**The Late Ottoman Era and its Legacy for Nursing in Turkey**

**ABSTRACT**

Reforms in the late Ottoman era had dramatic effects on health, education, and gender roles. Women had been midwives and nurses in the imperial palace since the early modern period, but few had public roles and they did not participate in the military sphere. This study examines nursing at the crossroads of these changes, showing that shifting societal attitudes form the context for women’s increasing involvement in public activities and professions and contributed to their successful wartime recruitment by the Ottoman Red Crescent in the early twentieth century, setting the stage for modern nursing’s development in the Republic of Turkey.

Keywords: nursing, late Ottoman Empire, Ottoman Red Crescent, war, Turkish nursing

**Introduction**

Throughout the nineteenth century, widespread reforms initiated by Mahmud II (1808–1839) and continuing into the Tanzimat (1839–1876) and Hamidian (1876–1909) periods led to significant changes in the societal roles of women. These changes were part of complex processes influenced by developments in the late Ottoman Empire’s political, geographical, and international relationships that contributed to women’s emergence from the private to the public sphere, as reflected in their increased involvement in education, politics, and social life.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Among the professional activities in which women increasingly engaged in the empire during this period was that of nursing. Female caregivers who practiced nursing in this period are familiar in the Ottoman history of medicine literature.[[2]](#endnote-2) Nevertheless, nursing did not emerge as an accepted profession for women until the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913, when, for the first time, women nurses volunteered to care for wounded soldiers on the frontlines. Indeed, as the empire’s involvement increased in civil-military arenas, nurses’ participation became more visible in public and in military spheres.

Missing from the English-language literature, however, are analyses that link the nineteenth century trends to women’s decisions to join the Ottoman Red Crescent (founded in 1868) and serve as nurses far from home at the war’s frontlines, caring for wounded male soldiers. This study’s primary goal is offering an analytic and historic context for the involvement of women as nurses during the Balkan Wars and World War I . Beyond arguing that the societal changes that preceded the war not only made it possible for women nurses to volunteer to serve on the frontlines, this study also contends that their wartime service further reinforced societal acceptance of and reliance on women nurses, eventually in sectors beyond the military. The rising status of nursing was reinforced after WWI with the articulation of professional roles, standards, and requirements, as well as the establishment of formal educational institutions, setting the stage for the development of modern nursing in the closing decade of the Ottoman Empire.

The study begins by offering the nineteenth-century analytic and historic context for the deployment of women as nurses during early twentieth-century wars. In particular, it considers the social, political, and health developments that influenced the emergence of women in the public sphere during the nineteenth century. The study then turns to the opportunities for women nurses provided by the Balkan Wars and WWI and describes the ways in which the Red Crescent Society leveraged these changing social norms while adhering to common societal views of women’s attributes to successfully recruit women nurses to the frontlines. Finally, the study concludes with a brief description of some of the educational and professional steps taken following wartime that set the stage for the development of nursing as a profession beginning in the early days of the Republic of Turkey.

**The impact of late Ottoman reforms and public health challenges on the status of women**

Until nineteenth-century economic, civil rights, education, and taxation reforms,[[3]](#endnote-3) Ottoman society could be described as maintaining strictly controlled relationships between the genders with men controlling the public arena while women’s activities remaining confined mainly to the private, domestic sphere.[[4]](#endnote-4) Ottoman women were mostly described in the family and religious context, as part of an Islamic society characterized by polygamy, extended families, patriarchal relations, and gender segregation. A possible exception may be the influence that the women close to the Sultan had on political and other public affairs.[[5]](#endnote-5)

The reforms were part of the Empire’s response to a tangled reality, including a loss of territories in war, contesting nationalisms*,* and poor public health conditions. Also during this period, the Empire developed closer relationships with European countries,[[6]](#endnote-6) resulting in the penetration of changing Western norms regarding gender, social, and health issues.

The result was that, despite centuries of established social norms, voices challenging gender roles began to be raised. Governmental reforms began to promote equity among the empires’ citizens. A social-gender change process, which included articulation of women’s rights to equality, developed in parallel to and under the influence of these broad political change processes. As a growing awareness of feminism entered Ottoman society, more voices advocated greater integration in social life, encouraging women’s education and empowerment.[[7]](#endnote-7) In addition, women became more involved in industry and public services, working as tailors, telephone operators, teachers, and school administrators.[[8]](#endnote-8) Moreover, they were increasingly represented in endeavors in arts and letters, in education, and as speakers at conferences and at trade, national, and charity activities, which in turn led to growing public awareness about women’s potential societal contributions beyond their home roles.[[9]](#endnote-9)

At the same time, public health imperatives contributed to a growing demand for healthcare workers such as doctors, but also nurses and midwives, roles filled then by women.[[10]](#endnote-10) Integration with the West contributed to Ottoman adoption of Western technology, medical methods, and knowledge, which were harnesses to confront diseases, such as malaria, that threatened public health and contributed to high death rates among both civilian and military populations.

Public health needs also precipitated important reforms to healthcare services which included: (1) taking governmental responsibility for public health education, such as advocating for preventive vaccinations; (2) establishing official medical institutions that monitored public health including, for example, the civil-medical and health administration (founded in 1870) and the Institute of Bacteriology in Istanbul (founded in 1890); and (3) improving public sanitation and hygiene. Importantly for the future of nursing, these new functions, operating throughout the empire’s rural and urban areas, increased the demand for healthcare providers such as physicians, midwives, and nurses.[[11]](#endnote-11)

**The impact of the Balkan Wars and WWI on women and nursing**

In the Ottoman Empire’s waning days, the Balkan Wars (1912–1913), followed by WWI (1914–1918) added another catalyst supporting the changing roles of women—this time laying the groundwork for establishing the legitimacy of women’s labor force participation more generally and for their engagement as nurses more specifically. Defined as “total war” in that the empire sought to involve all of its citizens in the war effort, this massive confrontation represented an existential threat to the Ottoman Empire. In order to meet the wars’ demands, the empire carried out a general recruitment of male soldiers and civilian resources, including a female workforce.

As men joined the wars’ front lines, they left their jobs at the home front. Many women replaced them, contributing to the macro-economy at the national level, while continuing to maintain their own private, home-based micro-economy. In data available from World War I, for example, the number of women working in manufacturing increased from 20% to 30% between 1913–1915. In addition to jobs in the civilian labor market, the war generated urgent demand for multiple positions for military purposes, opening new job opportunities for women in the military, where they worked as seamstresses making uniforms, secretaries, road construction workers,, cooks, and nurses, the latter as part of aid missions volunteered by the Ottoman Red Crescent.

It can be argued that the strong patriotic and nationalist spirit that spurred both men and women to join the war effort blurred the boundaries between the military and civilian sectors and between men and women. While both were considered essential for the war effort, women also channeled their patriotism by engaging in volunteer activities in civic organizations. Among such organizations was the Ottoman Red Crescent, which provided humanitarian support and engaged in war activities that complemented the government’s efforts.

Volunteering for the Ottoman Red Crescent enabled women to express their patriotism and desire to be part of the war efforts, particularly as nurses. This new public engagement of women occurred in the context of the social trends developing over the previous century, but it also benefited from societal views that considered nurses as possessing innate feminine and maternal skills. Thus, in socially acceptable ways, women took on critical roles as nurses. They cared for wounded soldiers, war victims, and refugees while far from their own homes, an effort seen as critical for addressing shortages of medical staff and equipment, especially in light of the high death rate of soldiers from diseases.[[12]](#endnote-12)

This trend was strengthened by the activities of Dr. Besim Ömer Paşa, a founding member of the Ottoman Red Crescent, who was key to initiating women’s integration as nurses for military purposes. His activities were influenced by his exposure to western nursing models, which he observed maintained high standards for patient care and hospital organizational integrity.

Given prohibitions against physical contact between unrelated men and women and taboos about women’s exposure to men’s bodies, integrating women as nurses via the military way was especially complicated in Ottoman society. Bridging the gap between the Ottoman Empire and Western countries in this regard (and minimizing objections from physicians and Ottoman Red Crescent colleagues[[13]](#endnote-13)) benefited from Besim Ömer’s reframing of what he and other Ottoman intellectuals considered to be the innate maternal characteristics of women and implementation of his plans for nursing care.

Besim Ömer made the following argument about women as nurses, highlighting especially what he considered their maternal characteristics: “In the past, a devoted and careful woman was thought to be enough to take good care of a patient; whether this woman was ignorant or stupid, this aspect was never taken into account. For this reason, every mother was considered the best nurse for her children.”[[14]](#endnote-14)

Besim Ömer continued that compassion, mercy, patience, perseverance, gentleness, and fortitude were more manifest in women than in men. Since women are mothers, they are naturally inclined to care for and comfort the weak and relieve their suffering. He claimed that their status as mothers elevated and glorified women in society and that maternal feelings make women more compassionate, making them ideal nurses. He argued further that only *women* nurses were suitable to care for the war wounded, to provide relief, and to manage their pain with delicacy, meekness, and a high degree of patience and attention.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Thinking beyond nursing’s role in the military, Besim Ömer transcended his gender beliefs to a degree in asserting that nursing was a calling that required more than maternal patient care. He thought that by turning women into competent nurses, the public health of the whole nation would benefit: “Nursing is the most important and essential duty of the Red Cross and Red Crescent. The duty of the Red Cross and Red Crescent societies not only cover war and the difficulties created by war, but also its activities will cover the public health issues.”[[16]](#endnote-16) With these words, he transcends the view of nurses as appropriate to the military environment and confirms their potential national significance as public health agents.

Figure 1. Dr. Besim Ömer Paşa (Akalin) with nurses, Beyoğlu hospital, Istanbul, 1913. TK 93/24, Courtesy of the Turkish Red Crescent Archive

Besim Ömer’s efforts to recruit and train qualified military nurses bore fruit in WWI when nurses proved themselves as professionals and sacrificed themselves to save the soldiers’ lives.[[17]](#endnote-17) Three hundred nursing graduates from Besim Ömer’s training programs were deployed in the war’s arenas, 12 of whom were recognized with the Medal of Honor of the Ottoman Red Crescent for their outstanding efforts saving soldiers’ lives.[[18]](#endnote-18) A glimpse into their work—and of the ways in which perceptions of women at the time helped ease their way into the nursing profession—can be found in the documents of Dr. Yahub, a physician who served at the Red Crescent Cağaloğlu Hospital in Istanbul during WWI. Like Besim Ömer, he emphasized their maternal characters, noting the value of nurses not only to the medical military ward but rather to the whole of Ottoman society:

It is enough to see an Ottoman woman at the head of a wounded person once to be convinced that she has acted with great humility and self-sacrifice. She unsparingly dedicates all her loving feelings, all her soul, to palliate and calm the most violent pains of the wounded, by caring like a mother and instilling patriotic feelings. With her soft and sweet voice, she raises the moral strength of the poor soldiers who are badly injured and gives them the strength to endure their pain. Even the most gravely injured ones, as a result of the delighting inspirations of the ladies who care for them, surrender themselves to our surgical operation with a high resignation… After the dressing is over, the poor sick soldiers thank their beloved nurses with sweet and contented looks, the ones who make them forget the pain of their wounds with their expressive and sometimes the words which are full of sweet hopes for the country.[[19]](#endnote-19)

In addition to their compassion for their injured soldiers, Yahub also pointed out that nurses provided diligent and devoted daily treatment to more than 350 injured soldiers at all times. During an eight-hour shift at any point around the clock, they provided comprehensive treatment, dressed the wounds, stemmed bleeding, and even administered anesthesia for operations at peak times.[[20]](#endnote-20)

The integration of women nurses proved its value in war zones. By the end of the Balkan Wars and WWI, nurses had become highly esteemed nationally and a symbol of proud female war volunteers was publicly recognized as their image was put displayed on Ottoman Red Crescent postcards, plaques, rosettes, and medallions honoring their contributions to the war effort.[[21]](#endnote-21)

**Laying the foundation for professional nursing in the Republic of Turkey**

By the end of the Balkan Wars and especially after WWI, nursing had become a highly respectable profession for women. Working together with men in clinical wards during the war, nurses proved themselves to be valuable workers who could initiate change and make autonomous decisions.[[22]](#endnote-22) Their success in caring for the wounded on the battlefield enabled nurses to break through gender barriers and paved the way for their own higher education and that of other women in many vocational fields.[[23]](#endnote-23) To lay the foundation for professional nursing, however, both professional standards and schools of nursing education were required. In the aftermath of the Balkan Wars and continuing through the mid-1920s, both were achieved, laying the foundation for professional nursing in the Republic of Turkey.

*Professional standards and roles*

The development of professional nursing standards and roles can, again, be attributed to the work of Besim Ömer. In 1915, he published a textbook, *Hastabakıcılık* (“Nursing”), that outlined the basic principles of day-to-day nursing work. Although we may observe a clear gender division in roles and the professional relations between women nurses and men physicians in the Ottoman army, for the first time this textbook provided professional guidelines for nurses and described their roles.

Although the work dedicated a significant chapter to the military arena, it also described and defined nurses’ clinical and managerial responsibilities in detail. The book reveals much about the images nurses were expected to maintain as well as the nature of their work. According to this textbook, women who had good bedside manners and had also acquired years of experience would become chief nurses supervising hospital nurses and providing administration, with additional responsibility for patients’ laundry and personal hygiene.

Ottoman Red Crescent nurses appointed in military hospitals were charged with caring for the patient, keeping bed areas clean, feeding, dressing wounds under physician’s supervision, supplying medicines, helping patients to wash and use the toilet, sterilizing surgical devices, and even writing and sending patients’ letters to their families. Nurses were also responsible for preparing the patient and the ward before, during, and after the physician’s rounds, taking the doctor’s apron from him when the visit ended and escorting him to the exit. Finally, nurses had to avoid expressions of sadness or sorrowful emotions in front of patients so as not to lower their morale.[[24]](#endnote-24) In his textbook, Besim Ömer also presents what he considered an ideal nurse–patient ratio as a key healthcare standard—one nurse to 10 patients.

*Formal nursing education*

To prepare women to provide nursing services during the Balkan Wars, Besim Ömer initiated nursing courses for military tasks. Under his leadership, the first thirty Ottoman women who graduated from nursing courses between 1914–1915 were directed to positions in military hospitals during WWI. The nurses were mostly characterized as elite Ottoman women who volunteered to serve the empire’s needs at the front lines. This act was a step towards recognizing nursing as an essential profession for the Ottoman Empire and was supported and encouraged by the government and Ottoman intellectuals. They saw it as a justified women’s profession and understood nurses’ potential to act as the empires’ agents in maintaining and improving soldiers’ health.[[25]](#endnote-25)

In the aftermath of the Balkan Wars and continuing through the 1920s, several schools of nursing were established. Initially, Besim Ömer focused on the importance of immediately promoting the establishment of nursing schools to train staff for military hospitals[[26]](#endnote-26) in the field, on hospital trains, and at sea via Red Crescent medical ships and vehicles.[[27]](#endnote-27) However, the educational offerings soon expanded beyond preparations for service in military settings and responded to the education that would be needed if nursing was to foster the building of a healthier society. Beyond formal schooling, Besim Ömer asserted that it was a matter of national pride to be a trained nurse[[28]](#endnote-28) and emphasized the importance of nurses participating in international professional conferences.[[29]](#endnote-29) He was also determined to fight for nurses’ rights to fair wages and to not accept “national honor” as a substitute.[[30]](#endnote-30)

Figure 2. Nursing training at Kadırga hospital, Istanbul (no date). TK 93/26, Courtesy of the Turkish Red Crescent Archive

Nurses themselves also contributed to the development of nursing as a profession, often building on their wartime experience. Among the nurses who became renowned for their wartime contributions were Munire İsmail, Kerime Salahur, Nesime Ahmed Dölen, and Safiye Hüseyin Elbi.[[31]](#endnote-31) All were nurse volunteers in the Balkan Wars and/or WWI who were considered among the leaders of nursing during the beginning of the Republic period. Safiye Hüseyin Elbi, in particular, is a remarkable figure and exemplifies not only this group of eminent nurses, but also the ways in which volunteering with the Red Crescent during the Balkan Wars—and later during the First World War—streamlined entry into the nursing profession.

Elbi was the daughter of an Ottoman naval officer delegate in England. She was educated as a child in Europe and was one of the first graduating nurses with a diploma who volunteered to care for the wounded in the Balkan Wars, serving as a chief nurse on the Red Crescent’s hospital ship.[[32]](#endnote-32) In 1925, she opened a nursing school, where she served as a teacher while also volunteering for various public associations, including the Red Crescent Society. She was also one of the founders of the Women’s People Party, which fought for Turkish women’s rights, becoming a role model as she encouraged women to integrate themselves into the wider social life of the country. She advanced the nursing profession and its role in advancing healthcare policy through her involvement in national and international congresses that promoted the status of nursing and its role in advancing healthcare policy, becoming a symbol and a role model in nursing during the transitional time between Empire and the emerging Republic. [[33]](#endnote-33)

*The legacy of the late Ottoman era for modern nursing in the Republic*

TBuilding on the changes in nursing instituted during the late Ottoman era, --- ,,

**Conclusions**

This study describes the impact on the development of professional nursing of reforms in the late Ottoman era, as well as growing Western influence. The resulting shifts in social, political, gender roles, as well as public health needs, contributed to women taking more positions in the public arena. It was in this setting that the needs presented by the Balkan Wars and WWI catalyzed nursing as an acceptable profession for women. While nurses escorted combat forces in the western armies (for example, in the American Civil War), the Ottoman Red Crescent more slowly became aware of the value of integrating women nurses directly into the military.

Dr. Besim Ömer Paşa was the first to identify the benefits of nursing for military medical outcomes. In a society in which the mixing of genders and physical contact between unrelated men and women were circumscribed, he and other intellectual figures framed the role of nursing wounded soldiers as an honorable application of innate female and maternal characteristics. Amidst the patriotism of the war period, women’s maternal and feminine attributes were glorified and idealized, encouraging the public to attribute warm domestic sentiments to promoting nursing as a profession for women.

With societal support, women volunteered, primarily through the Ottoman Red Crescent, to serve far from home at wars’ frontlines. The public recognition of their contributions is an indicator of acceptance in Ottoman society of this new role for women . Nursing was increasingly viewed as a highly organized and essential caring profession that fostered national pride and respect.

Building on this acceptance, Besim Ömer and others, including nurses who had served during wartime, established the first educational infrastructure for the modern nursing profession. By the 1920s, in the early years of the Republic, these changes resulted in the establishment of modern nursing as a profession with the potential to support public health more generally.

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