiers evacuated from the front were sent.³⁴ Without a doubt, then, at the frontlines, "women's assistance and feminine care for the wounded and the sick proved invaluable".³⁵ During this war, there were also instances in which women in Russian field infirmaries and hospitals performed functions which differed significantly from those commonly ascribed to Sisters of Mercy. At the frontline, Nikolay Pirogov met, e.g. a woman who skillfully performed the duties of a surgeon or physician (in a hospital in the Bulgarian town of Zimnica), singlehandedly monitoring the health status of sick soldiers.³⁶

The Russian Society for the Care of the Wounded and Sick in War was the largest and most active institution involved in providing medical assistance during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878. Therefore, to complete the picture of the

³⁰ П.А. Илинский, *Русская женщина*, pp. 149–150; B. Żejmo, 'Klasycy rosyjscy wobec konfliktu bałkańskiego 1875–1878', *Studia Rossica Posnaniensia*, vol. 40, no. 2 (2015), pp. 64–65.

³¹ П.А. Илинский, *Русская женщина*, pp. 151–156.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 157.

³³ Е.Е. Белова, 'Сестры милосердия в период русско-турецкой войны 1877–1878', *Ярославский педагогический вестник*, no. 2 (2010), p. 35.

³⁴ Е.Н. Козловцева, *Московские общины сестер милосердия в XIX – начале XX века* (Москва, 2010), pp. 162–163.

³⁵ Н.И. Пирогов, *Военно-врачебное дело*, p. 334.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 338–339.

immense sacrifice and generosity of the sisters of mercy, some statistics relating to the effects of their ministry should be cited. Evacuated in the company's sanitary trains and ships from the rear of the Russian army's operational activities in Romania and northern Bulgaria were 76,760 sick and 30,312 wounded. As many as 109,368 sick and injured were evacuated from the Jassy-Kishinev operational area, where 25 infirmaries with a total of up to 2,000 beds were in operation. The society spent almost 16,800,000 roubles to help those injured on the war front, not counting the donated medicines, dressings, clothing, and other necessities.³⁷

In July 1879, Emperor Alexander II approved the renaming of the Russian Society for the Care of the Wounded and Sick in War to the Russian Red Cross Society.³⁸ Thus, the Russian sisters of mercy were officially able to provide their aid under the Red Cross banner. Almost immediately after the change of name, the institution began providing medical care to the tsarist army, conducting an expansion into Turkmenistan between 1879 and 1881.³⁹ In 1886, the Russian Red Cross Society dispatched medical relief to Bulgaria and Serbia, engaged in armed conflict as of November 1887. A unit composed of several clerks, seven physicians, 12 sisters of mercy, six feldshers and humanitarian aid (150-bed infirmary equipment, bed linen, medicines, surgical instruments, food) were dispatched to each of the warring states.⁴⁰ The same was done in 1897, when sanitary support was sent to the front of the Greco-Turkish war. A detachment of two doctors, one feldsher, and 20 sisters was sent to Athens. A slightly smaller group, consisting of five doctors and 10 sisters, arrived in Turkey. Both units were equally equipped with the necessary equipment to run a 50-bed hospital.⁴¹ In 1900, the Russian Red Cross Society dispatched three large medical support units to the Russian troops involved in the international expeditionary corps suppressing the Boxer uprising in China (1899–1901). Comprehensive hospital equipment, medical supplies, and hospital trains were sent to the Far East, and a ship named *The Empress* adapted to handle the sick and wounded was cleared from Odessa. The personnel composition of the Russian medical mission was impressive, including more than 30 doctors and 230 sisters of mercy.⁴²

No less important was the sisters' participation in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, during which as many as 3,342 doctors – 978 army doctors and 2,364 reserve doctors – served in the Russian army. They were assisted by an additional

³⁷ О.В. Чистяков, 'Деятельность Российского общества Красного Креста в вооруженных конфликтах (1867–1917 гг.)', *Путь к миру и безопасности*, no. 1(54) (2018), p. 227.

³⁸ ПСЗРИ–СВ, vol. 54, part 2 (Санкт-Петербург, 1881), no. 59877.

³⁹ О.В. Чистяков, 'Деятельность Российского общества', p. 228.

⁴⁰ РОККИОД, pp. 20–22.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 22–23, 131.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 24–27; Л.А. Пахомова, 'Становление и развитие общин сестер милосердия в России в конце XIX – в начале XX века', *Теологический вестник Смоленской Православной Духовной Семинарии*, no. 2(7) (2020), p. 60.

360 doctors of the Russian Red Cross Society (including 11 women doctors) and 1,487 sisters of mercy.⁴³ Among others, a representative of the aristocracy, the future first Russian professor of surgery, Dr Vera Gedroits, went to the front as a volunteer.⁴⁴ It must be stressed that the number of doctors, and even more so the number of sisters scattered both near the frontline and behind it, was far too insufficient. Suffice it to mention that a hospital train carrying 800–1,000 sick and wounded soldiers was attended to by two or three sisters, who worked over and above their physical and mental endurance while being exposed to all manner of illnesses.⁴⁵ The unfolding events of the war at the time in Port Arthur, the main Russian Pacific Fleet base, were described in memoirs⁴⁶ by the highly experienced sister of mercy in matters of medical assistance, Olga von Baumgarten of the Society of St. George.⁴⁷ Her 80-strong unit dispatched to the Far East included, apart from 11 sisters, e.g. five physicians, nine medical students, 50 paramedics, and two feldshers. The unit was to set up an infirmary in Port Arthur for 200 sick (to be divided into two parts, the surgical and the therapy sections) and a small infirmary for STD patients. According to Olga von Baumgarten, many indicated that the medical unit assigned was too large for the 200 sick.⁴⁸ These opinions were quickly proved wrong as a field hospital of a similar size was soon to be launched aboard the passenger ship *Mongolia*,⁴⁹ leased by the Russian Red Cross Society from the Chinese Railroad Society. Another vessel, the *Kazan*, was adopted for a similar purpose; it could accommodate as many as 1,000 sick and wounded yet was attended by only two sisters of mercy.⁵⁰

Soon, the Russian Red Cross Society was involved in the medical and sanitary aid to the states taking part in the Balkan Wars 1912–1913. Disregarding their political sympathies with the countries involved in these conflicts – Montenegro,

⁴³ Е. Павлов, *На Дальнем Востоке в 1905 году. Из наблюдений во время войны с Японией* (Санкт-Петербург, 1907), pp. 370–372.

⁴⁴ See more: В.Г. Хлопов, *Цвет жизни белый* (Брянск, 2011), pp. 76–90.

⁴⁵ К.В. Зорин, 'Медицинская деятельность сотрудников московских общин сестер милосердия на Дальнем Востоке (1904–1905)', *Дальневосточный медицинский журнал*, no. 2 (2015), pp. 122–126.

⁴⁶ [О.А. фон-Баумгартен], *В осажденном Порт-Артуре. Дневник сестры милосердия О.А. фон-Баумгартен* (Санкт-Петербург, 1906).

⁴⁷ Olga von Baumgarten had ample experience as far as medical care for the sick and wounded frontline soldiers went. In 1899–1900, she was part of a 33-strong unit (nine sisters of mercy – four of the Society of St George, four – of the Alexandrovsky Society and one volunteer) dispatched to the Boer state, or the South African Republic, commonly known as the Transvaal. The purpose of the mission was to provide medical aid to the Boer troops then at war with the English. The trip was described in Sister von Baumgarten memoirs, soon to come out in print in the Russian Empire, see: ead., *Воспоминания о Трансваале сестры милосердия Общины св. Георгия О. фон-Баумгартен. 1899–1900* (Санкт-Петербург, 1901).

⁴⁸ [О.А. фон-Баумгартен], *В осажденном Порт-Артуре*, p. 7.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 5–10.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

Bulgaria, Serbia, Greece, and Turkey – the Russian authorities then sent 66 doctors, 18 clerks, two pharmacists, 142 sisters of mercy, and 234 paramedics. In addition, means of transport to carry the sick and wounded, as well as medical supplies, were sent to Bulgaria. The total cost of aid to the warring parties amounted to 826,682 roubles.⁵¹

Table 2. Medical support of the Russian Red Cross Society for the states participating in the Balkan Wars, 1912–1913

State	Type of medical support provided		Total number of hospital and infirmary beds
	Number of infirmaries (I) or hospitals (H)	Number of beds in each infirmary or hospital	
Montenegro	2 I	50	100
Bulgaria	1 H	200	550
	7 I	50	
Serbia	1 H	200	450
	5 I	50	
Greece	2 I	50	100
Turkey	1 I	50	50
All states	2 H	400	1250
	17 I	850	

Source: *Очерк возникновения и деятельности Российского Общества Красного Креста* (Санкт-Петербург, 1913), pp. 38–39.

The First World War proved the greatest challenge for the Russian Empire and the Russian Red Cross Society in providing adequate medical aid for their own troops. Until 1912, the number of sisters of mercy in the Russian Empire ready to be dispatched to provide medical assistance to sick and wounded soldiers was c. 3,500.⁵² In 1914, shortly before the outbreak of the war, the Community of St George had the largest number of sisters – 1,603, closely followed by the Petersburg societies, numbering respectively: Community of the Sisters of Charity of General-Lieutenant M.P. von Kaufman – 952 and Community of Saint Yevgeniya – 465 sisters.⁵³ However, immediately after the start of hostilities, the wife of the then incumbent Emperor Nicholas II (1894–1917), Empress Alexandra Feodorovna,

⁵¹ О.В. Чистяков, 'Деятельность Российского общества', p. 233; *Очерк возникновения и деятельности*, pp. 38–39; Л.А. Пахомова, 'Становление и развитие', p. 61.

⁵² А.С. Конохова, 'Сестры милосердия в годы революции и гражданской войны', *Новейшая история России*, no. 1 (2012), p. 91.

⁵³ Е.Ю. Нургалиева, 'Общины сестер милосердия в период первой мировой войны (1914–1918)', *Мелицкая сестра*, no. 1 (2014), p. 55. More on the activity of the community see: М.В. Поддубный, 'О медицинской и издательской деятельности Общины святой Евгении', *Проблемы социальной гигиены, здравоохранения и истории медицины*, no. 3 (2012), pp. 57–61.

followed by a great number of representatives of the Russian aristocracy, joined in the extensive relief effort involving the organisation of hospitals, infirmaries, hospital trains, and warehouses of medications and linen. The empress herself, along with her daughters, worked as a sister of mercy in the Red Cross warehouse she opened in the palace in Tsarskoye Selo, which belonged to the Romanovs.⁵⁴ This is how Anna Vyrubova, the daughter of the head of His Imperial Majesty's Personal Chancellery, a lady-in-waiting, and confidante of Empress Alexandra, described the daily hospital service performed by the Empress, her daughters, and herself in 1914:

I will describe one such morning. At half past eight, we drove to the hospital and began our work – bandaging, most often the severely wounded; the Empress and the Grand Duchesses were present at all the operations. The Empress, standing behind the surgeon like any nurse assisting during surgery, handed him sterilised instruments, cotton wool, and dressings, carried away amputated legs and arms, dressed gangrenous wounds, without recoiling and enduring with perseverance the smells and horrific sights of a military hospital during wartime. She explained it to herself by saying she had been born a Sister of Mercy.⁵⁵

Alexandra Feodorovna and her daughters also sought to encourage and comfort the soldiers in the hospital with their presence, as noted in a letter written in September 1914 by the daughter of Nicholas II, Grand Duchess Anastasia Romanova: “Mama and my sisters were doing dressings, and Maria [i.e., her sister – P.K.] and I went to the wounded, spoke with each of them, and one of them showed me the very large and heavy piece of shrapnel they had removed from his leg”.⁵⁶ Representatives of the aristocracy who made significant contributions to the provision of medical aid to soldiers fighting in the war included the aforementioned Vera Gedroits, who, in addition to her logistical support in the rear (including the establishment and management of hospitals), took part in direct service on the south-western front, where she was wounded in January 1918.⁵⁷

According to official data, in 1916, as many as 17,436 sisters of the Russian Red Cross Society were dispatched to the frontlines of the First World War. They represented various Russian relief troops, providing aid in over 2,000 frontline and backline hospitals, infirmaries, hospital trains, and other designated places. Due to the acute shortage of frontline doctors, in many cases, the sisters of mercy had

⁵⁴ See more: Н.Н. Блохина, ‘Деятельность сестер милосердия Дома Романовых в годы Первой мировой войны (к 100-летию начала Первой мировой войны)’, *Российский медицинский журнал*, no. 1 (2015), pp. 52–56; *Дневниковые записи Великих княжон Ольги, Марии, Татьяны, Анастасии и их письма к отцу Императору Николаю II (1914–1917)*, (Москва, 2016), p. 9.

⁵⁵ *Дневниковые записи Великих княжон*, p. 14.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁵⁷ В.Г. Хлопов, *Цвет жизни белый*, pp. 146–149; M. Chlipała, ‘Księżna wojskowej chirurgii – Wiera Giedrojc’, *Medical Tribune*, no. 12 (2019), pp. 76–80.

to assume these physicians' duties and add them to their own.⁵⁸ For example, in hospitals, one sister attended to as many as 15 seriously ill patients, and in surgery wards, one sister was in charge of as many as 25–30 patients. In addition, during each shift, each of them had to perform unexpected and urgent medical tasks (bandaging, vaccinations, etc.) for around 100–150 sick and wounded.⁵⁹

Without doubt, the initiative taken in the mid-nineteenth century by members of the ruling family and representatives of the Russian aristocracy to establish communities of the sisters of mercy was a laudable and, at the same time, utilitarian measure in terms of providing care to the sick and wounded soldiers of the army of the Russian Empire. Over the years, ever-new communities of sisters of mercy were established there, joined by women from other social strata who followed the example set by women of noble birth. At the outbreak of war, they were sent to the front, where they shared all the hardships and hazards, providing medical assistance to soldiers. Many of them were also deployed to hospitals in the rear. Frequently, their enormous sacrifice led to illnesses and even death. The unencumbered activity of such vital communities of sisters of mercy continued in Russia until the October Revolution of 1917. When the communists took power, members of the communities of mercy, including the sisters, were harassed and persecuted, and the institutions themselves were either dissolved or taken over by the new state authorities.⁶⁰

Przykład wyższych sfer – rosyjskie siostry miłosierdzia na frontach wojennych w XIX i XX wieku (do 1918 r.)

Streszczenie

Artykuł poświęcony jest posłudze siostr miłosierdzia, działających w ramach Czerwonego Krzyża, w konfliktach zbrojnych z (bezpośrednim lub wspierającym) udziałem Imperium Rosyjskiego od XIX w. do końca I wojny światowej. Inicjatywa podjęta w połowie XIX stulecia przez

⁵⁸ Е.Ю. Нургалиева, 'Общины сестер милосердия', pp. 54–55. See also: A. Drozdowska, 'Kobiety a działalność Czerwonego Krzyża na ziemiach polskich zaboru rosyjskiego w latach 1914–1916 na podstawie wspomnień lekarza Czerwonego Krzyża oraz Laury de Turczynowicz', *Czasopismo Naukowe Instytutu Studiów Kobięcych*, no. 1(2) (2027), pp. 73–91. In December 1914, as many as 800 military infirmaries were opened in Moscow alone, see: А.Д. Шалыгин, О.И. Шалыгина, 'Пирогов и сестринское дело в России', *Вестник Национального Медико-хирургического Центра им. Н.И. Пирогова*, vol. 15, no. 3, part 1 (2020), p. 102, DOI: 10.25881/BPNMSC.2020.80.31.018.

⁵⁹ А.Б. Асташов, 'Сестры милосердия в годы Первой мировой войны: повседневность и труд', *Вестник РГГУ. Серия: Литературоведение. Языкознание. Культурология*, vol. 10 (2020), pp. 123, <https://doi.org/10.28995/2686-7249-2020-10-118-134>.

⁶⁰ Е.Н. Козловцева, 'Судьба общин сестер милосердия после 1917 года на примере Москвы', in: *Православные братства в истории России. К 100-летию воззвания патриарха Тихона об образовании духовных союзов. Сборник научных трудов*, ed. Ю.В. Балакшина, С.В. Смирнов, vol. 1 (Москва, 2018), pp. 189–199.

członków rodziny panującej i przedstawicieli rosyjskiej arystokracji w celu założenia wspólnot siostr miłosierdzia miała na celu pomoc ubogim, sierotom, wdowom i chorym. Obejmowało to chorych i rannych żołnierzy powracających z frontów, którzy nie byli już zdolni do czynnej służby. Ci ostatni wymagali również bezpośredniej pomocy na linii frontu. W rezultacie przez lata w Imperium Rosyjskim powstawały kolejne wspólnoty siostr miłosierdzia, do których dołączały kobiety z innych warstw społecznych, naśladujące przykład rosyjskich arystokratek. W chwili wybuchu wojny zostały one przydzielone do szpitali i infirmerii na froncie lub wysłane do opieki nad chorymi i rannymi żołnierzami na tyłach wojsk. Ceną, jaką płaciły za swoją służbę, była często choroba, a nawet śmierć. Nieograniczona działalność żywotnych wspólnot siostr miłosierdzia trwała w Rosji aż do rewolucji październikowej 1917 r.

По примеру высших сословий – русские сестры милосердия на военных фронтах в XIX и XX вв. (до 1918 г.)

Абстракт

В статье рассматривается участие в вооружённых конфликтах сестёр милосердия, действовавших в составе Красного Креста. В конфликтах, в которых непосредственно участвовала Российская империя (или только поддерживала), начиная с XIX века и до конца Первой мировой войны. Предпринятая в середине XIX века членами императорской семьи и представителями русской аристократии, инициатива создания общин сестёр милосердия была направлена на помощь бедным, сиротам, вдовам и больным. К перечисленным категориям относились и больные и раненые солдаты, возвращающиеся с фронта, утратившие способность к активной службе в армии. Последним также непосредственно требовалась помощь на фронте. В результате, со временем, в Российской империи создавались новые сестринские общины, и, по примеру дам благородного происхождения, к ним присоединились и женщины из других сословий. С началом войны они направлялись во фронтовые госпитали и лазареты, а также в тыл в пункты ухода за больными и ранеными солдатами. Часто они расплачивались за свою службу болезнями и даже собственной жизнью. Столь важная для общества, свободная деятельность общин сестер милосердия сохранилась в России вплоть до Октябрьской революции 1917 г.

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Paweł Krokosz, dr nauk humanistycznych w zakresie historii, adiunkt w Instytucie Historii Uniwersytetu Papieskiego Jana Pawła II w Krakowie. Zajmuje się historią wojskowości i dziejami nowożytnymi, w tym Rosją od XVIII do XX w., fortyfikacjami, sztuką wojenną oraz historią Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej (krokosz.pawel@poczta.fm).

Paweł Krokosz, PhD in History, assistant professor at the Institute of History of the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Kraków. His research focuses on military and modern history, including Russia from the 18th to the 20th century, fortifications, the art of war, and the history of Central and Eastern Europe (krokosz.pawel@poczta.fm).