Military Nursing in Ottoman Palestine During World War I

**Submitted to the**

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1. Statement of the Research Aim and Purpose

Military nursing during World War I 1914–1918 is a widely-studied subject in research on the history of nursing. A review of the literature reveals numerous works addressing the professional aspects of nursing and its contributions to the war efforts. The role of nursing during the war has been well documented, especially regarding the American and British armies’ involvement in battle arenas worldwide. However, little is known about nursing and military nurses during World War I in Palestine. Palestine, then under Ottoman rule, stood in the middle of a strategic military crossroads between the British and Turkish-Ottoman forces in the Middle East. Health in wartime Palestine was characterized by poor sanitation, a serious shortage of medicine and medical equipment, and outbreaks of cholera and spotted fever. Mostly German, French, and Austrian nuns, together with a few local Jewish nurses, offered nursing services, with the American Colony of settlers in Jerusalem playing an essential role in providing healthcare and welfare for the local population. When WWI broke out, particularly when the American Army joined the war against the Turkish, the political status of the American Colony became problematic. Nevertheless, the American settlers continued to maintained good relations with the Turkish governor, opened four military hospitals, and kept nursing and caring for British and Turkish soldiers as well as the civilian population. Despite this activity, there is a lack of published knowledge about the American Colony nurses and, particularly, about nursing in Palestine during this period.

This research seeks to fill this gap in the knowledge about the historical development of nursing in Israel and to provide a new perspective that will shed light on the pivotal role of military nursing in general. To this end, the following research questions will be examined:

A. Who were the nurses in Palestine during WWI? How did they train? What were their qualifications? What was their military or civilian status?

B. Where did the nurses serve? What were their clinical and management roles?

C. What was the nurses’ contribution? What sort of influence did they have on health, welfare, and political issues in Palestine? What was their influence in shaping nursing in Palestine during the British Mandate and subsequently in Israel?

The Karen Buhler-Wilkerson Fellowship Research Award will enable me to examine the most exclusive and essential historical materials for research on nursing in Palestine during WWI — the books, articles, and archival materials located in the Barbara Bates Center for the Study of the History of Nursing. In addition, the fellowship will provide an excellent opportunity to meet experienced scholars of nursing history for advice and discussions about the project.

2. Project Description

World War I was the greatest mortal conflict the world had experienced until it outbreak in 1914, with entire societies fighting one another. When it ended in 1918, ten million military personnel had died and the world order had totally changed. Empires had collapsed and the entire world faced new challenges of totalitarian regimes and ethnic-religious conflicts (Ahlstrom, 2014). New lethal weapons had been introduced, such as exploding artillery and smokeless powder-propelled rifles, presenting military medicine with new demands for advanced care. During this war, new medical developments included the diagnosing of bacteriology, improved mobile x-ray machines, intravenous saline infusions in the resuscitation procedure, and advanced surgical devices, all of them crucial for treating the wounded (Gabriel, 2013). As medicine advanced, the demand for professional physicians and nurses rose. British army nurses were drafted to the frontlines without any prior preparation (Bernthal, 2014), and nurses functioned as surgical assistants during surgical and anesthesia procedures. They also treated those wounded by gas burns, washed infections from deep abdominal injuries with antiseptic solutions, and managed the evacuation of the wounded from the frontline to the home front hospitals via ships and trains (Summers, 1988). The nurses treated not only physical injuries; Hallett (2010) has argued that nurses also helped to alleviate the soldiers’ psychological traumas, helping them maintain their emotional stability.

When the American Army entered the war in April 1917, 403 nurses were serving, together with 170 reserve nurses. One year later, there were already 12,186 military nurses, and they were sent to serve all over the world (Feller & Cox, 2000). The war emphasized the need for qualified nurses and contributed to accelerating the education and academization of military and civilian nursing (Palmer, 1991).

What is known about the Ottoman military nurses? Until 1910, healthcare in the Ottoman Empire was delivered by untrained men. In 1910, Turkish women began participating in the labor force and in social activities, with the 1912 Balkan War witnessing the first Turkish women military nurses. Unfortunately, their numbers were few, and, in WWI, the Ottomans had to rely on seven Red Cross nurses and eleven German nuns to treat their wounded soldiers. Although the Red Crescent for Ottoman Society for the Wounded and Ill Soldiers had been founded in 1868, only in 1913 did the organization recognize the nursing practice, which was based on women’s traditional abilities as mothers and caregivers, and characterized by sensitivity and mercy for the wounded. Nursing courses in Turkey were opened in 1913–1914, preparing 300 nurses to serve on several fronts (Sançar, 2016). Knowledge about the work of the Red Crescent nurses during the war, particularly on the Palestine front, is still lacking in the scholarly literature.

Palestine during WWI was suffering a deep political, economic, and health crisis (Bar-El & Greenberg, 2006). The country had been severely hurt by Turkish restrictions on foreign money transfers to the population and by the confiscation of food, water, oil, and goods to meet Ottoman military needs. Jerusalem, recognized as the center of the Turkish home front in Palestine, drained much of the medical and economic resources of the Turkish army (Shiloni, 1991). As a result of poor sanitary conditions, outbreaks of cholera, spotted fever, varicella, and malaria were ubiquitous (Shiloni, 1991). The diseases and wartime starvation caused 15,000 deaths among the civilian population (Ruppin, 1968). In addition to poor public health conditions, the Turkish military recruited the majority of the Jewish physicians and nurses and confiscated all the basic medical equipment from the local clinics (Smilansky, 1934), while the Ottomans deported foreign nurses from enemy countries, such as Russia, Britain, and France (Shiloni, 1991). Under these complex political and health conditions, nursing became quite a challenging task. The American Colony’s nurses even undertook the management of four Turkish military hospitals despite the complicated political relations between the United States and the Ottomans (Spafford, 1951). Further evidence of military nursing activity, reflected only in photographs, shows Turkish Red Crescent nurses (Kalbian, 2015) and the Rosary sisters standing next to staff medical officers (Schwake, 2014). In general, the role of nursing and the function of the nurses during conflict have remained rather obscure. Keeling and Mann Wall (2015) have argued that nurses’ ability to innovate and perform their duties despite political sensitivities and international conflicts is a critical aspect of disaster response. Wartime nursing also challenged nurses’ practice and their social and professional status from a gender perspective (Dixon Vuic, 2013). This project aims to examine these two issues of nursing during conflicts and gender-related changes in nursing status.

3. The Center’s Collections

For this research, I intend to use the Center’s primary sources, books, monographs, and other printed materials dealing with nursing during World War I, such as MC: 227, 236, 224, 10, 171, 222, 220, 188.

4. Budget Outline and Itemized Details

The fellowship will enable me to travel (air fare + accommodation) to the Center, uncover crucial materials, and meet the Center’s nursing historians. It will also enable me to visit other American archives, including those in the National Archives and the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., The Women’s Memorial Foundation in Arlington, VA, the Five College Archives & Manuscript Collections in MA, duplicate documents and photographs, and interview Dr. V. V. Kalbian, who has a private archive of military medicine in Palestine during WWI.

I also plan to conduct research at the following centers holding essential primary and secondary sources for my research project: in Israel, the Central Zionist Archives, Yad Yizhak Ben Zvi Archives, and the Jerusalem Municipality Archives; in Turkey, the Red Crescent Archives; and in Britain, the Wellcome Library and the National Archives.

**Project Timeline**

September 2021–September 2022: data collection; October–December 2022: manuscript writing, January 2023: presenting and publishing the project’s outcome.

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**Summary of My Activities and Future Plans**

I am a lecturer and a nephrology nurse, and am primarily interested in: (1) medical education — military nursing history, nursing history and healthcare systems developments; (2) transcultural nursing and cultural competence in health care systems, and (3) nephrology nursing — improving patients’ quality of life and clinical nursing skills.

I am working on a number of historical research projects: the history of Laniado, the Jewish ultra-Orthodox nursing school; a history of aspects of nephrology nursing; and a number of multidisciplinary clinical research projects conducted with colleagues from various fields. I intend to continue applying new nephrology nursing treatments and methods involving quality of life measures, thus improving the health of patients in end-stage renal disease. In the transcultural nursing sphere, I collaborate with several colleagues from the fields of social work and behavioral sciences. I plan to focus on conducting more history projects in the field of military nursing during wartime and conflict in both the Middle East and in global arenas.