

## Florence Nightingale

Florence Nightingale was a British statistician, nurse and social reformer known for her pioneering work in nursing during the Crimean War. Her pivotal role in organising the care for the sick and wounded during the conflict laid the foundation for modern nursing.

Spending many hours in nightly rounds to care for the wounded and sick soldiers earned her the famous byname of “The Lady with the lamp”.

This article will further elaborate on the background of Florence Nightingale and the background of medical conditions during the onset of the Crimean war. The information from this article will be useful in the UPSC World History Segment.

### Background of Florence Nightingale

Florence Nightingale was born on 12 May 1820 to William Edward and Frances Nightingale (Her father's original name was Shore but he changed it to Nightingale after inheriting his great-uncle's estate in 1815). She was the second of two daughters born to both the couple and was named after the city of her birth.

The family returned to England in 1821. Exhibiting early signs of maturity, Florence's father took particular interest in her education. She was educated in subjects such as history, philosophy, literature, mathematics and languages. At an early age, she was able to read and write French, German, Italian, Greek and Latin.

Not the one to be satisfied with learning traditional female skills of the time; e.g. home management, she preferred to read the great works of a philosopher while engaging in social discourse with the father.

Hailing from a liberal Unitarian family, Florence Nightingale had great conviction in her religious beliefs. At the age of 16, she experiences several “calls from God” that convinced her that the nursing profession was the best way to serve God and humankind. However, the profession was considered lowly for a lady of a noble background and her attempts to join the profession were thwarted from time to time by her family.

However, she managed to join the Institution of Protestant Deaconesses at Kaiserswerth in Germany for two weeks of training in July 1850 and again for three months in July 1851. Here Florence learnt basic nursing skills, the importance of patient observation and the value of sanitary hospital conditions.

Through social connections, she became the superintendent of the Institution for Sick Gentlewomen (governesses) in Distressed Circumstances, in London. There Florence successfully demonstrated her

skills by improving working conditions and efficiency at the hospital. After a year she realised that her skillset would be better put to use in an institution that trained nurses. To this end, she sought to become the superintendent of nurses at King's College Hospital in London. However, fate would have something else in store for her.

## The Crimean War

Following a series of disputes over holy places in Jerusalem, the Ottoman Empire declared war on Russia in October 1853. The additional cause for war was also Russian demands to become the protector of the Ottoman Empire's Orthodox Christian subjects.

The British and the French, allies of the Ottomans, were alarmed at the prospect of a belligerent Russia conquering the Ottoman territories thereby threatening their interests in Africa and Asia. They too joined to curb Russian expansion. The Crimea war was fought mainly in the Crimean Peninsula in Russia. It was one of the first modern conflicts where technologies such as explosive shells, railways and telegraphs were used.

The usage of the telegraph would particularly play a crucial role in the war as it allowed for quick information about the conditions of the soldiers to make it quickly to the public sphere. It was reported by the first modern war correspondent British journalist William Howard Russel that the British troops in the hospitals were being cared for under appalling conditions.

Russel reported that the soldiers were treated by an incompetent and ineffective medical staff and that the disease killed more soldiers than Russian bullets did. The reporting caused much outrage among the British public that they demanded that something should be done about it.

The secretary of state at war for the British government, Sidney Herbert wrote to Nightingale, requesting that she lead a group of nurses to Scutari, where the British field hospital was set up. Scutari was located on the Asiatic side of the Bosphorus, opposite Constantinople (now Istanbul). She agreed

Florence Nightingale led an officially sanctioned party of 38 nurses, departing on October 21, 1854, and arriving in Scutari on November 5 of the same year. Once at the Barrack Hospital, she found that the conditions were filthy, supplies were scarce, overcrowding was extreme and the staff was uncooperative. Five days after her arrival, wounded soldiers from the Battle of Balaklava and the Battle of Inkerman arrived at the hospital. Both battles were one of the bloodiest in the entire war.

The deluge of injured soldiers overwhelmed the facility. In her memoirs, Florence admitted that the hospital resembled the "Kingdom of Hell".

So that better care could be provided, Florence arranged the necessary supplies through funds provided by the London *Times*. She also enlisted the soldier's wives to assist with the laundry. Amongst other reforms that she set up were:

- Cleaning wards so that hygienic conditions were maintained
- Establishing basic standards of care
- Arranging necessities such as bathing, clean clothing and adequate food
- Giving attention to psychological needs through assistance in writing letters to relatives and recreational activities.

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Nightingale herself wandered the wards at night, providing support to the patients; this earned her the title of “Lady with the Lamp.”

Her efforts earned her the respect of both the soldiers and the medical fraternity. She was instrumental in reducing the mortality rate from 42% to 2% earning her much fame in England through the press and the soldiers’ letters.

An investigation by the authorities in the 20th century found that the mortality rate at the Scutari hospital was higher than previously reported. The British government had concealed it to cover up the mismanagement.

In her first of several trips to the Crimean battlefields, Nightingale came down with what is referred to as the “Crimean fever” in May 1855. The fever was most likely brucellosis, contracted when she had contaminated milk. Since no active treatment was available in that era, her recovery was slow. The effects of the disease would last for 25 years, confining her to bed most of the time due to severe pain.

The Treaty of Paris was signed on March 30, 1856. Heralding the end of the Crimean War. Florence remained in the Barrack Hospital until it was ready to close. She returned to England on August 7, 1856 to a heroine’s welcome

## Legacy and Final Years of Florence Nightingale

Even though Florence Nightingale’s achievements were remembered during the Crimean War, her greatest accomplishments were of making social reforms in health care and nursing.

Upon her return to England, she met Queen Victoria and Prince Albert to discuss the need to reform the British military establishment. Nightingale kept meticulous records about how the Barrack Hospital was run, the causes of illness and death, the capability of medical staff and the lack of essential supplies.

Using the data collected the Royal Commission was able to make great reforms based on their findings. In recognition of her efforts and gratitude for the same, the Nightingale Fund was established. The funds raised were used to set up the Nightingale School of Nursing at St. Thomas Hospital in London, opening in 1860.

The establishment of Nightingale School helped make nursing a respectable profession for women who desired employment outside of the home.

Nightingale's statistical models—such as the Coxcomb chart, which she developed to assess mortality—and her basic concepts regarding nursing remain applicable today. For these reasons, she is considered the foundational philosopher of modern nursing.

Another reform that came through the Nightingale Fund was a school to train midwives, established at King's College Hospital in 1862.

For her part in caring for the sick and wounded in Crimea, Florence Nightingale received the title of Lady of Grace of the Order of St John of Jerusalem and by becoming the first woman to receive the Order of Merit. Florence Nightingale died peacefully in her sleep in her room at 10 South Street, Mayfair, London, on 13 August 1910, at the age of 90.

Per her request, her family refused the offer of a state funeral and burial in Westminster Abbey. Instead, she was given a memorial service and laid to rest at St. Paul's Cathedral.

## Frequently Asked Questions about Florence Nightingale

### What is Florence Nightingale best known for?

In addition to writing over 150 books, pamphlets and reports on health-related issues, she is also credited with creating one of the first versions of the pie chart. However, she is mostly known for making hospitals a cleaner and safer place to be.

### Why was Florence Nightingale called the lady with the lamp?

Florence gained the nickname 'the Lady with the Lamp' during her work at Scutari. 'The Times' reported that at night she would walk among the beds, checking the wounded men holding a light in her hand. The image of 'the Lady with the Lamp' captured the public's imagination and Florence soon became a celebrity.

### What is the greatest contribution of Florence Nightingale to nursing?

The foundations of nursing practised across the world were pioneered by the greatest figure in nursing history, Florence Nightingale. She helped to define nursing practice by suggesting that nurses did not need to know all about the disease process like the medical field.

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