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The Poutiatine Women: War, Revolutions, and Exile, 1898-1922

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The Poutiatine Women: War, Revolutions, and Exile, 1898-1922

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To Bullard

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This is a study of six women who lived in Britain during the early twentieth century. A mother and five daughters, they immigrated to Britain from Russia in 1909, and their letters provide a window into the lives of women during times of great strain and changes. The daughters attended school in Britain and expected to live a comfortable upper-class lifestyle funded by their family's business in Russia. However, World War I and the February and October Revolutions in Russia made that future impossible. Instead the women became both military and civilian nurses, adopting professional careers and remaining unmarried. Their letters allow one to examine issues ranging from the cultural identities of émigrés and exiles to the effects of gender roles on life choices. This paper serves as a case study of their family, examining how larger political, social, and cultural events affected the practical and emotional facets of their lives.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2: Roles & Relationships.....	7
I. Introduction.....	7
II. Edith and “Jack”.....	10
III. May and Vera.....	14
IV. Dorothy and Eugenia.....	19
V. Changes over Distance and Time.....	20
VI. Changes Caused by Olga’s Illness.....	22
VII. Supporting Each Other as Russians.....	26
VIII. Conclusion.....	30
Chapter 3: War & Revolution.....	32
I. Introduction.....	32
II. Service.....	33

III. Duty to Family and Country.....	36
IV. British versus Russian.....	40
V. Revolutions.....	44
VI. Hardship.....	54
VII. Conclusion.....	60
Chapter 4: Labor.....	62
I. Introduction.....	62
II. War Work.....	63
III. Post-war Work.....	71
IV. Dearth of Domestic Servants.....	78
V. Adapting to Work.....	80
VI. Conclusion.....	83
Chapter 5: Health.....	85
I. Introduction.....	85
II. Aches & Pains.....	87

III. Vera's Illness.....	90
IV. Deaths.....	93
V. Olga's Nervous Breakdown.....	93
VI. Conclusion.....	104
Chapter 6: Conclusion.....	106
Bibliography.....	110

Chapter 1: Introduction

This study of the Poutiatine family seeks to bridge the gap between family and gender history; it reveals how relationships in a single family both shaped and were shaped by gender roles in early twentieth-century Britain and Russia. As Megan Doolittle has argued, family relationships and gendered expectations of individual family members did not develop separately but were constructed by each family member over the course of many years.¹ These relationships and expectations also changed because of circumstances outside of the family; thus the family was not an impenetrable bubble in the midst of world events. Instead, each family was like an organism adapting to a changing environment, and within each organism different parts modified their actions and relationships in reaction to outside events. Thus the study of a particular family can both answer and raise questions about the relationships between gender expectations, family roles, and larger cultural and political developments.

This study follows in the footsteps of Leonore Davidoff, Megan Doolittle, Janet Fink, and Katherine Holden, who approached these same topics in their *The Family Story: Blood, Contract and Intimacy, 1830-1960*. Their introduction demonstrates the many ways in which the idea of family has shaped the world beyond the family itself; the organizational structure of military and civilian nursing, for instance, relied on a familial vocabulary with titles such as “sister” and “matron” – an example appropriate for the

¹ Megan Doolittle, “Closer Relations? Bringing Together Gender and Family in English History,” *Gender & History* 11.3 (1999): 548.

Poutiatines.² The reproduction of family structures in public spaces hints at the constant back and forth between “family” and “society.” As the authors argue, “family and gender are inseparable.”³ In *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class: 1780-1850*, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall explore similar connections. Their examination of women’s business enterprises illuminated the ways that middle-class women were able to provide resources for their families while keeping within their expected gender roles. Women used the gender roles assigned to them to argue for greater public roles in realms such as education, charity, and nursing. These women crossed the boundary between public and private spheres, using their private family roles and relationships to increase their public roles and to create relationships with those outside of the family.⁴ Women were at the nexus of gender, family, and society, and these three areas form the basis of my examination of the Poutiatine archive.

Consisting of over 2,000 letters written to or by the six women of the Poutiatine family between 1895 and 1968, the archive spans two timelines that are not as distinct as they might seem: on the one hand, the lives of the women in the family; on the other, the turmoil of world war and two Russian revolutions (February and October of 1917). Most of the letters are in English, but a sizeable portion is in Russian and French, with a few in German. The bulk of the collection falls between 1908 and 1925 and focuses on the family in relation to World War I and the revolutions in Russia. Issues of identity,

² Leonore Davidoff et al, *The Family Story: Blood, Contract, and Intimacy, 1830-1960* (London: Longman, 1999) 9.

³ Davidoff, *The Family Story* 11.

⁴ Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (London: Hutchinson, 1987) 273-335.

emigration, patriotism, gender roles, and familial relationships are interwoven with everyday concerns such as dinner or buying new clothes. In some cases, the relationship between the everyday and the larger society is clear. For example, when the Poutiatine women bemoaned the lack of good servants in the post-war years, they were experiencing the effects of a larger migration of working-class young women from domestic service to manufacturing, jumpstarted by the need for factory workers during the war. In other cases, the relationship between larger events and everyday life is more obscure. Close examination of a single family's letters allows the historian to examine the construction and adaptation of identity, gender roles, and family relationships over the course of many years and in relation to larger events.

To aid in my examination of the letters, I have relied upon various essays in *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-Writers, 1600-1945*. Rebecca Earle's introduction is an especially helpful guide for an historian looking at a family's letters. Letters serve myriad purposes within a family. On the surface, they pass information about one family member to another, but at a deeper level, each letter serves a number of purposes. The letters allow distant family members to maintain their relationship, and the content and quantity of the letters can indicate how close that relationship is and whether it grows closer or farther apart over time. Letters also allow the writer to paint a picture of himself or herself in order to achieve a particular purpose or to create a specific image. Letters serve as a space for identity creation, with both the information and its presentation influencing how the reader sees and understands the writer. Finally, letters during the

late nineteenth and early twentieth century were not one-to-one communications; letters were routinely shared among family members and re-sent to distant family members.⁵ Thus, the historian must understand letters within all of these frameworks and not simply as vessels of information. A letter must be examined not only for its information, but also for its use in maintaining a relationship, molding the writer's identity, and communicating with the larger family.

For help in maneuvering amid such a large family and its letters, I used Barbara Caine's *Destined to Be Wives: The Sisters of Beatrice Webb* and Michael Ignatieff's *The Russian Album*. Caine's work was particularly useful in two respects. First, Caine guided the reader through family relationships, frequently acknowledging that mother-daughter or sister-sister relationships are not all the same. Caine paints an individual picture of each relationship in the Webb family, understanding that parents, children, and siblings have individual personalities and choose favorites from among even their close relatives. Second, Caine demonstrates that relationships change over time in response to personal, familial, and social change. As each Webb sister married, had children, and grew old, her relationships with her parents and sisters changed.⁶ I modeled my analysis of the Poutiatines' relationships on Caine's analysis of the Webbs.

Ignatieff's family study was useful in a different way; it was infused with the emotional and logistical difficulties of being in exile and of changing status and income.

⁵ Rebecca Earle, "Introduction: Letters, Writers, and the Historian," *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-writers, 1600-1945*, Ed. Rebecca Earle (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999) 2-7.

⁶ Barbara Caine, *Destined to Be Wives: the Sisters of Beatrice Webb* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986).

Like the Poutiatine family, Ignatieff's family went from being part of the Russian aristocracy to being part of the British middle class, forced to find ways to financially support itself. These changes deeply affected the relationships of family members and also forced the family to maintain their Russian identity in creative ways.⁷ The Poutiatine women faced these same issues in the aftermath of the October Revolution, and I used Ignatieff's work to understand their struggles.

Analysis of the Poutiatine archive mirrors certain aspects of Caine and Ignatieff's work and validates claims made in *The Family Story* and *Family Fortunes*. It provides a case study that complements those included by Davidoff and her coauthors. The Poutiatines' lives and letters demonstrate that families do not act as units in society but instead reflect the agency of each member.⁸ There is also no clear line between relationships within the family and relationships between the family and the outside world; instead there is a spectrum of relationships ranging from those between immediate family members to those between a family member and a complete stranger. Relationships with extended family members, school friends, work friends, and acquaintances fall between these two extremes of the spectrum, and all of these relationships affect the others and are affected by outside events and expected gender roles.⁹ Finally, the Poutiatine letters demonstrate *The Family Story*'s claim that families are not devoid of power struggles; as members of the Poutiatine family leave home or have health issues, power shifts from one to another, forcing relationships between family

⁷ Michael Ignatieff, *The Russian Album* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988).

⁸ Davidoff, *The Family Story* 17.

⁹ Davidoff, *The Family Story* 17.

members to change.¹⁰ Thus the study of the Poutiatines seeks to show how familial, gendered, and social expectations combine to shape the lives of women living during times of great change.

¹⁰ Davidoff, *The Family Story* 17.

Chapter 2: Roles & Relationships

I. Introduction

In 1889, Count Eugene Poutiatine married Edith Cazalet in St. Petersburg. Eugene, the son of a Russian admiral, had served in the Russian military and belonged to the Russian nobility. Edith was a British heiress, born and raised in Moscow, whose family owned Muir & Mirrielees, Russia's first modern department store. Eugene and Edith's marriage was one example of the cultural ties between wealthy Britons and Russians which had developed over the past two centuries. In the early eighteenth century, under Peter I, more and more Britons began moving to St. Petersburg to help Peter I construct his navy. This small community of British "navigators, shipbuilders, officers, [and] technicians" settled in a row of houses that became known as the English Embankment.¹¹ British communities developed in both St. Petersburg and Moscow, and increasing numbers of British merchants moved to Russia as well. These merchants supplied the Russian nobility with Western European items popularized by Peter I and Catherine the Great. The largest expression of this market was Muir & Mirrielees, the first western-style department store in Russia and Edith Poutiatine's family's business.¹²

¹¹ Anthony Glenn Cross, *Anglo-Russica: Aspects of Cultural Relations between Great Britain and Russia in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Oxford: Berg, 1993) 97-98; M.S. Anderson, "Some British Influences on Russian Intellectual Life and Society in the 18th Century," *Slavonic & East European Review* 39.92 (1960): 148; Harvey Pitcher, *Muir & Mirrielees: The Scottish Partnership that Became a Household Name in Russia* (Cromer: Swallow House Books, 1994) 5; Anthony Glenn Cross, *By the Banks of the Neva: Chapters from the Lives and Careers of the British in Eighteenth-Century Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 9-11, 16; Anthony Glenn Cross, "English Embankment," *St. Petersburg: 1703- 1825*, Ed. Anthony Glenn Cross (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 65-67.

¹² Cross, *By the Banks of the Neva* 17-20, 40-43; Cross, *Ango-Russica* 95-96; S. G. Pushkarev, "Russia and the West: Ideological and Personal Contacts before 1917," *Russian Review* 24.2 (1965): 141-142; Christine

At the same time British merchants were establishing themselves in Russia, however, Russian nobles were increasingly impoverished and unable to maintain their living standards. Their privileges and landholdings had decreased drastically in the mid-1800s, most notably with the abolition of serfdom. Though a few of these changes might have benefitted the nobility, such as the abolition of the nobles' service requirement, few took advantage of new opportunities and many continued to work for the civil service or military. The income from these government jobs service rarely covered the cost of their lifestyles, and the nobility's failure to adopt more efficient farming techniques meant that they were unable to complement their salaries with much income from the land.¹³ The financial desperation caused by these circumstances probably played a role in Eugene's decision to marry Edith; he was one of a handful of Russian nobles who married into wealthy middle-class families from Western Europe.¹⁴ This marriage allowed Eugene and Edith to live comfortably on her share of the Muir & Mirrieles profits.

Eugene and Edith raised a family of five daughters, first near Moscow and then in Dresden. In both locations, they were accompanied by Edith's parents, Lewis and Sarah Jane Cazalet. However, within a year of Eugene's death, Lewis Cazalet also passed away, leaving the family outside their country of origin and with no male head. At this

Ruane, "Clothes Shopping in Imperial Russia: The Development of a Consumer Culture," *Journal of Social History* 28.4 (1995): 765-767; D. C. B. Lieven, *The Aristocracy in Europe, 1815-1914* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992) 156-157.

¹³ Seymour Becker, *Nobility and Privilege in Late Imperial Russia* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1985) 108-109, 113; Jerome Blum, "Russia," *European Landed Elites in the Nineteenth Century*, Ed. David Spring (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977) 71, 73, 82; Lieven 36-52, 182; Walter Pinter, "The Nobility and the Officer Corps in the Nineteenth Century," *The Military and Society in Russia: 1450-1917*, Eds. Eric Lohr and Marshall Poe (Boston: Brill, 2002) 244, 252.

¹⁴ Anderson 156-157.

point, the Poutiatine family began a long series of adaptations, necessary to cope with emigration, war, revolution, exile, illness, and death. The women variously adopted masculine roles, entered the labor force, moved to different countries and continents, all the while maintaining family cohesion and their Russian identity. Their lives are notable not only for the adaptations they did make but also for the changes they refused to make, for the ground they refused to yield. And though in some ways their relationships with each other fit into contemporary standards, in other ways their relationships mutated to further adapt to their exceptional circumstances.

After the deaths of immediate male family members, the Poutiatine clan consisted of the six women in Eugene's immediate family accompanied by a variety of more distant female relations. Edith's five daughters, May, Olga, Vera, Dorothy, and Eugenia, ranged in age from ten to eighteen when their father died. Upon his death, Edith moved to England with her daughters and her mother. Her mother settled in with other family members, while Edith purchased an estate in Weybridge, Surrey and named it Glébovo. In moving to England, Edith left behind family in Dresden: Eugene's sisters, Mary and Lise. These women lived together in Dresden and then Copenhagen, and would remain an integral part of the Poutiatine family. Edith's family also remained close to Eugene's sister, Lulie, who lived in Johannesburg, South Africa. This extended family of women would support each other through a world war, a revolution, illnesses, deaths, and exile.

II. Edith and “Jack”

The Poutiatines became an all-female family shortly after Edith’s father’s death and Eugene’s move to a nursing home. A few days after her father’s death, Edith took Olga, the second eldest daughter, for a walk. Later that day, seventeen-year old Olga confided in her diary: “I am to be her son Jack, to help her as a son would now and always.”¹⁵ She was referring to a conversation with her mother, during which Edith asked Olga to become the “male” in the family. Edith believed that the family would need someone to fulfill “masculine” responsibilities in the absence of her father or husband. Edith’s belief and her conversation with Olga were not unprecedented. According to historians Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, there was a general belief in the English middle class that all familial roles needed to be fulfilled in one way or another, and “if these [roles] were not fulfilled biologically, surrogates were found.”¹⁶ Russian mores may have also influenced Edith’s understanding of what the family needed to function. Historian Jessica Tovrov described “porosity and flexibility” as “a prominent feature of family and kinship structure throughout Russian society.”¹⁷ Though Russian families had definite beliefs in appropriate roles for each gender and generation, these beliefs could be altered based on behavior. If a male head of family was unwilling or unable to fulfill his role, his role would fall to whoever acted in his

¹⁵ Olga Poutiatine, *War and Revolution: Excerpts from the Letters and Diaries of the Countess Olga Poutiatine*, Ed. George Alexander Lensen, Trans. George Alexander Lensen (Tallahassee: The Diplomatic Press, 1971) 8.

¹⁶ Davidoff, *Family Fortunes*, 322.

¹⁷ Jessica Tovrov, “Mother-Child Relationships among the Russian Nobility,” *The Family in Imperial Russia*, Ed. David Ransel (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978) 16.

stead.¹⁸ This flexibility may have contributed to Edith's desire for Olga to adopt a new role. At the time of their conversation about becoming the male head of the family, Olga was about sixteen years old, and for the rest of Olga's life, her mother referred to her as "my son Jack."¹⁹ Olga also adopted the name. She signed letters to Edith, "your loving son Jack," and letters to her sisters and friends "Jack" or "Jackie."²⁰ One school friend even had to address a letter to Edith because she had forgotten Olga's real name.²¹ It is tempting to extrapolate that Olga adopted a masculine role in the family unit by virtue of becoming "son Jack," but in reality the nickname better reflected Olga's relationship with Edith than it did her role within the larger group.

Edith did indeed come to depend on Olga for emotional support, especially from 1908 to 1918. In the years before the war, Edith frequently traveled back to Germany and Russia, leaving her daughters in England with the servants. During these trips, Edith wrote to Olga with instructions for the other daughters, even for May who was older than Olga. Edith asked Olga to "feed [May] up" and have the cook fix "rice or semolina" for May, demonstrating not only Edith's reliance on Olga, but also Olga's

¹⁸ Tovrov 16-17.

¹⁹ Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 8 March 1915, Poutiatine Correspondence, Harry Ransom Center, Austin, TX, Box 2, Folder 2, Letter 4; Edith Poutiatine to her daughters, 14 October 1909, Box 1, Folder 8, Letter 3; Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 18-21 July 1921, Box 2, Folder 9, Letter 6; Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 21 March 1915, Box 2, Folder 2, Letter 2; Edith Poutiatine to her daughters, 5 October 1909, Box 1, Folder 8, Letter 1; Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 12 May 1915, Box 2, Folder 2, Letter 7; Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 2 June 1915, Box 2, Folder 1, Letter 5.

²⁰ May Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 1915, Box 2, Folder 3, Letter 23; Olga Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 7-8 April 1915, Box 2, Folder 3, Letter 9; Olga Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine 14 September 1926, Box 2, Folder 15, Letter 5.

²¹ Maudie to Olga Poutiatine, 26 June 1906, Box 4, Folder 1, Letter 10.

position in the household hierarchy.²² She was left in charge and had command of the servants and her sisters. Olga came to identify herself with this role. She believed that she was the strongest of the sisters, the most capable of management and work. When World War I started, Olga saw herself as the head of the family, who had a responsibility to participate in the war effort, and once she started work as a war nurse, Olga considered her sisters too weak to follow in her footsteps. When her sister Vera recommended that Dorothy could also become a nurse, Olga responded “Vavie darling my post is far too hard for Dorrie.”²³ This response was typical of Olga’s relationships with her sisters before and during World War I. In her letters to them, Olga never betrayed any weakness or self doubt. She frequently comforted them but never sought any comfort from them.

Olga showed her insecurities only to Edith, further deepening their relationship. From her first nursing post in Tenbury, England, Olga wrote to Edith about her poor memory and her lack of confidence in her work: “do only somebody lend me your memories mine is stretched to the breaking point with tiny fiddly bothersome things & with important ones. I hope I shall soon cease to start inwardly when called Nurse or ‘Nurse Olga’ + shall remember to answer the bells then things will go better.”²⁴ When work did not “go better,” Olga wrote to Edith again: “Yesterday I felt very low about my

²² Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 5 May year unknown, Box 1, Folder 5, Letter 19; Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 14 May 1911, Box 1, Folder 12, Letter 6.

²³ Olga Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 21 April 1915, Box 2, Folder 3, Letter 13; Olga Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 15 April 1915, Box 2, Folder 3, Letter 11.

²⁴ Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 23 April 1915, Box 2, Folder 2, Letter 23.

work & decided I should be ‘kicked out’ if I did not leave myself in a few days.”²⁵

Finally, Olga wrote a long and torturous letter about being corrected repeatedly by her superiors. Olga concluded that she was incapable of nursing and would return home immediately; this letter reflected Olga’s lowest point in her war work and was more emotionally fraught than any other letters before and after. Notably, it was addressed to Edith and marked “PRIVATE.”²⁶ Edith called this letter “sad and pathetic” and instructed Olga to rely on prayer in her time of need.²⁷ Though Edith’s response was sympathetic, it was more stern than her letters to her other daughters in their times of need, which overflowed with consolation and even coddling.

The practicality of Olga and Edith’s relationship was most obvious during discussions of finances. When Olga was nursing in Russia during the war, she took control of the family’s financial ties to Muir & Mirrielees, Edith’s family’s business. She recommended that Edith transfer her shares in the company to her daughters in order “to escape the huge taxation and because of the enormous death duties that are coming in.”²⁸ On Edith’s behalf, Olga negotiated with her uncles, who ran the business. She demanded that they send 500 roubles, the maximum monthly allowance, to Edith throughout the war, and she “continually” reminded them that Edith was “living on last remaining capital in England” and the uncles needed to “take every chance of

²⁵ Olga Poutiatine to mother and sisters, 12-13 March 1915, Box 2, Folder 3, Letter 3.

²⁶ Olga Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 27 May 1915, Box 2, Folder 3, Letter 20.

²⁷ Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 2 June 1915, Box 2, Folder 1, Letter 5.

²⁸ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 84.

getting money to you.”²⁹ When workers began striking in Russia, Olga even began attending board meetings to hear and respond to the workers’ demands. She dutifully described all of this to Edith and, by looking out for Edith’s financial wellbeing, further adopted a masculine role in relation to her mother.³⁰

III. May and Vera

While Edith gave Olga responsibilities, the rest of the family seems to have more frequently relied upon May, the eldest daughter. Even Edith and Olga turned to May when necessary; Edith relied on May especially when Olga was absent. During the war, May and Olga became a volunteer nurses, Edith called May back home to help her. In earlier years, when Olga was away at boarding school, Edith had May tend to Sarah Jane and younger siblings. Edith described a “good little May” accompanying her grandmother to church and tending to her younger sisters’ sniffles and upsets. May’s correspondence with her younger sisters indicates her maternal role and their reliance upon her for comfort and advice.

The girls’ adjustment to boarding schools offers an excellent example of May’s nurturing skills. When Olga worried over exams, May wrote to her: “I am sorry, darling, that you are bothering about these stupid exams. Never mind, even if you do not come out brilliantly, everybody knows you have worked hard...Best love & don’t worry.”³¹ When Vera was severely homesick during her first term at school, May wrote to Olga

²⁹ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 84.

³⁰ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 100.

³¹ Vera Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 9 August 1912, Box 1, Folder 14, Letter 12.

asking for updates about Vera and wrote to Vera offering comfort.³² May felt a need to be physically near Vera and used letters to create a compensatory emotional closeness. She wrote, “But I hope this letter will be a little comfort, at least. Tho I am not with you in person I am so in thought, darling. I know so well how you feel” and “Poor little Vera, I wish I was there to comfort you.”³³ The more maternal nature of her letters to Vera indicate May’s special role in Vera’s life. Referring to Vera as “my little Vavie,” May went to great distances to care for her younger sibling.

In 1914, Vera began suffering from an unknown illness which struck while she was visiting family in Russia. She entered a sanatorium and began a round of tests and treatments, explaining each one in letters home. Edith, who was tending to Eugenia and Dorothy at home, could not travel to Russia, so May argued that she should go instead.

May wrote to Vera:

I hope I am doing wisely in coming. I feel so well & full of hope now! I think I am doing right but it has not been easy for me, especially with Aunties. I am not wasting our money as I am using my own, Aunt Lily must be told that or she will judge wrongly. I feel absolutely sure it is my duty, so it must be right.³⁴

In order to be with Vera, May risked criticism from other family members, who felt that Vera had enough familial support in Russia already. However, May argued that her traveling to Russia would comfort both Vera and her mother. She wrote to Vera describing Edith as “very worried + unhappy about you [and your illness]” and hoped that by traveling to Russia May might allay some of Edith’s fears. In assuming this

³² May Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 14 November 1909, Box 1, Folder 9, Letter 6.

³³ May Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 5 September 1907, Box 1, Folder 7, Letter 3; May Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 27 August year unknown, Box 1, Folder 4, Letter 12.

³⁴ May Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 22 May 1914, Box 1, Folder 16, Letter 2.

responsibility, May revealed her importance to the family as a substitute maternal figure and also her special bond with Vera, whom the family considered weak.

Vera's "weakness" dated back to her early school years and became more pronounced as time passed; though her family offered little evidence to support the assumption that Vera was especially weak. Judging by the letters, Vera was the most susceptible to homesickness upon beginning boarding school. Not only May but also Edith and aunts and cousins wrote to Vera to cheer her up during her first months there. Her cousin Eelin wrote from Russia: "I am feeling very much for you as I know what my first week at school was but cheer up things will turn up straight before half term."³⁵ May even wrote to Olga, who shared a dorm room with Vera, asking if Vera was up to the task of attending school at all:

About Vavie, if you think she is not quite up to the mark or not up to the hard work, I would, in your place, go to Miss Cecilia [the headmistress] & tell her what you think; or if not her, then the matron. I am sure they would understand. But if she is silent don't make her talk, she will get over the silent fit in a short time.³⁶

Vera's occasional "silent fits" only exacerbated her family's concerns. When Vera was still at home and Olga at school, Edith wrote to Olga: "V. has a cold & is not well, I consider, but I cannot get anything out of her, & scarcely see her."³⁷ When Vera fell ill in Russia in 1914, it only confirmed the family's prognosis of frailty.

According to Vera, the doctors determined that she had weak lungs. She wrote home to Edith describing her diagnosis: "[the doctors] say my lungs are v. small &

³⁵ Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 1 August 1914, Box 1, Folder 16, Letter 5.

³⁶ May Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 14 November 1909, Box 1, Folder 9, Letter 6.

³⁷ Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 1 August 1914, Box 1, Folder 16, Letter 5.

undeveloped so I do various exercises with the doctor every day to strengthen them. I always imagined my lungs were enormous!”³⁸ Vera went back and forth between accepting her “weakness” and rejecting it, but she always refused to be limited by it. From the sanatorium, she told Edith “I know [the doctor] considers me weak organically, but huge percentage of humanity is a little weak & one can get along very well all the same.”³⁹ Vera was determined to get on with her life, returning home to England just as war broke out.

During World War I, Vera continually sought war work despite her family’s urgings to rest, and in adapting to the demands of World War I, she changed her relationship with her mother, refusing to heed Edith’s advice for what seemed to be the first time. She even defied her extended family because she wanted so powerfully to be useful during war time. In the early months of the war, Vera’s Aunt Annie and Uncle Archibald wrote from Russia: “We are both glad you have not found work yet, as we don’t think you are strong enough. You must be patient and get quite well and you may still be able to take your share.”⁴⁰ Olga empathized with Vera’s desire to work but believed Vera should wait for work more suited for her. From her nursing position in Tenbury, Olga wrote “I do wish my Vav, you could be here, or elsewhere, working as we know you long to, God will be sure in his mercy & justice to give you some special work to do for him here, now, later on or in the future to recompense you for all this weary

³⁸ Vera Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 7 June 1914, Box 1, Folder 16, Letter 13.

³⁹ Vera Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 10 June 1914, Box 1, Folder 16, Letter 11.

⁴⁰ Arthur Mirrieles to Vera Poutiatine, 3 October 1914, Box 4, Folder 16, Letter 4.

waiting my Vavie.”⁴¹ Eventually, Vera found work in an office, translating documents. It was not the war work she had hoped for but it made her feel less useless. Edith did not accept it very well and complained to Olga: “Vera overworks, not only at the office, but doing & studying, translating, hospital visiting, etc. & had to take 2½ weeks sick-leave lately, having tried her heart by overdoing it. She is better since her rest but not strong.”⁴² Despite Edith’s worry, Vera would return to her charity and office work, defying her mother again but also doing what she felt was necessary during war time. On one level this amount of involvement defies her role as the weak one, but on another level it fit within her reputation in the family; she had always been the empathetic one, and she felt much empathy for the soldiers and refugees during the war.

Vera recognized her sensitivity to others’ emotions, and though she upset her family by working during the war, she also frequently sought to fulfill the desires and alleviate the pain of her mother and siblings. When Olga was working in Tenbury and dreaming of nursing in Russia, Vera took it upon herself to make it possible. She dreamed up multiple plans and wrote to Olga about how each might be possible, eventually helping Olga find a place at the Anglo-Russian Hospital in St. Petersburg. Vera also traveled to Copenhagen, Denmark during the war to stay with her elderly aunts so that they would be less alone, and from Denmark, Vera frequently wrote to Edith and Dorothy to comfort them. Again, this pushed Vera outside of her dependent role; in Copenhagen, she was the one her aunts depended on. Her absence also forced Edith and

⁴¹ Olga Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 21 April 1915, Box 2, Folder 3, Letter 13.

⁴² Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 22 July 1918, Box 2, Folder 6, Letter 2.

Dorothy to realize how much support they had received from Vera. During Vera's time in Copenhagen, Edith had decided to sell Glébovo and let a flat in London; Dorothy and Edith were both nervous about the decision and overwhelmed at the idea of moving the household without May and Olga's help. Vera wrote to reassure and encourage them: "The flat sounds v. nice! I know it is a huge responsibility for you & Mother to choose it alone but I for one am quite prepared to see it thru your eyes & find it all delightful."⁴³ Vera took a special interest in caring for her younger sister Dorothy, who would soon start training as a nurse at Middlesex Hospital in London. Worried about Dorothy's workload, Vera wrote "Dodo take care of your very dear self. I love you too much for you to afford yourself the luxury of losing more weight or of growing thinner or paler" and "please Dodo-mine, take a wee bit of care of yourself. Remember how I love you."⁴⁴ Vera provided emotional support for everyone around her while fighting the notion of her "weakness."

IV. Dorothy and Eugenia

Dorothy and Eugenia, the two youngest siblings, seemed to pass through their childhoods without acquiring any particular roles in the family or unique relationships with siblings. Other than their typical sniffles and aches, Edith rarely mentioned them in her letters to May, Olga, Vera, and other relatives. Eugenia was at boarding school when World War I began and felt great frustration at her exclusion from major family

⁴³ Vera Poutiatine to Dorothy Poutiatine, 7 February 1916, Box 2, Folder 4, Letter 10.

⁴⁴ Vera Poutiatine to Dorothy Poutiatine, 21 September 1917, Box 2, Folder 5, Letter 11; Vera Poutiatine to Dorothy Poutiatine, 5 September 1917, Box 2, Folder 5, Letter 13.

decisions, such as taking on war work and moving to London. Dorothy helped Edith move into the London flat during the war, but sought confirmation from Vera for her decisions and eventually ceded her responsibilities to May. Neither Dorothy nor Eugenia seemed to need specific comforts or support from their mother or sisters in the years before and during the war, and both independently sought work in the aftermath of the war without the sort of family fretting that accompanied May, Olga, and Vera's work decisions. Eugenia even moved to Johannesburg, South Africa, to work at a hospital and live near her Aunt Lulie. By the time she and Dorothy moved away from Edith and became part of the family correspondence, the family and their relationships were already changing due to outside factors.

V. Changes over Distance and Time

After the February Revolution in Russia, Edith's family lost its income from Muir & Mirrielees, triggering a number of changes for the women. Dorothy and Eugenia joined May as nurses, and Olga and Edith turned their home, The Old Barn, into a guesthouse. These changes resulted in greater distances between the women as they moved around for work and in greater stress for all of them. Their relationships had to accommodate less time for correspondence and visiting, and each letter took on greater significance as it compensated for the personal contact the women were missing. With the letters as almost their only ties to one another, the women included weightier content and depended on their interpretations of the letters in order to understand their changing relationships.

Edith, who was accustomed to having her daughters nearby or corresponding regularly, felt the heaviest emotional strain. She complained to Olga that taking in boarders was “a strenuous life & leaves me little time for my real work – business letters, accounts, mending, etc. or for my pleasure, esp. writing to my dear girls.”⁴⁵ She frequently had to put off writing to one or more of the daughters because of other responsibilities around the house, specifically corresponding with potential guests and supplying her house for them: “I had so many important letters, notes, & cheques, bills, etc. to attend to yesterday that my ‘pleasure letters’ had to be put off.”⁴⁶ Edith became more anxious about each daughter because of her lack of contact with them, and she took to fretting over small disagreements often caused by unclear communication. In one instance, she pestered Olga until Olga became angry and “scolded” Edith, leading to an emotional letter meant to restore peace. In it, Edith apologized for her fretting: “I am so sorry for every time I have worried you by impatience, or consulting or talking to you when you were tired or busy writing. I am getting too impulsive in my old age, tired of the long, trying command of nerves & temper.”⁴⁷ However, Edith also wrote about the value of distance in that same letter, revealing that the stress in her life now made accommodating her daughters’ emotions more difficult. She apologized to Olga but also remained accusatory: “I promise to forgive & forget if you will, for I lost my temper, & was v. cross after feeling so happy, fit, & ready for the fray till you ‘scolded’ me! Nevermind. ‘a storm clears the air’; ‘absence makes the heart grow fond,’ ‘familiarity

⁴⁵ Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 11 August 1921, Box 2, Folder 9, Letter 12.

⁴⁶ Edith Poutiatine to her daughters, 14 October 1909, Box 1, Folder 8, Letter 3.

⁴⁷ Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 5 November 1924, Box 2, Folder 13, Letter 4.

breeds contempt' etc. are all true proverbs.”⁴⁸ Edith both desired to be closer to her daughters and struggled with her anxiety and theirs.

She also felt added insecurity at the idea of the daughters corresponding about her without her knowledge. In earlier years, when more than one daughter had lived at home, the girls who were away wrote private letters to Edith or family letters, which Edith read to the entire family; therefore Edith was usually privy to whatever was said. When the daughters scattered for work, they corresponded with each other, occasionally cutting Edith out of the loop. In one instance, Edith suspected that Dorothy had complained to Eugenia about Edith's actions, and so Edith complained about Dorothy to Eugenia. Dorothy felt hurt by Edith's mistrust, and Edith had to repair relations with a letter to Dorothy. Edith wrote, "I only meant by 'tirade' a natural grumble (against my forgetfulness having yr things sent & mended) which yr letter to Jen probably contained, I thought. As if I shld ever think you wld write nasty things against me! I am so sorry you felt hurt, my Dorrie...we love one another too truly ever to wish to hurt one another.”⁴⁹ The distances between the women, bridged only by hurriedly-written letters, led to a series of suspicions and arguments that subtly altered their peaceful, pre-war relationships.

VI. Changes Caused by Olga's Illness

The most drastic shifts in the women's relationships, however, were caused not by time or distance but by Olga's worsening mental health. After the war, Olga had a mental breakdown, and her aunts committed her to the psychiatric ward of a Copenhagen

⁴⁸ Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 5 November 1924, Box 2, Folder 13, Letter 4.

⁴⁹ Edith Poutiatine to Dorothy Poutiatine, 3 September 1922, Box 2, Folder 10, Letter 6.

hospital. Though Olga eventually left the hospital and returned to England, she was never the same mentally. Olga's weakness forced Edith and the other women to adjust their understanding of Olga and their relationships with her in order to accommodate Olga's increased sensitivity and decreased capacity for work. Financially, the other sisters supported Olga, who lived with Edith until Edith's death.

When Olga was still in the hospital in Copenhagen, Edith began to adjust to Olga's illness. Edith communicated with the aunts, in addition to Olga, in order to get a more complete picture of Olga's health, and Edith became gentler and more encouraging in her letters to Olga. She wrote, "I am so longing for my Jackie, & constantly thinking of her! I feel sure our Vavie's allowed to be very near you, & to help you, as all our prayers must" and "Go on steadily my darling girl, adding health & strength so that we may all rejoice at having our dear Jackie well & happy with us."⁵⁰ Using information from the aunts, Edith encouraged Olga with good news; she wrote that she was "so pleased to hear the doctor's good report of you & that you will be home by the end of the month. I can hardly realize it, it seems too good to be true!"⁵¹ Edith referred to Olga's treatment as a "rest cure" and came to believe that since rest worked in Copenhagen, rest was what Olga needed in England as well.⁵²

Edith and the other daughters spent the rest of Olga's life encouraging her to be calm and do as little as possible, a marked contrast to the war years when they were determined to help her take up war work. From her home in South Africa, Eugenia

⁵⁰ Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 4 November 1920, Box 2, Folder 8, Letter 1; Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 21 September 1921, Box 2, Folder 9, Letter 8.

⁵¹ Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 21 September 1921, Box 2, Folder 9, Letter 8.

⁵² Edith and Eugenia Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 27 March 1919, Box 2, Folder 7, Letter 4.

pleaded with Olga: “I do wish you could rest more than you do or have done lately. You sound so weary + sad abt the future.”⁵³ Eugenia reminded her that Olga had “promised me when I came out here that you wld always be very frank & tell me all yr feelings +...how you feel because I was worried from rumours you still have very bad headaches.”⁵⁴ May also wrote to Olga with encouragement to rest: “You must do your very best to get stronger daily so as to be able to come over here soon.”⁵⁵ Eugenia and May received worrying information about Olga from Edith, who felt constant concern for her “son Jack.” Edith wrote to May that Olga “overdoes it, & gets tired and short-tempered” and Edith was frequently at the receiving end of Olga’s temper.⁵⁶ Despite these sensitivities and anxieties, Edith and Olga made their situation work, living together and running the guesthouse together until Edith’s death in 1928.

After Edith’s death, Olga’s sisters took over her care, with Dorothy leaving hospital nursing in order to work as a private nurse. This move gave them more time to tend to Olga from 1928 to 1940, at which point she needed constant supervision because of anxiety triggered by World War II. At this point, May and Dorothy began a correspondence regarding where Olga could live during the war. May gave Dorothy the final say in the matter because Dorothy was the one living with and caring for Olga; May wrote, “Remember I have agreed all along that any decision you make about Olga will be right as I cannot judge at a distance certainly it looks a lovely place & as you say from

⁵³ Eugenia Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 20 October 1925, Box 2, Folder 14, Letter 3.

⁵⁴ Eugenia Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, n.d., Box 2, Folder 11, Letter 2.

⁵⁵ May Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 3 June 1919, Box 2, Folder 7, Letter 3.

⁵⁶ Edith Poutiatine to May Poutiatine, 21 October 1923, Box 2, Folder 11, Letter 12.

what you saw of it much better for O.”⁵⁷ May and Dorothy pooled their money and sent Olga to a nursing home, where she stayed for about a year. Twenty years earlier, Olga had commented that nursing work was “far too hard for Dorrie,” but in that time Dorothy’s nursing work became necessary for Olga to receive constant care. Their relationship had shifted enormously over the course of two world wars and various illnesses and deaths in the family.

Each family member had adapted in her own way to the changes that occurred between 1914 and 1940. In some cases these adaptations altered their relationships with each other and their roles in the family. Edith became increasingly dependent on her daughters for financial and emotional support, while May, Dorothy, and Eugenia became more independent. Though this was typical of any transition from childhood to adulthood, it demonstrates the types of change that became possible during this period. In earlier times, the daughters would have had to marry to provide financial support to their mother while maintaining their respectability. In the post-war years, however, society was more open to women working in clerical and nursing positions, making the Poutiatines’ adaptations possible. It was Olga’s adaptations which fell furthest from the female norm. Like the healthy, upper-class young men who went off to war by choice, to fulfill their duty to their country, Olga left for Russia in 1915. At that time she was healthy, strong, and motivated by her desire to help Russia. And like many of Britain’s young men, Olga returned to England broken by years of violence and deprivation. Her position in the family went from male heir, the financial decision-maker and emotional

⁵⁷ May Poutiatine to Dorothy Poutiatine, 11 March 1939, Box 2, Folder 17, Letter 1.

support for her mother, to dependent invalid. The rest of the family had to adapt to the changes war had wrought in Olga.

VII. Supporting Each Other as Russians

These changes in roles and relationships were accompanied by a change in status: from émigrés to exiles. The Poutiatines' ties with Russia also changed profoundly over the course of their lifetimes, at times providing consistency and identity and at times creating uncertainty and anxiety. One consistent aspect of the Poutiatines pre-World War I relationships was their maintenance of the family's Russian identity; each woman helped the others remain attached to their Russianness; they wrote to each other in Russian frequently, sometimes even requesting a letter or postcard in Russian, and Edith hired Russian teachers and asked the older girls to teach the younger ones Russian.⁵⁸ At boarding school, an outside Russian tutor came in to work with the girls, who enjoyed the lessons. As Vera wrote to Edith, "Our Russian master comes regularly, and the lessons are nice."⁵⁹ Eugenia began her Russian lessons at home before she left for boarding school. Edith found a Russian tutor to visit Glebovo and wrote to Vera that "Jen had her first Russ. Lesson last Friday, & enjoyed it."⁶⁰ When the older girls visited home, Edith asked them to work with Eugenia as well: "Then you can give Jennie some Russian lessons, when you are over at Weybridge" and "It will be so good for Jennie to read

⁵⁸ Poutiatine Correspondence Box 8; Eugenia Poutiatine to her mother and sisters, 23 July year unknown, Box 1, Folder 5, Letter 12; Olga to unknown, 27 May 1915, Box 2, Folder 1, Letter 3; Olga Poutiatine to Dorothy Poutiatine, 9 June 1915, Box 2, Folder 3, Letter 27; May Poutiatine to unknown, 6 March 1915, Box 2, Folder 1, Letter 11.

⁵⁹ Vera Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 25 January 1912, Box 1, Folder 14, Letter 9.

⁶⁰ Edith Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 29 November 1915, Box 2, Folder 2, Letter 16.

Russian with you.”⁶¹ The women both bonded and defined themselves through their use of the Russian language. In addition to using the Russian language, the women attended Russian church services whenever possible. Edith took Eugenia to Russian services even before Eugenia began Russian lessons, and the older girls attended a Russian church near their boarding school in London.⁶² Whenever they could not find a Russian service to attend, the girls attended a Greek church instead, but they preferred the Russian services.⁶³ When May was visiting relatives in Brussels, she wrote home to Edith, “I am going to church tomorrow at last! Angela & I went to find out the time of the service yesterday...It is in a house & on the door is written [Russian]. You don’t know how I felt seeing Russian writing again! It is awful never to hear a word.”⁶⁴ The girls frequently wrote to each other about services they attended and sent each other greetings and gifts on their namesdays and on other Russian Orthodox holidays.⁶⁵ The Russian Orthodox religion and its church communities provided an essential connection to Russian culture for the girls. The church had fulfilled this role long before the Poutiatines moved to England; it had formed the center of the Russian émigré community in Britain starting in 1746, when the head of Eastern Orthodoxy appointed a Russian priest to lead the church in London, which had been led by Greek priests from its founding in 1712. By the time the Poutiatines moved to England in 1910, the Russian

⁶¹ Edith Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 11 January year unknown, Box 1, Folder 14, Letter 5; Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 25 September 1921, Box 2, Folder 9, Letter 14.

⁶² Edith Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 29 November 1915, Box 2, Folder 2, Letter 16.

⁶³ Vera Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 17 September 1911, Box 1, Folder 13, Letter 13.

⁶⁴ May Poutiatine to her sisters, 5 December 1908, Box 1, Folder 7, Letter 12.

⁶⁵ Vera Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 29 September 1911, Box 1, Folder 13, Letter 12; Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 6.

identity of the Orthodox church in London was well-established, and it provided the Poutiatine women with a tangible link to their Russian identity.⁶⁶

Finally, whenever one of the family members had access to Russian goods, she was expected to bring back tokens for her family. When Edith made trips to Russia while the girls were at boarding school, she took request for Russian items. Vera requested “any little Russian rubbish from a pretty card (not a view) to a paper book as I am longing for more Russia – in any form.”⁶⁷ When Olga was nursing at Tenbury, she asked for Russian items from their church in London: “a tiny blessed piece & a candle end (this if it really is possible) from church please.”⁶⁸ At a Yuletide fair in London, Dorothy asked Edith to buy her some “Russian things,” and Edith purchased “some lovely embroideries” for her. These odds and ends allowed the family to feel attached to Russia despite their distance and it gave them a way to support each other’s Russian identity. Writing in Russian, teaching Russian, attending church services, and purchasing Russian goods allowed the Poutiatines not only to maintain their personal ties to their home country but also to foster each other’s Russian identity.

Their support of each other’s Russianness was most crucial when Olga wanted to nurse in Russia during the war. From a very young age, Olga had dreamed of doing good works for Russia. At age six, she confided in her diary:

⁶⁶ Anthony Glenn Cross, *“By the Banks of the Thames:” Russians in Eighteenth Century Britain* (Newtonville: Oriental Research Partners, 1980) 35-56.

⁶⁷ Vera Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 17 March 1912, Box 1, Folder 14, Letter 11.

⁶⁸ Olga Poutiatine to her mother and sisters, 23-25 March 1915, Box 2, Folder 3, Letter 5.

I'm rather bothered because I think I won't be able to give up anything to do with my own pleasure or advantage for the sake of my mission for Russia, if God wants me to do it...Now about the only way I can do good to my Country is to pray for her during this great crisis and to prepare myself to do good to her by training my character and mind. I must do my best in all I learn, as everything will come in useful and helpful...I still think about what I hope is to be my mission to Russia, but I'm afraid I don't think of it enough.⁶⁹

Her mother reassured her that there would be work to do in Russia when she was older, and indeed when World War I began there was a need for medical care for the Russian troops. The difficulty was to find a place for Olga to nurse in Russia where she would be both useful and properly chaperoned. Vera, May, and Edith all tried to find a way to help Olga; Vera even recommended that Edith, May, and Olga move to Russia while Vera cared for Dorothy and Eugenia in England. The women's determination to see Olga fulfill what she considered her duty to Russia indicated the ties to Russia felt by the entire family. Olga saw herself as fulfilling the role of the male heir, serving his country to the honor of the family, and her sisters endorsed this view. Their relationships adapted to support Olga, with May supporting Edith while Olga was in Russia.

Notably, before and during World War I, the women's exchanges about Russia were always positive; during and after the February Revolution, the women's feelings toward their country were more mixed. With the October Revolution in 1917, the women became exiles and supported each other through that transition, which was not only emotionally trying but also financially difficult. The women went into mourning for the

⁶⁹ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 9-10.

imperial Russia that they had known and for their own Russian citizenship. As Olga wrote when leaving Russia in 1918, “I feel as you do that to go away now may [mean to go away] for many years and, my God, how [my] heart hurts at the thought.”⁷⁰ The women felt “constant anxiety” about the situation in Russia during and after the October Revolution, and almost all letters sent between October 1917 and 1923 include a mention of the situation in Russia, which, according to the Poutiatines, was worsening daily. Their mourning lasted for the rest of their lives. When Olga was in the nursing home during World War I, she wrote in her diary of her longing for Russia: “Portraits and icons make me long for my native land and for those from whom I have no news.”⁷¹ In the 1970s, when she was the only surviving member of the Poutiatine family, Dorothy told an historian that her dying wish was to see Russia once more. The women communicated this sorrow in their letters and held up fond memories to help each other cope with their sadness.

VIII. Conclusion

Like any family, the Poutiatines developed roles and relationships within the family unit that allowed the unit to function peacefully for the most part, and like most families, these roles and relationships shifted over time. The Poutiatines’ situation was unique in two respects: first that the family was made up only of women, and second that the family was a British-Russian hybrid with very complicated national roots. These two conditions both sheltered and exposed the family during the tumultuous earlier decades of

⁷⁰ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 89.

⁷¹ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 105.

the twentieth century. The family did not have a father, husband, or son to give up to the war effort, but they chose to send two daughters abroad as military nurses. The family was also especially vulnerable to events in Russia, which was their source of financial support and their family identities. When the October Revolution severed this connection, the women were left both financially and emotionally vulnerable. The family's precarious finances made it particularly sensitive to issues of women and work, which were rapidly changing during this time period. The women, out of desire and necessity, became part of a large group of middle-class women who took up labor in the post-war period. All of these changes affected not just the women's daily activities from 1914 to 1940, but also their emotional lives and their relationships, forcing them to adapt to a new and unstable landscape.

Chapter 3: War & Revolution

“Keep well and bright; don’t let our Mad-tea-party here make you too anxious. I think things are sure to come that will make the Doormouse sit-up and put a stop to the March-Hare’s wool-gathering and the Mad Hatter’s haranguing and peace talk. Alice must sit quiet and do her best when the crisis comes, having prepared all she can beforehand.” – Olga from Petrograd, 1917⁷²

I. Introduction

The roles and relationships of the Poutiatine women changed the most during World War I and the revolutions in Russia. At these times, the daughters felt called to serve both Russia and Britain. May and Olga became nurses, while Vera and Dorothy volunteered in other capacities. The experiences of the war changed each woman internally, and together and individually, they came to view themselves as competent and useful members of society. Their actions during the war fulfilled their desire to serve but also fulfilled desires they left unstated: travel, excitement, respect, and a sense of usefulness. In many ways, World War I helped the Poutiatine women by providing new opportunities and initial experience in nursing, which a few of them would later pursue as a career. The revolutions in Russia, however, divided and then devastated the family. They were split during the February Revolution between those loyal to the tsar and those excited about a democratic government. During the October Revolution, they lost the family business and became exiles, which hurt them both financially and emotionally.

⁷² Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 69-70.

II. Service

From a very early age, the Poutiatine daughters were steeped in the Eastern Orthodox Church and in the traditions of Russian nobility, both of which fostered a commitment to service. Since the time of Peter the Great, the Russian nobility drew its status from service to the tsar; this service took precedence over their landholdings and other pursuits.⁷³ Until 1762, the Russian government required noble men to serve in the military or the civil service, and even after the government abolished this requirement, service played a large role in the lives of most Russian nobles.⁷⁴ Eastern Orthodox teachings complemented the state's emphasis on service. The church in Russia taught that charity was necessary for personal salvation and therefore encouraged almsgiving, albeit of an anonymous and individual variety. Though the Eastern Orthodox Church set up few charity organizations compared to Western churches, serving the poor in society became a regular part of life for well-off Russians.⁷⁵ The Poutiatine family participated in both service to the state and service to the poor. Eugene Poutiatine and his father both served in the Russian military, and multiple family members took up missionary work.⁷⁶ From an early age, Eugene Poutiatine's daughters internalized this commitment to service. A photograph from 1905 includes Edith Poutiatine and all of her daughters dressed in Red Cross uniforms, possibly to symbolize their dedication to serving

⁷³ Becker 108-114; Blum 83-86.

⁷⁴ Blum 68-73; Becker 108-109, 113; Marc Raeff, "The Russian Nobility in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *The Nobility in Russia and Eastern Europe*, Eds. Ivo Banac and Paul Bushkovitch (New Haven: Yale Concilium on International and Area Studies, 1983) 110.

⁷⁵ Adele Lindenmeyr, "The Ethos of Charity in Imperial Russia," *Journal of Social History* 23.4 (1990): 679-681.

⁷⁶ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 7-8.

Russia.⁷⁷ They regretted being in Dresden during this time of need for Russia, but even in Russia the family would not have been able to do very much. Eugene was too injured to rejoin the military, Edith had her hands full managing the family and household, and the daughters were too young to volunteer.

However, eight years later, at the start of World War I, the family seized the chance to serve each other and Russia. Edith invited her sisters-in-law Mary and Lise to stay at Glébovo, the family's British estate, on July 31, 1914, in light of the military build-up in Germany against Russia, and Olga wrote home from a trip to the seaside, telling Edith to "Promise if I am wanted to help you will wire for me."⁷⁸ Olga would later feel a greater responsibility to Russia, but her first thought was of her role as Jack, the masculine support for Edith. Olga and Edith, however, were not the only family members feeling the need to take action; Vera spearheaded an attempt to adopt a Belgian refugee in 1914. Vera wrote to Edith that "we are all extremely glad about the little Belgian boy. I don't think we ought to mind who or what we get as long as we do something. I do hope we will get him & that it won't fall through like everything else."⁷⁹

Unfortunately, the adoption of a Belgian refugee fell through as had earlier efforts, but the Poutiatine women clearly offered aid to the war effort within months of the start of the war. These philanthropic efforts fit neatly into the British tradition of women's philanthropy that had developed in the nineteenth century. Donating time,

⁷⁷ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 9.

⁷⁸ Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 1 August 1914, Box 1, Folder 16, Letter 5; Olga Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 3 August 1914, Box 1, Folder 16, Letter 4.

⁷⁹ Vera Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 4 November 1914, Box 1, Folder 16, Letter 15.

money, organizational skills, and maternal care were well-recognized ways in which women affected the world around them, expanding their moral and maternal duties into the public sphere.⁸⁰ Charity among the middle-class British, however, was notably different than charity in Russia. In Britain, the middle-class had adopted an almost scientific understanding of charity, which classified poverty as a problem and well-planned philanthropy as a solution to this social ill. Society understood the poor as being morally deficient, casting the female philanthropists as morally superior. In Russia, the idea of poverty as a social ill was less entrenched; it was more common for Russians to empathize with “poor people” than to fret over the societal ramifications of “poverty.” Though a more Western, humanitarian understanding of poverty gradually entered Russian culture in the nineteenth century, many Russians rejected the scientific and organizational approach of British charities in favor of traditional individual giving.⁸¹ The Poutiatine women, therefore, received competing messages about the substance and structure of charitable work. When World War I gave them increased options for charitable work, the women forged a middle path. Working within British philanthropic organizations, they described their charity as highly empathetic and individualized, demonstrating their Russian-influenced understanding of their work. From this, they gained personal satisfaction from their accomplishments and their newfound purpose and they fulfilled a spiritual requirement of the Orthodox Church.

⁸⁰ F. K. Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980) 7, 10-11, 27-28, 73; Gillian Avery, *The Best Type of Girl: A History of Girls' Independent Schools* (London: Deutsch, 1991) 121-123; Georgina Brewis, “From Working Parties to Social Work: Middle-Class Girls' Education and Social Service, 1890-1914,” *History of Education* 38.6 (2009): 763.

⁸¹ Lindenmeyr 680-686.

III. Duty to Family and Country

By 1915, almost everyone in the family had found a way to help the war effort. Three of the five daughters became nurses or hospital volunteers. Olga and May joined Voluntary Aid Detachments (V.A.D.s) and worked as nurses-in-training, while Dorothy found a position visiting hospitals to work with refugees and invalids.⁸² Vera, Edith, and Eugenia found other ways to help. Vera, whom the family considered too weak to volunteer as a nurse, looked for work in the Foreign Office but was rejected because of her Russian birth.⁸³ She bemoaned her feeling of uselessness, writing to Olga, “You are filling a place of hope, trust & importance compared to poor little me with my gardening odd jobs, babies, etc.”⁸⁴ Vera went on to “adopt” a “poor blind Pole” and sent him letters and presents.⁸⁵ Eugenia, who was still in school, also became frustrated by her lack of usefulness, so she and Edith “adopted” an injured soldier living in London and sent him letters and packages to cheer him along.⁸⁶ The Poutiatine women demonstrated the various levels of involvement possible for women during World War I; Eugenia, Edith, and Vera took part in local, largely home-based service that suited Edith’s domestic life, Eugenia’s life at school, and Vera’s physical weakness. Olga, May, and Dorothy, on the other hand, took a more adventurous role by becoming nurses, which suited their age, physical fitness, and lack of familial responsibilities.

⁸² Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 10-11; Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 23 April 1915, Box 2, Folder 2, Letter 23.

⁸³ Laurence (surname unknown) to Vera Poutiatine, 7 November 1917, Box 5, Folder 5, Letter 2.

⁸⁴ Vera Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 7 June 1915, Box 2, Folder 1, Letter 7.

⁸⁵ Lise Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 27 February 1917, Box 5, Folder 1, Letter 13.

⁸⁶ Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 23 May 1915, Box 2, Folder 2, Letter 11.

In terms of duty and service, Olga was the most serious and devoted of the Poutiatine women. Olga felt it her duty to serve in the war as fully as would a son. From her first V.A.D. position in Tenbury Wells, England, Olga wrote to Edith: “Thanks so very much for your long letter and for permission to stay on here if I like. I am so glad you can spare one so well & that you are seriously thinking of May going to Russia – it is right one at least of us should be helping our own country in her need. I love my life here so need not grouse, though I long that this should be a preparation for work in Russia.”⁸⁷ Olga made no secret of her desire to nurse in Russia either alone or with May, and her family seemed to fully support her ambition. Letters from this time indicate the family tried to get Olga to Russia. Unfortunately, nursing abroad posed more problems for unchaperoned young women than nursing in England. When thinking of ways to get Olga to Russia, Vera proposed having Edith, May, Olga, and Dorothy go to Russia together with Edith as chaperone, while Vera stayed with Eugenia at or near Wentworth. Vera also thought that Olga might “have a room in the same house as [cousin] Zuka or something. After all this year is quite different to others & when one is doing things for work’s sake I think no one need think of or mind appearances.”⁸⁸ Though Vera claimed that appearances did not matter during this time of war, ideas of respectability clearly affected her thinking on Olga’s prospects. She was speaking not only of finances but also of respectability, when she wrote to Olga: “I do feel so strongly that every sacrifice should be made [to get you to Russia].”⁸⁹ In the end, Olga and May both traveled to

⁸⁷ Olga Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 15 April 1915, Box 2, Folder 3, Letter 11.

⁸⁸ Vera Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 20 April 1915, Box 2, Folder 1, Letter 8.

⁸⁹ Vera Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 20 April 1915, Box 2, Folder 1, Letter 8.

Russia in 1915 under the supervision of the V.A.D. program: May to work in an invalid home and Olga to work in the Anglo-Russian Hospital in Petrograd.

While nursing, Olga, as the “son” of the family, and May, as the eldest daughter, struggled with conflicting duties more than their sisters. Only days after Olga had begun nursing at Tenbury Wells, Edith wrote to her, “We missed you much, my child, as we often do. I cannot believe it will only be 2 weeks tomorrow since you left us. It seems so much longer!”⁹⁰ Letters like this followed Olga to Petrograd and then to field hospitals on the Eastern Front, and though Edith presumably sent them out of love, Olga felt the guilt of leaving her mother. Olga repeatedly wrote Edith back describing the useful work done in the hospital and the family duty Olga fulfilled through nursing. In 1915, when the lack of servants made Glébovo too difficult for Edith to keep up, it was May, as the oldest daughter, who returned from nursing in Russia to help her mother move the family to a London flat. The weight of her nursing duties, the travel, and her familial duties nearly drove May to collapse, and she wrote to a friend that her “nerves were stretched to breaking point from all the worry & trouble of this winter & esp. the last month & all the physical work at home & in hospital, as well.”⁹¹ Realizing that the situation at home was difficult, Olga maintained her duty to Russia and wrote to Edith: “Still I feel I must work in my own country while I can be spared from home.”⁹² Olga did not ask if she could be spared, she assumed it and continued on with her work. Letters back and forth between family members in England did not indicate any tension or resentment regarding Olga’s

⁹⁰ Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 21 March 1915, Box 2, Folder 2, Letter 2.

⁹¹ May Poutiatine to unknown, 6 March 1915, Box 2, Folder 1, Letter 11.

⁹² Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 32.

decision; though Edith expressed the typical anxiety of a mother whose child is far away and engaged in dangerous work, Edith never mentioned a desire for Olga to return home.

Later in the war, after two years of service, Olga did offer to help her elderly family members; she wrote to Mary and Lise in Copenhagen that if they needed her, she would come. By this time, 1917, it was too difficult to travel from Britain to Denmark. German u-boats made a sea voyage from Britain impossible, but Olga could travel to Denmark over land, via Finland and Sweden. Olga was the only family member in a position to join the elderly aunts.⁹³ This burden of caring for relatives in addition to war duties was a specifically female one during World War I. Vera Brittain, who spent nearly three years as a V.A.D. during World War I, felt constant pressure from her parents to return home and care for them. Unlike Olga, she did eventually give in to the pressure, but not without deeply conflicted emotions:

What was I to do? I wondered desperately. There was my family on one side demanding my presence, and here was the offensive, which made every pair of experienced hands worth ten pairs under normal conditions...I only knew that no one in France would believe a domestic difficulty to be so insoluble; if I were dead, or a male, it would have to be settled without me...Half-frantic with the misery of conflicting obligations, I envied [my brother] his complete powerlessness to leave the Army whatever happened at home.⁹⁴

Brittain described her experience as a “violent clash between family and profession, between ‘duty’ and ambition, between conscience and achievement,” which was not

⁹³ Mary Poutiatine to Dorothy Poutiatine, 19 February 1917, Box 5, Folder 1, Letter 10; Julius Moritzen, “The Perils of Scandinavia,” *The North American Review* 205.735 (1917): 228-230.

⁹⁴ Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900-1925* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989) 422.

uncommon among V.A.D.s summoned home to care for ailing relatives.⁹⁵ It deeply bothered Brittain that the Army would never consider a male's familial duty to supersede his patriotic duty, but that all of society considered it right for her to fulfill her familial responsibilities above all else.⁹⁶ Olga might have felt similarly, but she was lucky enough to have four other sisters, including an older sister, to care for Edith, Mary, and Lise. Olga also came from a very different family than Vera Brittain. Whereas Brittain's family fell into the standard British middle-class mold, Olga's family was both less British and without a father or son. So while Olga may have been a female who often supported her mother, she was more like Vera's brother, the family heir who decided his or her own fate but felt beholden to cultural expectations. In the Poutiatine family, May most closely resembled Vera Brittain in her relationship with her mother and siblings and in her role within the immediate family. The unique characteristics of her all female family and May's willingness to shoulder family burdens gave Olga an unusual measure of freedom.

IV. British versus Russian

Olga's other conflict was between her duty to Britain and her duty to Russia. The war brought this conflict into stark relief, both for Olga and for her family members, but Olga felt the most pressure. During her time as a VAD in St. Petersburg, Olga worked with British medical staff on Russian patients. She worked, ate, and slept with the British but felt increasingly Russian during this time period. This tension created an internal

⁹⁵ Brittain 422.

⁹⁶ Brittain 421-423.

dialogue in which Olga constantly compared British and Russian habits and cultures and often found in favor of the Russian side. At the same time, she felt indebted to the British V.A.D. program for training her and to the British staff of the Anglo-Russian Hospital, with whom she worked for over a year. Upon arriving at the hospital in 1915, Olga had embraced both of her allegiances: “We do want something here to show British sympathy and no one can pass this building by unnoticed when the Union Jack waves over it. Anglo-Russian friendship is nearer my heart than ever, and I just long that it should be helped just a wee bit by this hospital.”⁹⁷ Soon, however, she was frustrated with her translating and escorting duties, which took precedence over her nursing duties at the hospital. She complained, “I am kept busy telephoning...taking one or other member of the party shopping, interpreting between the architect...and the Red Cross official...Then I give the orders to hotel servants or help my pupils [other V.A.D.s] to bargain with cabbies who take 1 rouble for the shortest of distance.”⁹⁸ The constant demand for her language skills frequently interrupted what little medical work she was allowed to do as a V.A.D.

She longed to take part in the medical work that V.A.D.s had to do in the overwhelmed Russian hospitals. The number and severity of cases that reached the Anglo-Russian Hospital resulted not only from the sheer numbers of injured soldiers but also from the weakness of medical care nearer the front and from the great distances between the front and the hospitals. Because of the greater distances between the

⁹⁷ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 16.

⁹⁸ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 15.

fighting and the hospitals on the Eastern Front, nearly fifty percent of wounded Russian soldiers died, compared to fifteen to twenty-five percent of wounded soldiers on the Western Front.⁹⁹ For this reason, the Anglo-Russian Hospital was overcrowded with dire cases that might have been treated successfully closer to the front, and V.A.D.s had more opportunities to do medical work there than in the war hospitals in Britain. Olga's letters from the Anglo-Russian Hospital provide a unique perspective on the Eastern Front. Olga was more forgiving of Russian inefficiencies and identified more closely with her patients than other British nurses on the Eastern Front, but her idealization of the Russian peasant soldiers and of the Russian war effort colored her understanding of her work. Thus her letters provide a more nuanced and emotional account but possibly a less accurate one.

After a year at the Anglo-Russian Hospital, the VAD program offered Olga a position in a field hospital, and she eagerly took it. She had fewer bureaucratic duties there and was given more medical responsibilities. She found great joy and comfort nursing Russian peasants, and she frequently wrote home about them, though her descriptions were tinged with paternalism and romanticism. She connected herself to the peasants by focusing on their idealized connection to the land:

I love all these boys and best of all the peasant of peasants who tells of his fields in simple words, but such glowing enthusiastic ones that you just smell them, and I begin to understand why I have that love of turning the ground, enriching it, sowing seeds and handling wee seedlings; it is

⁹⁹ Leo van Bergen, *Before My Helpless Sight: Suffering, Dying, and Military Medicine on the Western Front, 1914-1918*, Trans. Liz Waters (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009) 287; Christine E. Hallett, *Containing Trauma: Nursing Work in the First World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009) 139.

inborn, inherited, not only from Daddie, but from a great multitude of ploughing, sowing and harvesting ancestry.¹⁰⁰

Through musings such as these, Olga reveals her slow transition from enjoying “Anglo-Russian friendship” to idolizing the Russian community of nurses and patients. Olga’s experience with Russian patients deepened her sense of Russian identity. Before the war, Olga felt tied to Russia through ancestry and religion; after working with Russian peasants, Olga felt an inherent “Russianness” within her, characterized by her love of the soil. Her feelings echoed those of the Russian Slavophiles, intellectuals who cherished an idealized version of the Russian peasantry. As Olga continued to write about the peasant-soldiers throughout the war, she would frequently refer to their simplicity, kindness, and ties to the land, all stereotypes held up by the Slavophiles as proof of the Russian peasantry’s inherent goodness.¹⁰¹ As her contact with patients drew Olga towards Slavophile beliefs, she felt more keenly the distance that being a British V.A.D. created between her and the Russian people.

Explaining the situation to her mother, Olga wrote “After the work [in the field hospital] I don’t feel like returning to the work in Petrograd...now many things have changed, and I also having the longing to work with my compatriots and, if possible, to find friends among them. Interpreters have been found for [the English nurses]; now my duty points less clearly in their direction.”¹⁰² Olga bristled at helping Russian soldiers as an English nurse; she attached value to serving *as a Russian* and felt it impossible to

¹⁰⁰ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 69.

¹⁰¹ Geoffrey Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001) 271-275, 281-285.

¹⁰² Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 33.

serve as a Russian within the V.A.D. framework. She solved this conflict by not reenrolling as a V.A.D. at the end of her six-month term. Instead she planned to join the Russian Red Cross. Before she could do so, however, the February Revolution began right below the hospital windows, and Olga's highly romanticized experiences with Russian peasants took on a newfound importance.

V. Revolutions

During the February Revolution, Olga's described her experience in a long letter to her family and in her daily diary.¹⁰³ For the most part her writing included dry descriptions of events, with only tiny bits of evaluation and emotion seeping in; on March 11, after recording five days of lengthening bread-lines and growing workers' strikes, she recorded that "police treacherously dressed as soldiers" had opened fire and injured a number of protesters, scattering the rest.¹⁰⁴ "Why does one not scatter [the protesters] by firing blanks? Would this not do? Is blood necessary? Are victims necessary?"¹⁰⁵ These questions are the first glimmers of Olga's early, idealized understanding of the revolution. She believed that the inherently peaceful Russian people were driven to violence by government and police provocation. She did not budge from that position. After the revolution, she would ask, "why did Nicholas II not reply to the telegram of the Duma, why did he not want to make concessions before it was too late?"¹⁰⁶ Olga felt that

¹⁰³ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 43.

¹⁰⁴ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 45-48.

¹⁰⁵ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 48-49.

¹⁰⁶ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 68.

lives “might have been saved if the Sovereign had not persisted so long in refusing to believe what had happened.”¹⁰⁷

The criticism of police and of the tsar reflects Olga’s changing political views during her time in Russia. The mismanagement of the war followed by the police’s response to the revolution pushed Russians’ discontent with the government to a tipping point. Workers and peasants had long demanded better conditions, soldiers had grown increasingly frustrated with incompetent military leaders, and nobles and industrialists began to believe the tsar incapable of maintaining social peace and winning the war. All of these groups demanded change of some sort in the years and months leading up to February 1917.¹⁰⁸ Olga was not immune to the desires of those around her, and politically she fell closer to the soldiers and intelligentsia than to her aristocratic peers, who feared the chaos that political and social change would bring.

During the February Revolution, Olga never criticized the rioters, strikers, and eventual revolutionaries. Though she admitted that “many painful things are happening, (much that is sad),” Olga went on to write about “the moderation of the people” and “the remarkable organization of the new government.”¹⁰⁹ Her account is remarkable for the absence of fear or anger. It crackles with excitement and, more surprisingly perhaps, respect for the revolution. Indeed, she signed her original account to her family, “Am embracing you all and congratulate you with the great deeds which have been carried out

¹⁰⁷ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 68.

¹⁰⁸ Orlando Figes, *A People’s Tragedy: The Russian Revolution, 1891-1924* (New York: Penguin, 1998) 257-270, 282-284.

¹⁰⁹ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 59.

excellently. Now to win the war, exerting all our efforts to this end, and we shall have an unprecedented historical event and shall be more than proud.”¹¹⁰ Olga was not alone in the optimism. In the days following the February Revolution, millions of Russians in Petrograd and beyond celebrated the overthrow of the tsar and the implementation of a more democratic government. Historian Orlando Figes describes “scenes of rejoicing throughout the Russian Empire” featuring “rapturous crowds,” “jubilant processions,” and “patriotic speeches.”¹¹¹

Olga’s participation in this “rejoicing” was preceded by her slow shift to the political left. Before the disturbances in Petrograd, Olga wrote the following in a letter to her Aunts Mary and Lise:

One wants to believe that everything in this world is done for the best, that this struggle will in the future give freedom and happiness to the majority of the common people. The social reforms, whose birth we now see in all warring states – the raising of wages and income taxes – all this must lead to a more equitable division of resources and to a more just and correct appraisal of human labor.¹¹²

By Olga’s own admission these views differed greatly from the political beliefs she had held in Britain, and she attributed the change to her personal encounters with Russians in the field hospitals on the Eastern Front. Knowing that her family had not changed in their devotion to the tsar, Olga sought to explain her newfound liberalism:

¹¹⁰ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 65.

¹¹¹ Figes 345-348.

¹¹² Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 65.

I personally am not sure how I would have taken the news of the recent days had all this happened in 1915, while I lived abroad. After all, we were brought up to love the former monarch...but you know Aunties, since living in the native land, and particularly having been at the front, many of my views have changed, and I was completely prepared for the developments of last week. After everything that I had heard and seen in [regard to] our old regime, after all the criminal mistakes of the former authorities, who had entrusted the fate of the people in such difficult years to the hands of favourites and traitors, after all this, is it surprising that my views have changed so and that the overthrow [of the Tsar] has rekindled my conviction that we shall after all defeat the German. The war will be followed no doubt by a difficult period of internal changes and strife, but now, I am confident, we shall exert all effort to defeat the foreign enemy.¹¹³

The revolution brought two identities within Olga to a point of conflict: Olga as a Russian countess and Olga as a Russian nurse. During the revolution, Olga could have felt as if she was under attack, as many in her social position were. Olga even treated a Russian countess who had been injured by the revolutionaries, as Olga might have been if she was not a British nurse. Of course, Olga could also identify with the Russian peasants whom she had cared for over the past year. Like them, Olga had witnessed the inefficiencies and carelessness of the czarist war effort and knew the toll it had taken on the ill-equipped and untrained peasant soldiers. When the revolution broke out these peasant soldiers and their families were in direct opposition to the Russian aristocracy to which Olga's family belonged. In this conflict, Olga sided with the peasants.¹¹⁴ Part of her decision may have stemmed from her romanticizing of the Russian peasantry, but British and Russian ideas of service by the upper class for the poor may have also influenced Olga. There were parallels between her role as a nurse and as an upper-class

¹¹³ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 67-68.

¹¹⁴ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 53.

woman, the same parallels that made nursing an acceptable middle-class occupation in Britain. Both wealthy women and nurses fulfilled the role of caretaker, especially in Russia where the nobility adopted paternal attitudes in regards to the peasants.¹¹⁵ When Olga refers to “our peasant[s]” in letters home, there is a possessiveness that belies her stated respect for the lower class. These remnants of aristocratic beliefs mixed in with empathy for the peasant soldiers and were largely hidden under her joy in the February Revolution, but they would emerge as soon as the new government considered pulling out of World War I.

In the months following the revolution, Olga treasured her belief that the new government would give fresh energy to the fight against the Germans. Though she supported the republican principles of the new government, her chief interest was in winning World War I, which she saw as the key to legitimizing the new government and proving its value to the world. She believed that a successful revolution and a victory against Germany would be “so excellent that one will hardly find in history a similar popular feat” and she believed this to be “possible particularly for our brave, enduring, forgiving and amazingly kind people, capable of great sacrifices and deprivations.”¹¹⁶ Like many educated Russians, she persuaded herself that the revolution would inspire

¹¹⁵ Prochaska 6-7; Sue Hawkins, *Nursing and Women's Labour in the Nineteenth Century: The Quest for Independence* (London: Routledge, 2010) 17, 21-22.

¹¹⁶ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 67.

patriotism among Russian soldiers, giving them a greater and more personal desire to win the war. The soldiers, however, had other desires.¹¹⁷

Whereas many educated Russians saw the revolution as political, many Russian soldiers saw the revolution as social. A political revolution might have deepened feelings of citizenship and patriotism, but a social revolution led to a general questioning of all social divisions and authority. Russian soldiers stopped obeying their commanding officers and in many cases completely refused to fight.¹¹⁸ Olga spoke to her patients about the importance of winning the war, but she determined that they had been corrupted by socialist leaders, who promised peace and prosperity after withdrawal from the war. For this reason, Olga became disenchanted with the new government, though she claimed to remain loyal to the Russian peasants. She believed that the soldiers did not understand what abandoning the war effort would mean, and that though Russian soldiers were “kind” and “brave,” they were also easily misdirected.¹¹⁹ Other nurses on the Eastern Front recorded similar concerns, and some even noted a breakdown in discipline among wounded soldiers in the hospitals. A number of British nurses serving in Russia began the process of returning to Britain as unrest among the soldiers grew, but Olga betrayed no desire to leave Russia even once her V.A.D. term had ended.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Figes, 378-380.

¹¹⁸ Figes 378-380.

¹¹⁹ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 77-78.

¹²⁰ Jane McDermid, “A Very Polite and Considerate Revolution: The Scottish Women’s Hospitals and the Russian Revolution, 1916-17,” *Revolutionary Russia* 21.2 (2008): 143; Joyce Wood, “The Revolution Outside her Window: New Light Shed on the 1917 Russian Revolution from the Papers of VAD Nurse Dorothy N. Seymour,” *The Proceedings of the South Carolina Historical Association* (2005): 81.

Instead, Olga joined the Kaufman Sisterhood, a division of the Russian Red Cross. Working in field hospitals along the Eastern Front, Olga received only fragmentary news of political events back in Petrograd. Even from the field hospital, however, Olga could see the changing tide of the Russian Army; her patients more and more often were won over by “the frightful poison of the peace propagandists,” which was “temptingly sweet to those who have suffered for three years in a war they were not taught to understand.”¹²¹ The wounded soldiers told Olga that tilling their fields and deciding “the questions of the day – the proprietorship of the land, of factories, and of capital” took precedence over the fight against Germany.¹²² In return, Olga argued the need “to protect our newly born liberty against our outside enemy.”¹²³ Olga understood the homesickness of the soldiers; she realized that many men had not seen their homes in years. Repeatedly, Olga had nursed injured and dying patients who lovingly described their families, villages, and farmland. This affection for the land and for what Olga considered a “simple life” was one of the traits that Olga idealized in the Russian peasants. Yet Olga’s accounts of the peasant soldiers were colored by this attraction. She never mentioned healthy soldiers complaining about the war or the conditions, preferring to dwell on the romantic image of the dying peasants imagining his farmland, and Olga never fully described the sick soldiers’ anger at the government, preferring to focus on their sadness. Olga could only accept and support the emotions and actions that fit into her idealized view of the Russian peasants as simple, agrarian people. The

¹²¹ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 77.

¹²² Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 77-78.

¹²³ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 77-78.

thought that the peasants might independently act on their desires to return home appalled her.

Back in England and Denmark, Olga's family was plainly repulsed by the developments in Russia. Olga's family had no sympathy with the revolutionaries and their new government. Lise wrote to Vera bemoaning the "terrible jumble + confusion" in Russia and predicting that "Freedom, given indiscriminately to each individual man, whether he knows how to use it or not, whether he be an honest man or a rascal, working for the destruction of his Country, cannot but lead to most fatal results."¹²⁴ Vera responded that they could "only pray + hope that the good elements may get the upper hand."¹²⁵ Every family member writing after February 1917 referred to the situation in Russia as either saddening or a "crisis" or both. This response was common among Russian émigrés in Europe, and was bolstered after the revolution by the arrival of Russians who fled the civil war. The émigré community that formed during and after the February Revolution rejected the Bolshevik government and idealized conditions in pre-revolutionary Russia.¹²⁶

The Poutiatine women who spent World War I in Britain and Denmark joined this community of exiles, even as many British citizens around them celebrated the revolution. In Britain, government officials and members of the press approached the revolution hopefully, believing that the new government might lead the war effort more

¹²⁴ Lise Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 14 May 1917, Box 5, Folder 2, Letter 10.

¹²⁵ Lise Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 24 July 1917, Box 5, Folder 3, Letter 11.

¹²⁶ Aaron J. Cohen, "Oh That! Myth, Memory, and World War I in the Russian Emigration and the Soviet Union," *Slavic Review* 62.1 (2003): 71-73.

effectively. Many Britons also felt relief at the idea of fighting alongside a democracy instead of a monarchy. According to historians John Slatter and Michael Hughes, the British public generally celebrated Russia's new independence from monarchy.¹²⁷ The Poutiatine women were doubly vexed, forced to be women and émigrés. There was a palpable sense of helplessness and despair in their letters. As women, they could not safely travel to Russia and participate in the events there, nor could they hope to affect British policy toward the revolution. As émigrés, the aunts could only read about events in Russia; they could not witness or participate in them. Their depression seemed to stem as much from their possible permanent separation from Russia as from the revolution itself. Though the aunts had spent most of their lives in Germany, they had family living in Russia and had frequently visited family estates and the graves of their dead relatives. Exile would mean an end to even this tenuous connection, and exile became much more likely with the start of the October Revolution.

In late February, after the revolution, Mary and Lise had invited Olga to Copenhagen, but Olga, feeling she could still be of use in Russia, did not try to travel to Denmark until October. At that point, the October Revolution began and Olga was unable to meet them. During 1917 and 1918, Mary and Lise corresponded frequently with Vera, who had returned to England. Already frightened by the events of the spring, Mary and Lise admitted to sheer misery once the October Revolution began. Events in

¹²⁷ Michael Hughes, "Searching for the Soul of Russia: British Perceptions of Russia during the First World War," *Twentieth Century British History* 20.2 (2009): 225; John Slatter "Learning from Russia: The History of Soviets in Britain," *Labour History Review* 61.1 (1996): 8-12.

Russia were “more + more depressing...every day [brought] sadder details.”¹²⁸ The aunts referred to the days of the October Revolution as “trying times of anguish for our Country,” to the revolution itself as “madness, to Lenin as an “odious Bolshevik traitor,” and to Russia as being in “the Devil’s grip.”¹²⁹ It is unclear just who the Devil was, because though the aunts blamed Lenin, they also believed the revolution was a German or “Hun” conspiracy, and that “true Russians” were resisting both the Bolsheviks and the pacifists in Russia.¹³⁰ The “true Russians” or “nobler sons” stood in sharp contrast to the “wickedness + blindness of the masses” who were “letting themselves be led by [Lenin] + putting themselves under the gods of the unscrupulous Huns.”¹³¹ The aunts’ despair differed from the feelings of their nieces in that it was more intense and foreboding. The younger generation of Poutiatine women were less attached to their aristocratic heritage because of their close relationship to their mother’s family, which was part of the upper-middle class. Though equally attached to Russia and their Russian identity, the younger women were less enamored of the culture of imperial Russia because they had not grown up in it in the same way their aunts had. These class and generational differences became noticeable in the family’s reactions to the October Revolution.

While the withdrawal from the war, the murder of the tsar, and the “sad news” about friends in Russia left the aunts feeling “quite broken,” they also struggled with the

¹²⁸ Lise Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 5 September 1917, Box 5, Folder 4, Letter 4.

¹²⁹ Mary Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 6 November 1917, Box 5, Folder 5, Letter 3; Lise Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 20 May 1918, Box 5, Folder 8, Letter 3; Mary Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 21 December 1917, Box 5, Folder 5, Letter 8.

¹³⁰ Lise Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 18 April 1918, Box 5, Folder 7, Letter 12.

¹³¹ Lise Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 29 December 1917, Box 5, Folder 5, Letter 12; Lise Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 18 April 1918, Box 5, Folder 7, Letter 12; Lise Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 20 May 1918, Box 5, Folder 8, Letter 3.

revolution's reverberations in Copenhagen.¹³² The camp for Russian prisoners of war, which the aunts had supplied with shirts and socks, was "contaminated" by the Bolsheviks.¹³³ An "anarchist spirit" began to "prevail among the men" in the camp, and "some Bolshevik Agents had the insolence to go down to the Camp, excite the men, + create no end of trouble."¹³⁴ Worries about Bolshevism closed down the Russian Orthodox church in Copenhagen because the priest was found to be "hand and glove with the Bolsheviks."¹³⁵ Mary and Lise blamed the Danish government for being "too democratic to put order."¹³⁶ In this verdict, they revealed their attachment to the imperial governments that they had grown used to in Russia and then in Germany.

VI. Hardship

Olga's spent the October Revolution in a field hospital and then moved to Moscow at the start of 1918. During the revolution itself, she was emotionally devastated, but the Kaufman Sisterhood provided her with food and shelter. Once Russia pulled out of the war, the Kaufman Sisterhood disbanded, and Olga was left to fend for herself. She stayed with her Uncle William at first, but when he left Moscow for the country, Olga had to move from friend to friend and offer language lessons in order to stay sheltered and fed. While staying with a friend, Olga wrote in her diary: "I was made

¹³² Laurence (surname unknown) to Vera Poutiatine, 7 November 1917, Box 5, Folder 5, Letter 2; Lise Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 18 April 1918, Box 5, Folder 7, Letter 12; Lise Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine 25 July 1918, Box 5, Folder 8, Letter 7; Lise Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 29 December 1918, Box 5, Folder 8, Letter 12.

¹³³ Mary Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 3 June 1918, Box 5, Folder 8, Letter 4.

¹³⁴ Lise Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 20 May 1918, Box 5, Folder 8, Letter 3.

¹³⁵ Mary Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 3 June 1918, Box 5, Folder 8, Letter 4.

¹³⁶ Mary Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 3 June 1918, Box 5, Folder 8, Letter 4.

to cry from shame when I spoke of my starving and caused Ekaterina Ivanovna to give me again her hidden ration of sugar and bread. I cry so easily and this compassion hurts so much, that when I left after Ekaterina Ivanovna had spoken to her brother...of me as someone ill and starving I cried also on the way home.”¹³⁷ Shamed by her position, Olga still admitted to being ready “to lick other people’s plates.”¹³⁸ Confessions of humiliation and need went *only* in Olga’s diary. Her letters home told a different story. To her aunts and mother, Olga wrote “Here it is difficult to get provisions, but so far I have suffered no need.”¹³⁹ In a letter to her mother, Olga enclosed a recipe for “potato peel biscuits,” which she described as “really very nice.”¹⁴⁰ Olga’s positive attitude and reticence about the severity of her position may have reflected her understanding of her relationship with Edith. Olga may have felt pressure to convey her self-sufficiency and to avoid sounding weak or needy. Of course, her letters to her mother might also have reflected Olga’s aristocratic pride, which did not allow her to admit the desperation of her circumstances. Whatever the reason, Olga soldiered on this way without describing it to her family until the spring of 1918, when she managed to travel to Copenhagen.

Though Olga experienced shelling and homelessness during the war, her family also felt that they had sacrificed for the war effort. In Denmark, coal rations prohibited Mary and Lise’s apartment building from operating the lift, so the two elderly women

¹³⁷ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 90.

¹³⁸ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 90.

¹³⁹ Mary Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 25 August 1918, Box 5, Folder 8, Letter 8.

¹⁴⁰ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 94.

had to climb multiple flights of stairs each day.¹⁴¹ Their personal coal ration reduced them “to only one lamp.”¹⁴² Ration cards often arrived late and were reduced throughout the course of the war.¹⁴³ As Mary described to Vera: “Everything here is getting curtailed: no more hot water allowed except on Fridays and Saturdays. Washing linen has much increased in price and food is rising daily.”¹⁴⁴ Though the aunts rarely complained about their circumstances, they often fell ill, which they blamed on the cold in their flat. In London, the Poutiatine family cowered in fear toward the end of the war, when German air raids began in London.¹⁴⁵

Some of the Poutiatine women were sorry to miss these brushes with danger. In response to Edith’s description of the air raids, Vera wrote, “I am disappointed to have missed the raids. It must be my childhood’s wish to be a soldier which has translated itself into my great wish never to miss a danger nowadays.”¹⁴⁶ Olga, having witnessed the fresh wounds of battle, reacted more circumspectly. After watching a battalion of female soldiers leave Petrograd, she wrote:

I suppose many women had the same thought as I did, when I saw these young heroines leave: ‘Why not have gone with them, our family could give no son for the war, why not a daughter?’ Yet there is always an uncertainty as to how one would act when brought face to face with the actual thing at the front. I have met fear when I dropped on my hands and knees in the midst of the ward to my shame when a bomb burst outside the

¹⁴¹ Lise Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 9 March 1917, Box 5, Folder 2, Letter 2.

¹⁴² Lise Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 23 March 1917, Box 5, Folder 2, Letter 5.

¹⁴³ Lise Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 9 March 1917, Box 5, Folder 2, Letter 2; Lise Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 23 March 1917, Box 5, Folder 2, Letter 5; Lise Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 29 December 1917, Box 5, Folder 5, Letter 12.

¹⁴⁴ Mary Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 23 April 1917, Box 5, Folder 2, Letter 9.

¹⁴⁵ Edith Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 25 September 1917, Box 2, Folder 5, Letter 5.

¹⁴⁶ Vera Poutiatine to Dorothy Poutiatine, 2 October 1917, Box 2, Folder 5, Letter 9.

barracks in Lutsk. Rather not try than put one's hand to the job and fail ignominiously. All honour and glory to them!¹⁴⁷

Olga, who thought of herself as the most daring and masculine of the Poutiatine women, responded skeptically to the idea of fighting alongside men. As much as she and the other women wanted to fulfill their perceived duty, either to Russia or to the allies more generally, none were certain of their ability to cope with constant physical danger. In her greatest brush with physical danger, Olga had disappointed herself and therefore doubted even her own ability to be a soldier; as she recorded in her diary from a field hospital, “[there] was an enormous explosion, felt for thousands of yards round and heard for miles and miles. Our hospital windows were all that suffered in our building, but we all or nearly all found ourselves groveling on the bandage-room floor in a most undignified way – the result of combined shock of the air and noise and instinct for self-preservation.”¹⁴⁸ According to the aunts and the other Poutiatine women, the worst hardship of the war was not danger but physical separation and the difficulty of communicating with one another.

Communications were scrambled by censorship. At the start of the war, when Mary and Lise were still in Dresden, the Poutiatine women had to find coded ways to communicate from Britain. From her position at Tenbury Wells, Olga advised Edith to “just mention [me] ‘en passant’ as if I were an acquaintance over in England it will not reveal that your letter comes from England & yet Aunties will know I am safely in the

¹⁴⁷ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 75.

¹⁴⁸ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 30-31.

Midlands.”¹⁴⁹ After the aunts moved to Denmark, the chief concern was a naval blockade that would stop mail to and from Britain.¹⁵⁰ Even when mail moved between the two countries, it was stopped by censors and occasionally held up indefinitely. As Lise complained to Vera, “the uncertainty as to the letters reaching their destination now-a-days rather takes the wish to write away” and later, “correspondence now-a-days is rather disheartening, as many letters seem to get lost + they take such a time to reach one, when they do come, that one can scarcely ever get a real answer to what one has written, for in the interval, one forgets the details in question.”¹⁵¹ The time lapse between letters heightened the sense of physical dislocation and isolation, the sisters’ chief complaint during this time. Having been very close before the war, the aunts mourned the loss of Vera and clung to her missives. Almost every letter from Mary and Lise opened by thanking Vera for writing to them and then went directly to how much they missed her physical presence:

Thanks for both your postcards...; you have no idea how welcome they were at this time, when one feels cut away from those one loves. Sometimes those terrible lonely feelings get rather overwhelming especially at this time of this sad disheartenment about our Country. As I passed your little room today which was open and empty, my heart ached for longing of our dear young companion of bygone days. When will this miserable war cease!¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ Olga Poutiatine to her mother and sisters, 12-13 March 1915, Box 2, Folder 3, Letter 3.

¹⁵⁰ Mary Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 4 February 1917, Box 5, Folder 1, Letter 9.

¹⁵¹ Lise Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 9 March 1917, Box 5, Folder 2, Letter 2; Lise Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 18 April 1918, Box 5, Folder 7, Letter 12.

¹⁵² Mary Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 1917, Box 5, Folder 1, Letter 3.

The correspondence, delayed and censored as it was, could only partially make up for Vera's physical absence and for the separation which had lasted years by this point.

It is telling that the separation from family and the political situation in Russia weighed on the family more than their substantial financial difficulties, which worsened throughout the war. As early as 1916, Mary described having “to reduce every extra expense” because she and Lise could not “get our last percentages from Russia paid out by the bank at present.”¹⁵³ Mary and Lise received a pension from their father's military service, which did make its way to Copenhagen from Russia during the early part of the war. After the February Revolution, this pension became less reliable, and Mary and Lise frequently gave up hope for it. As Mary described to Vera, “Our pension has not come in so far, that is the quarter (from May) and little chance of expecting it. We have done what we could about it, but it will be a miracle, if it comes.”¹⁵⁴ That time, the pension did arrive, but Mary told Vera that even with the pension, “your old Aunts twiddle over accounts” and fret over the “insecurity of the times.”¹⁵⁵ Once the revolution took place, Mary and Lise received “Russian Republican money [which was] held worthless” in Copenhagen. The only person in Copenhagen who took pity on the Russian émigrés was a Danish Red Cross volunteer, “who very goodnaturedly” changed the Russian money into kroner.¹⁵⁶ Mary and Lise muddled through with their father's old

¹⁵³ Mary Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 8 December 1916, Box 4, Folder 23, Letter 11.

¹⁵⁴ Mary Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 26 October 1917, Box 5, Folder 4, Letter 10.

¹⁵⁵ Mary Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 30 March 1918, Box 5, Folder 7, Letter 7; Mary Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 5 May 1918, Box 5, Folder 8, Letter 1.

¹⁵⁶ Mary Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 25 August 1918, Box 5, Folder 8, Letter 8.

military pension until they could return to Dresden, where they had savings in a local bank.

Edith and her family were not as lucky; their income depended on their partial ownership of Muir & Mirrielees, which was drastically affected by events in Russia. The Russian employees of Muir & Mirrielees had gone on strike during the February Revolution, but returned after two months of negotiations between the owners and the workers.¹⁵⁷ Even after the October Revolution, the government largely left Muir & Mirrielees alone, but in the autumn of 1918, a burst of anti-British sentiment in the Bolshevik government led to the arrest and imprisonment of Olga's uncle William and his business partner, Walter Philip. After spending thirty-nine days in prison, William moved his family to England in November of 1918. Walter Philip stayed in Moscow, attempting to run Muir & Mirrielees, but widespread looting followed by nationalization ended the British department store in the heart of Moscow.¹⁵⁸ It also ended the financial support that allowed the Poutiatine women to live a middle-class life in Britain; Edith and her daughters all took up paid labor in the aftermath of the October Revolution.

VII. Conclusion

World War I, followed by the February Revolution and October Revolution, forced the Poutiatine women to adapt in many ways, both physical and emotional. They moved houses to help conserve resources and then found themselves huddled in their new

¹⁵⁷ Pitcher 174-175.

¹⁵⁸ Pitcher 180-181.

London flat, listening in the dark to German bombs. The aunts had to flee Germany and live in Copenhagen, where they endured hunger and cold because of rationing and the difficulty of receiving money during wartime. More significantly, the women had to become more independent because they could not rely on constant communication and visits from each other. Edith had to turn to May, Vera, and Dorothy in Olga's absence, while Olga had to become largely self-reliant in field hospitals with inconsistent, if any, postal service. However, not all of these adaptations were negative. The women derived emotional fulfillment from the work they did during the war, whether it was nursing soldiers, knitting socks, or translating documents. They came to see each other as more capable, with Vera travelling alone to support her aunts in Copenhagen and Olga forsaking the safety of the VAD program for the Kauffman Sisterhood. Finally, they had to adjust their understanding of themselves as Russians in relation to the changes wrought by the revolutions. For some of the women, notably the aunts, this meant entering a period of prolonged mourning for the imperial Russia that they had known. For Olga, it meant a continual compromise between her loyalty to the Britain and Russia, between her aristocratic identity and her feelings for the peasants, and between her desire for democracy and her desire for Russia to win World War I. Finally, for all of the Poutiatine women, the war and revolutions created new circumstances, where there was no guarantee of a fixed income from an outside source; they responded to these circumstances by going to work.

Chapter 4: Labor

“If you will ever be a nurse, you will discover all the joy and all the sadness of this love for your hopelessly ill.” – Olga to Eugenia, 1916¹⁵⁹

I. Introduction

Though most of the Poutiatine women became nurses, they also took up different types of paid labor at various times, as suited their ages, reasons, and familial responsibilities. Olga, May, Dorothy, Vera, and Eugenia took up work out of a sense of patriotic duty between 1915 and 1918. In general, and in keeping with the experience of women more broadly, these early jobs paid very little and required minimal training. In 1919, May, Dorothy, and Genia sought work because of financial need, and in careers requiring more substantial training. Edith, at times, turned her household into a boarding house, as suited her familial responsibilities, social class, and financial need. All of these decisions regarding labor sprang from a complicated mix of financial necessity, wartime duty, and a desire for personal fulfillment. Women in the early twentieth century took up work for all of these reasons, and the Poutiatines’ experience was not so different in this respect. Its uniqueness stemmed from the influence of their Russian identity and their almost single-minded focus on nursing. Unlike most families living in Britain during and after World War I, the Poutiatines considered themselves Russian and took up war work out of a desire to serve Russia more than Britain. Also, four of the five Poutiatine daughters took up nursing during or after the war, and the fifth became a volunteer visitor

¹⁵⁹ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 26.

at a military hospital. This drive not only to work but specifically to nurse could have been the incidental result of the limited respectable occupations for women, but it also could have sprung from the Poutiatine women's deep desire to nurture others.

II. War Work

Between 1915 and 1917, May, Olga, Dorothy, Vera, and Eugenia all joined wartime hospital staffs. May and Olga joined the Red Cross's Voluntary Aid Detachment program. During World War I, approximately seventeen thousand young women served as VADs.¹⁶⁰ Most came from middle-class families and were young and unmarried. Each VAD completed First Aid and Home Nursing courses and underwent a one to three month probationary period in a British hospital. Olga spent this period at a small hospital in Tenbury Wells. After the probationary period, VADs signed on for a six-month term either in Britain or abroad.¹⁶¹ During their terms, the VADs worked in military hospitals assisting professional nurses. Frequently, VADs were at first assigned menial tasks such as cleaning floors and washing clothes, but after multiple terms or in a very busy hospital, a VAD would take on more medical duties.¹⁶² May left the program before her first six-month term ended, but Olga completed at least two terms before switching to a Russian Red Cross program, the Kaufman Sisterhood. Dorothy and

¹⁶⁰ Ian Martin, "'When Needs Must': The Acceptance of Volunteer Aids in British and Australian Military Hospitals in World War I," *Health and History* 4.1 (2002): 88-89; Janet Watson, "Khaki Girls, VADs, and Tommy's Sisters: Gender and Class in First World War Britain," *The International Historical Review* 19.1 (1997): 35.

¹⁶¹ Henriette Donner, "Under the Cross: Why VADs Performed the Filthiest Task in the Dirtiest War: Red Cross Women Volunteers," *Journal of Social History* 30.3 (1997): 687; Martin 89.

¹⁶² Martin 89; Jenni Calder, "World War and Women – Advance and Retreat," *War and the Cultural Construction of Identities in Britain*, Eds. Barbara Korte and Ralf Schneider (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994) 164.

Eugenia, who were too young to join the VAD program in 1915, volunteered at hospitals in Britain.¹⁶³

Vera had the hardest time finding war work, but her description of her struggles, and her family's response, demonstrate not only patriotism but the strong desire to be useful and to have purpose that motivated each woman's war work. In letters to her sisters and aunts, Vera expressed great frustration and even despondence with her inability to find useful work for the war effort. Her sisters and aunts responded sympathetically, and one aunt acknowledged that "work is a great help especially at the present time of sorrow & anxiety."¹⁶⁴ In the first year of the war, however, Vera was unable to find suitable war work and instead took on family responsibilities. For six months in 1916, she moved to Copenhagen to help her elderly aunts adjust to their new life there. She enjoyed her time with her aunts, but did not feel that she was helping the war effort. She felt no greater sense of purpose in helping her aunts; it was part of her traditional familial duties, not something extra that she was giving for the war. Therefore, when she returned to England, she immediately set about finding work for the war effort. She wrote to an acquaintance at the Foreign Office, hoping that her fluency in multiple languages might be of use. Unfortunately, the acquaintance wrote back that "there is an unbreakable rule in this office that none but British subjects may be

¹⁶³ Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 5 May 1915, Box 2, Folder 2, Letter 10, Olga Poutiatine to Dorothy Poutiatine, 9 June 1915, Box 2, Folder 3, Letter 27; Eugenia Poutiatine to Dorothy and Vera Poutiatine, 19 December 1917, Box 2, Folder 5, Letter 14; Martin 89.

¹⁶⁴ Laurence (surname unknown) to Vera Poutiatine, 7 November 1917, Box 5, Folder 5, Letter 2; Olga Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 21 April 1915, Box 2, Folder 3, Letter 13.

employed in it.”¹⁶⁵ Vera took the rejection in stride, and set about learning how to maximize her own potential by beginning a Pelman course. She told Dorothy: “I have sent in my first Pelman sheet & book 2 is nice...It is an amusing study...”¹⁶⁶ It is unclear how or if the Pelman course helped Vera, but she did succeed in finding what she considered to be meaningful work as a volunteer in a maternity hospital and as a volunteer who visited recovering veterans. Though her work was not as directly attached to the war as her sisters’ nursing, Vera felt content in the purpose of her work and she derived fulfillment from it.¹⁶⁷

For these early jobs, the sisters clearly sought to be of use during wartime, as opposed to seeking financial stability. Until 1918, Muir & Mirrielees continued to fund the Poutiatine family’s lifestyle, and the money earned by volunteer nursing was negligible compared to the family’s money. A VAD earned approximately £20 per year, which was not enough to keep the Poutiatine girls from writing home for more money.¹⁶⁸ As Olga wrote to Edith, “I shall need more money...to go to Worcester...must have money for journey tips & to do very necessary shopping ie cotton stockings & gloves, pr of kid gloves, & parasol.”¹⁶⁹ Instead, the sisters viewed their work as a form of service, regardless of their pay. Many other VADs expressed the same disregard for pay, and

¹⁶⁵ Laurence (surname unknown) to Vera Poutiatine, 7 November 1917, Box 5, Folder 5, Letter 2.

¹⁶⁶ Vera Poutiatine to Dorothy Poutiatine, 2 October 1917, Box 2, Folder 5, Letter 9.

¹⁶⁷ Vera’s datebooks, 1919, Box 10, Folder 8, Item 4; Vera’s work at the maternity hospital had the added benefit of continuing after the war. Vera worked there until her death in September 1919.

¹⁶⁸ Martin 89; Calder 164.

¹⁶⁹ Olga Poutiatine to her mother and sisters, 25-26 May 1915, Box 2, Folder 3, Letter 18.

instead focused on the usefulness of their work to the war effort.¹⁷⁰ When Edith was considering sending May to nurse in Russia, Olga claimed, “it is right one at least of us should be helping our own country in her need.”¹⁷¹ Olga also wrote of nursing in Russia as a “duty” that she sincerely wished to fulfill. The rest of the family echoed this desire. Vera described the alternative as “[going] on with our old do nothing life” and felt “so strongly that every sacrifice should be made” to get May or Olga to Russia to nurse.¹⁷² The family did manage to send both May and Olga to Russia through the V.A.D. program, though May soon returned home to care for Edith. Olga continued nursing for three more years and experienced a variety of conflicts because of her sex and social station.

As a V.A.D., Olga struggled between the organization’s expectation of feminine respectability and the reality of nursing horribly wounded men. The V.A.D.s in Petrograd lived at The Merchants’ Club on Nikolaevskaia Street and were strictly supervised.¹⁷³ Olga complained that she couldn’t venture out to see her friends because Dr. Flemming, one of her supervisors, disapproved of young women using the trams. For the sake of her own respectability, Olga felt she had to be “extra careful not to go about alone because friends here know I am here with another young lady and no chaperone. I don’t walk in the Nevskii alone...”¹⁷⁴ These limitations frustrated Olga especially when she juxtaposed them with the reality of her work inside the hospital. There she witnessed

¹⁷⁰ Donner 688, 700; Hallett 200-201; Janet Watson, “War in the Wards: The Social Construction of Medical Work in First World War Britain,” *Journal of British Studies* 41 (2002): 486.

¹⁷¹ Olga Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 15 April 1915, Box 2, Folder 3, Letter 11.

¹⁷² Olga Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 21 April 1915, Box 2, Folder 3, Letter 13.

¹⁷³ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 17.

¹⁷⁴ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 15.

“ghastly amputations, opening of joints, etc.” in addition to performing tasks that required strength and close contact with men.¹⁷⁵ Early in her service, Olga wrote that Dorothy would never be able to nurse because “even if D. could stand this work & running up & down for a short time...she could not lift [or] carry the stretcher, refill huge kettles etc.”¹⁷⁶ According to Olga, nursing required physical strength and a willingness to do unpleasant, unfeminine tasks such as checking for lice, bathing male patients, and emptying bed pans.¹⁷⁷ Somehow, a woman could retain her respectability emptying a bed pan but not walking home from the hospital at night!

Indeed, the idea that nursing was a suitable female task largely ignored the dirty reality in favor of the philosophical principles. Nineteenth-century nursing reforms stressed morality as a necessity in nurses and welcomed middle-class women, considered the most moral, into the wards. More, nursing became a “vocation” of service to those less fortunate, and society whitewashed the realities of nursing in favor of a clean and sterile image suitable for middle-class females. These middle-class nurses, however, coexisted with traditional working-class nurses. A division grew between working-class probationers, who were paid to nurse, and middle-class lady probationers, who at the outset were not paid.¹⁷⁸ VADs, therefore, entered work already fractured by class. They worked alongside working-class professional nurses and learned quickly that the reality

¹⁷⁵ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 19.

¹⁷⁶ Olga Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 21 April 1915, Box 2, Folder 3, Letter 13.

¹⁷⁷ Olga Poutiatine to her mother and sisters, 12-13, March 1915, Box 2, Folder 3, Letter 3.

¹⁷⁸ Brian Abel-Smith, *A History of the Nursing Profession in Great Britain* (New York: Springer, 1960) 22-23, 31-34; Calder 170; Hawkins 15-17, 22, 37-41, 53.

of nursing was neither clean nor sterile. VAD Mary Borden, who worked in a field hospital, described one of her experiences:

There was a man stretched on the table. His brain came off in my hands when I lifted the bandage from his head. When the dresser came back I said: 'His brain came off on the bandage.' 'Where have you put it?' 'I put it in the pail under the table.' 'It's only half of his brain,' he said, looking into the man's skull. 'The rest is here.' I left him to finish the dressing and went about my business. I had much to do."¹⁷⁹

Every VAD who went to the front experienced similar horrors, which were a far cry from the ideal sterilized wards and pristine white uniforms depicted in popular culture. Even mundane tasks, such as bathing a patient, required middle-class women to come in close contact with male bodies, an unthinkable impropriety outside of the nursing profession. VADs dealt with lice, mud, and every possible bodily fluid, yet they were seen as morally upstanding as long as they were within the nursing uniform and the confines of the hospital.¹⁸⁰ As Olga wrote to her family, "I don't walk in the Nevskii alone, but will do so later, when dressed as a nurse; that will be another matter..."¹⁸¹ Nursing required an odd combination of feminine gentleness and masculine strength and endurance, and VADs walked a very thin line between the respectability of their service and the improper tasks they had to do.

VADs also had to balance the resentment of working-class professional nurses, who often felt threatened by the upper- and middle-class VADs' presence in the wards. From her first days at Tenbury, Olga noticed a difference in her social standing:

¹⁷⁹ Bergen 291.

¹⁸⁰ Brittain 165-167; Donner 688.

¹⁸¹ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 15.

I think I have never mentioned the curious drop in the social scale which I experienced & felt a good bit when first I came here. It is quite funny still acting the dignified parlour-maid at the door when people come, being patronized by patients' relations or by shopkeepers, who call you nurse & give you things cheap because you are a nurse. I am getting accustomed to it now but it was funny at first.¹⁸²

Olga's treatment by others echoed the "parlour-maid" sorts of tasks she performed as a V.A.D. In Tenbury, Olga spent most of her time cleaning. She learned to "scrub & polish furniture," "make beds," clean windows, polish brass taps, and do an assortment of kitchen tasks, which intimidated her most of all.¹⁸³ She claimed she was "clumsy in the kitchen" but still had to "make tea cut bread & butter pour out soup & cocoa from the range boil eggs, look to things in oven for our meals...fill hot water bottles, refill kettles, burn & blister my fingers & break cups."¹⁸⁴ The only chore she was familiar with was weeding, though she went from weeding a flower garden at home to a vegetable garden at the hospital.¹⁸⁵ Olga eventually grew frustrated with this non-medical work and longed to do actual medical procedures.

Unfortunately, she faced stiff resistance from working-class professional nurses who resented the intrusion of upper- and middle-class V.A.D.s. When World War I began, nurses in Britain were in the middle of a campaign for greater professionalization, particularly they wanted an official nurses' registry.¹⁸⁶ In order to achieve this goal, nurses and their supporters had stressed the training and skills that nursing required,

¹⁸² Olga Poutiatine to her mother and sisters, 16 April 1915, Box 2, Folder 3, Letter 12.

¹⁸³ Olga Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 9 March 1915, Box 2, Folder 3, Letter 2; Olga Poutiatine to her mother and sisters, 12-13 March 1915, Box 2, Folder 3, Letter 3.

¹⁸⁴ Olga Poutiatine to her mother and sisters, 12-13 March 1915, Box 2, Folder 3, Letter 3; Olga Poutiatine to her mother and sisters, 23-25 March 1915, Box 2, Folder 3, Letter 5.

¹⁸⁵ Olga Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 7-8 April 1915, Box 2, Folder 3, Letter 9.

¹⁸⁶ Martin 94; Watson, "War in the Wards," 492-493, 509.

which set it apart as a respectable profession. When thousands of upper- and middle-class girls with only a few months of training began doing nursing work, the pre-war nurses felt threatened. The untrained young females who immediately began nursing contradicted claims that modern nursing required extensive training. For this reason, nursing “sisters” or “pros” could be antagonistic towards the VADs and frequently excluded VADs from medical work, instead forcing VADs to clean and cook.¹⁸⁷

Olga rarely wrote about the conflict directly, but she did praise the professional nurses who allowed her to do medical work. At Tenbury, Olga praised the matron for being “keen I should see all the surgical work possible, lets me ferment Hall’s leg dress blisters & has given one the men’s wards, as she knows why I took nursing up. She is a dear.”¹⁸⁸ Olga realized that she was “lucky to find a staff nurse who...does not mind teaching me the details.”¹⁸⁹ Once at the Anglo-Russian Hospital in Petrograd, Olga described herself as “a mere V.A.D.” and complained that she “[longed] for more to do with dressing [wounds] which I hardly even see, but with so many trained [nurses], no chance at all of that.”¹⁹⁰ She noted that “the Sister versus V.A.D. feeling has been a bit hot latterly but somehow I keep out of that or have done so far.”¹⁹¹ Luckily for Olga, she soon transferred to a field hospital that was too short-staffed to assign V.A.D.s exclusively to cleaning work. In the field hospital, Olga formed closer relationships with professional nurses and learned more advanced medical work.

¹⁸⁷ Watson, “War in the Wards,” 486, 490-494, 501; Brittain 170; Calder 164.

¹⁸⁸ Olga Poutiatine to her mother and sisters, 23-25 March 1915, Box 2, Folder 3, Letter 5.

¹⁸⁹ Olga Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 9 March 1915, Box 2, Folder 3, Letter 2.

¹⁹⁰ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 19.

¹⁹¹ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 19-20.

III. Post-war Work

The end of Olga's work in Russia also marked the end of the first phase of the Poutiatine women's labor; starting in 1919, two of the Poutiatine women would train to become professional nurses, and a third an x-ray technician, with the goal of supporting themselves financially. The Bolshevik takeover of Muir & Mirrielees made paid labor a necessity instead of a service. However, the Poutiatine women also considered personal fulfillment, social expectations and familial responsibilities when deciding how and where to work. After World War I, social restrictions on women's labor eased enough to allow middle-class women to take up teaching and professional nursing without sacrificing their respectability. These two types of work garnered more social respect than the existing option of "taking in boarders."¹⁹² Nursing, specifically, allowed each woman to feel a sense of purpose that resulted in greater personal fulfillment. In terms of familial responsibilities, the daughters changed locations and types of nursing in order to accommodate the needs of Edith as she aged, and the needs of Olga as her mental health deteriorated.

Dorothy and May both chose professional nursing, which required many hours of training and exams. By the end of World War I, nurses' push for professionalization had yielded many types of training, some more strenuous than others. Dorothy and May both

¹⁹² Davidoff, *The Family Story*, 160, 180, 196, 222; Leonore Davidoff and Belinda Westover, "Women's World in England, 1880-1939," *Our Work, Our Lives, Our Words: Women's History and Women's Work*, Eds. Leonore Davidoff and Belinda Westover (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986) 3, 11.

chose the more difficult level of training, which brought superior certification.¹⁹³ During her final exam period, Dorothy became thin and pale with stress and had little time to see her family. At the same time, she had to successfully serve as the lead nurse in at least twenty cases. She described her life to her mother and sisters:

...it seems impossible to get time for anything, & every spare moment ought to be spent in studying. It isn't unfortunately & I feel quite hopeless at the thought of the exam. You will I expect be glad to hear I have had my first two cases! The first I 'pinched' from a student at a moment's notice as he couldn't be found! – a fairly simple case & a lovely little girl (6lbs 11oz). The second was last night (I was up till 1am), a beautiful 8lb boy. So I feel a little more hopeful about getting my 20 cases in before next year.¹⁹⁴

She wrote to Olga, "I am longing to see you again my Jack & would have come before if it had not been for my exams which have kept me busy these last months. However they are all over at last & were not as bad as I feared."¹⁹⁵ In fact, Dorothy's exams went quite well, and Edith bragged that Dorothy was "third in the Hospital in the final Exams, which is splendid!"¹⁹⁶ Dorothy had predicted that her stress would decrease after finishing her professional training, but the opposite occurred. She wrote to Olga, "My job seems more strenuous even than I thought & my hours on duty long. Friday (usually my half day) 7:30am to 6pm, Saturday 7:30am to 12 midnight & today (my day off(!)) 10am to 6pm...so I haven't much time to settle in."¹⁹⁷ Dorothy's new career seems to have firmed up her sense of herself as a nurse as opposed to primarily a sister or daughter. Her

¹⁹³ Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985) 101-104; Hawkins 74-77.

¹⁹⁴ Dorothy Poutiatine to her family, 14 January 1923, Box 2, Folder 11, Letter 5.

¹⁹⁵ Dorothy Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 7 October 1921, Box 2, Folder 9, Letter 15.

¹⁹⁶ Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 30 July 1921, Box 2, Folder 9, Letter 3.

¹⁹⁷ Dorothy Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 17 June 1923, Box 2, Folder 11, Letter 4.

family had to adjust to this change. Dorothy also had to adjust to the changing needs of her family. When Olga's mental health and Edith's physical health began to worsen, Dorothy had to adjust again, shifting from highly-esteemed surgical nursing to its distinctly unglamorous private counterpart.

When Dorothy became a private nurse, she was following in May's footsteps. May had made the switch to private nursing by 1923, to allow her more flexibility to care for Edith.¹⁹⁸ Whether privately-funded care for the rich or government-funded care for the poor, private nursing allowed nurses to decide when and where they worked. Private nursing for the wealthy also paid more than most hospitals and provided nicer living conditions and more freedom.¹⁹⁹ Dorothy joined her in 1925 after two years of training and two years as a professional nurse at Middlesex Hospital in London.²⁰⁰ Dorothy's move allowed her to help May, who was now caring for both Edith and Olga in addition to working as a nurse.

Eugenia took a more circuitous route to full-time medical work. She attended a training program for doctors' assistants and described it to Edith: "Lectures we have 3 a day of + practical electricity learning how to treat patients by practicing on one another Students Seniors + Juniors are very nice + helpful."²⁰¹ She went on to take an exam, which she passed, and began work in Surrey at the Clandon Hospital children's ward as

¹⁹⁸ Edith Poutiatine to May Poutiatine, 21 October 1923, Box 2, Folder 11, Letter 12; May Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 9 June 1925, Box 2, Folder 14, Letter 6.

¹⁹⁹ Hawkins 12, 165-166.

²⁰⁰ Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 30 July 1921, Box 2, Folder 9, Letter 3; Dorothy Poutiatine to her family, 14 January 1923, Box 2, Folder 11, Letter 5; Dorothy Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 17 June 1923, Box 2, Folder 11, Letter 4; Dorothy Poutiatine to unknown, 22 July 1925, Box 2, Folder 14, Letter 9.

²⁰¹ Eugenia Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 16 September unknown year, Box 1, Folder 6, Letter 1.

more of a helper than a nurse. She worked “dusting wards + sweeping + cleaning brasses...looking after children washing brushing making beds” and was quite happy not to have to wash floors or cook for patients.²⁰² Unfortunately, the work at Clandon Hospital proved temporary, and Eugenia moved to the Charles Hospital in London, where she worked for about three years. Soon, however, she left or lost her job at the Charles.²⁰³ No letters describe why Eugenia stopped her work at Clandon or the Charles, but she eventually traveled to South Africa, where she hoped to live with her Aunt Lulie and find some sort of work.

In South Africa, Eugenia started as a radiologist’s assistant at Johannesburg Children’s Memorial Hospital. Eugenia was pleased with the new job: “I am very happy indeed in my work, + Dr. Ellis [the radiologist] couldn’t be nicer or more considerate.”²⁰⁴ Dr. Ellis was equally pleased, Eugenia reported. He told her “it suits me to have you, + I don’t want a trained nurse, + am going to try + fix up for you to stay on after 6 months if all is well.”²⁰⁵ Upon receiving Dr. Ellis’ stamp of approval, Eugenia used her connections and abilities to get the permanent job; she asked her Uncle Percy, Aunt Lulie’s husband, to write to two doctors on the hospital board.²⁰⁶ Her efforts succeeded, and she gained a permanent position as Junior Assistant in the x-ray ward.²⁰⁷

²⁰² Eugenia Poutiatine to Vera and Dorothy Poutiatine, date unknown, Box 1, Folder 4, Letter 6.

²⁰³ Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 10 December 1920, Box 2, Folder 8, Letter 2.

²⁰⁴ Eugenia Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 9 March unknown year, Box 1, Folder 5, Letter 4.

²⁰⁵ Eugenia Poutiatine to Dorothy Poutiatine, 20 November unknown year, Box 1, Folder 6, Letter 6.

²⁰⁶ Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 4 September 1923, Box, Folder 11, Letter 16.

²⁰⁷ Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 4 September 1923, Box, Folder 11, Letter 16.

Like many of her sisters, Eugenia took up other kinds of work before and after nursing. When Eugenia was first getting settled in South Africa, she taught French. As she described her life to Olga, Dr. Ellis' wife "arranged a small class of children for French conversation with me 3 times a week. 3 of her jolly children + 2 others so I shall be able to make a little more grist for the mill."²⁰⁸ Olga had also taught languages to make more money when she lived in Moscow after the war, though her efforts were less successful:

I give lessons at a school of languages...here I had my first big blow in the lessons line. I was to have given two classes in the afternoon also to a beginners' class of 10 pupils and to a more advanced group. The advanced group complained after my first trial lesson that they wanted a real Englishwoman and I had consequently to give it up and the beginners, who interested me very much, as the pay is so low (5 roubles an hour) that no one would undertake one hour. It was a nasty blow to pride and to self-confidence.²⁰⁹

Teaching clearly did not provide Olga with the sort of personal fulfillment she had come to expect from her nursing experience. Upon returning to Britain after a sojourn in Copenhagen, Olga gave up on the idea of teaching and felt too exhausted to nurse. Instead she created and sold "pretty things". Edith wrote to her, "I hope the sale will go off well, to-day, & your pretty things bring in lots of money. Next time I go to you, you must give me some of those you bought for me."²¹⁰ Dorothy asked, "I hope the sale of work went off well & was a great success financially?"²¹¹ Apparently it was, but no one ever described what the pretty things were. Sales and teaching proved only temporary

²⁰⁸ Eugenia Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 9 March unknown year, Box 1, Folder 5, Letter 4.

²⁰⁹ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 101.

²¹⁰ Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 18-20 July 1921, Box 2, Folder 9, Letter 6.

²¹¹ Dorothy Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 24 July 1921, Box 2, Folder 9, Letter 20.

diversions for both Olga and Eugenia, so Olga would eventually join Edith in another venture.

It is unclear who came up with the idea, but Edith and Olga decided to turn the post-war family home, The Old Barn, into a boarding house. Family members largely approved of the plan which combined profit with respectability.²¹² A relative told Olga, “it is splendid of you to have started the idea of receiving paying guests at ‘The Old Barn’! It is an ideal spot to stay in, and you will no doubt be overrun with applicants as soon as the fact gets known among your friends!”²¹³ Another acquaintance wrote, “I think I can advise that the paying guests idea is quite worth trying and probably would be a success.”²¹⁴ The boarding house approach fit Edith’s familial responsibilities; it made it financially possible for her to maintain a family home large enough to house her daughters if they returned home. It also fit into Edith’s existing maternal role; taking in boarders was not a profession so much as an extension of the traditional work performed by women in the home. Edith could earn money without sacrificing her respectability or identity.

For at least a couple of years the boarding house was profitable. Edith and Olga kept many letters requesting rooms for lengths of time varying from a couple of days to a couple of months.²¹⁵ The family charged between 3.5 and 4 guineas per guest per week,

²¹² Davidoff, *The Family Story*, 160, 180; Davidoff, “Women’s World,” 3.

²¹³ Dora Cazalet to Olga Poutiatine, 24 March unknown year, Box 5, Folder 21, Letter 3.

²¹⁴ Dorothy surname unknown to Olga Poutiatine, 20 January unknown year, Box 5, Folder 12, Letter 3.

²¹⁵ Olga Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 29 March 1925, Box 2, Folder 14, Letter 4; J. Barnard to Olga Poutiatine, 10 July unknown year, Box 3, Folder 13, Letter 1; B. Wray Streibeck to Olga Poutiatine, 17

with additional charges for providing a meal or laying a fire.²¹⁶ These prices must not have met costs, however, because Edith tried to find extra ways to make money, and eventually the family had to sell The Old Barn. At one point, Edith responded to a newspaper ad from a British family living in India. The family needed a home in Britain for their children on short school holidays. Edith responded to the family offering The Old Barn and providing references, but there is no evidence the children ever stayed with Edith.²¹⁷ By 1925, the boarding house business could not keep up with expenses, and Edith and Olga had to leave. As Eugenia wrote to them: “I know it will be an awful wrench to leave the Old Barn, but dear one...some Home we are bound to find + make somewhere.”²¹⁸ It is unclear where Edith and Olga lived between leaving The Old Barn in 1925 and Edith’s death in 1928, and it is also unclear whether the failure of The Old Barn affected Edith’s perception of herself as a mother and caretaker. At this point in her life, Edith was reaching an age when it was expected that her daughters would take care of her instead of the other way around, so perhaps she accepted the end of the boarding house as part of this natural progression. At the same time, even in her old age Edith had a dependent daughter in Olga, and must have felt torn about giving up the income that provided for both of them.

July unknown year, Box 3, Folder 13, Letter 3; Balle Radcliffe Laverack to Olga Poutiatine, date unknown, Box 3, Folder 13, Letter 4; B.W.S. to Olga Poutiatine, 9 August unknown year, Box 3, Folder 13, Letter 8.

²¹⁶ Advertisement of room rates at The Old Barn, date unknown, Box 9, Folder 1, Letter 1; Advertisement of room rates at The Old Barn, date unknown, Box 9, Folder 1, Letter 5.

²¹⁷ Edith Poutiatine to R. Grindley and Co., 3 September 1924, Box 6, Folder 8, Letter 2.

²¹⁸ Eugenia Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 20 October 1925, Box 2, Folder 14, Letter 3.

IV. Dearth of Domestic Servants

Though the Poutiatine family was clearly affected by their changing finances and the emergence of respectable occupations for women, Edith seemed most affected by the dearth of domestic servants during and after World War I. Edith never complained about her daughters' work or about taking in boarders, but she frequently lamented the lack of qualified domestic servants to help her maintain a large home. During World War I, between 100,000 and 400,000 female domestic servants left their posts to take up better-paid and more independent war work. Many of these young women never returned to domestic service, and there are multiple accounts of upper- and middle-class women unable to find domestic servants during and after the war.²¹⁹ In 1915, the Poutiatines' cook left their service, and Edith began searching for a new one. She found one with two years experience who was "just over 40, & a total abstainer."²²⁰ When the woman began work at the Poutiatines' home, Edith described her as "pleasant, economical, & anxious to help in any & every way," but unfortunately the cook did not "want to stay on after the holidays."²²¹ Edith never mentioned why the cook wanted to leave, but apparently the cook wanted to leave badly because she ran away before the holidays. Edith scribbled a quick note to Vera: "It has been impossible to write, - no quiet room, & heaps to do, with uncertain help since that wretch of a cooke ran away - 2 weeks ago, or one only was it? -

²¹⁹ Watson, "Khaki Girls" 50-51; Davidoff, "Women's World" 27.

²²⁰ Edith Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 24 November 1915, Box 2, Folder 2, Letter 14.

²²¹ Edith Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 12 November 1915, Box 2, Folder 2, Letter 13.

last Friday – it seems more like months to me, for one never knows who one will have to help, & to cook, if anyone!”²²²

Presumably, Edith eventually found a cook, but the domestic servant issue became even more pressing once Edith began taking boarders. When her housemaid quit, Edith complained of being “very busy with house-keeping & housework with the Tyrrells here, the General since Nov. 2nd, & Mrs. T & Maudie since the 22nd Nov.” and added that she was “looking for a servant, (the last one was temporary).”²²³ By 1921, Edith was looking as far afield as France, where she somehow found a woman who wanted to move to Britain but needed employment. Unfortunately, the French woman kept falling ill and delaying her departure.²²⁴ To temporarily fill the position, Edith hired a woman from London; this woman proved even more disastrous than the cook:

The new one who came last Monday had to go back to town next day as, after washing up the dinner things, & pretending to go to the village to send off a wire, she evidently bought some methylated spirits & drank herself silly, & spent 24 hours in or on her bed, sleeping off the effects, & [I was] taking her cups of tea or coffee at intervals. I got the District Nurse to come & see her & she brought the doctor who said it was certainly inebriation from the meth. spirits.²²⁵

Thankfully, the French maid arrived soon after. Edith found the new maid “younger & more capable at all duties, tho’ probably a less good cook” and was “very delighted to have a new maid & so spend less time preparing & cleaning.”²²⁶ Less than a year later, in 1922, Edith was once again looking for a cook. The new one worked for only four years,

²²² Edith Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 26 December 1915, Box 2, Folder 2, Letter 15.

²²³ Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 10 December 1920, Box 2, Folder 8, Letter 2.

²²⁴ Edith Poutiatine to Dorothy Poutiatine, 17 October 1921, Box 2, Folder 9, Letter 2.

²²⁵ Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 11 August 1921, Box 2, Folder 9, Letter 12.

²²⁶ Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 3 July 1921, Box 2, Folder 9, Letter 7.

and so it continued.²²⁷ Edith had to do the housework herself: “it is a strenuous life & leaves me little time for my real work – business letters, accounts, mending, etc. or for my pleasure, esp. writing to my dear girls.”²²⁸

V. Adapting to Work

For Edith, maternal pleasure had to be channeled into letter-writing because her daughters were scattered across England; Edith’s letters demonstrate the drastic shift that took place when the young women went into paid labor. Before all five daughters took up paid work, Edith typically wrote only to one or two daughters at a time, because the others lived at home with her. In the letters, Edith most frequently commented on minor health issues like coughs or pleasurable activities, such as a play she had attended with Eugenia. She might ask how the recipient was enjoying visiting family or how the recipient was doing in her school exams. From 1915 to 1921, the number and content of her letters slowly changed. Edith had to write more letters to more daughters about increasingly significant issues. Her first letters to her daughters at work sounded much like her letters to them at boarding school. “We are all thinking of you,” she wrote cheerfully to Olga in 1915, “& hoping you are safe & well & happy, & not feeling too tired or too strange. I keep imagining you in your new surroundings, but it is all quite

²²⁷ Edith Poutiatine to Miss M., 19 April 1922, Box 2, Folder 10, Letter 8; Edith Poutiatine to reference listed for a cook, 21 April 1924, Box 6, Folder 1, Letter 10; Edith Poutiatine to a potential domestic servant, 17 April 1924, Box 6, Folder 1, Letter 5; Potential domestic servant to Edith Poutiatine, 19 April 1924, Box 6, Folder 1, Letter 8; Edith Poutiatine to Miss Dymphna Smith, owner of a domestic service placement firm, 21 April 1924, Box 6, Folder 1, Letter 9; Miss Dymphna Smith to Edith Poutiatine, 22 April 1924, Box 6, Folder 1, Letter 12.

²²⁸ Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 11 August 1921, Box 2, Folder 9, Letter 12.

different, I expect.”²²⁹ She continued to remind them that work (for pay as for school) was character-building. When Olga was particularly discouraged at Tenbury, Edith wrote “the training has been good for your character....you have learnt much & a great deal that you wld not have learnt at home.”²³⁰ Slowly, however, the distance and demands of the girls’ work altered the content of Edith’s letters. In 1918 she described her feelings to Olga: “it is seeing [May and Dorothy] losing youth & health, & nerves deteriorating that makes me thin & anxious...but they won’t believe it, & are angry with me for worrying.”²³¹

Edith took on the responsibility of writing to each daughter about what the others were doing because few of the girls had time to write to each other in addition to their mother. Edith became a clearinghouse of information regarding nursing work across the country and later across the world. When Olga was in Copenhagen, Edith wrote to her about May and Dorothy’s nursing work: “I have seen May & Dorrie both yesterday & to-day both working hard & tired, but bright & cheery. Dorrie has less hard night work now, in various wards, taking duty for those who get nights off” and “I thought [May] looking much better when I saw her, & had lunch with her last Tuesday...I had time to see Dorrie for about an hour, tired, but well, & v. busy preparing for her final exams, now going on.”²³² When the elderly Aunt Lise moved in with Edith, she too took on the responsibility of connecting the girls’ to one another. She wrote a long letter to Olga

²²⁹ Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 8 March 1915, Box 2, Folder 2, Letter 4.

²³⁰ Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 2 June 1915, Box 2, Folder 1, Letter 5.

²³¹ Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 22 July 1918, Box 2, Folder 6, Letter 2.

²³² Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 10 December 1920, Box 2, Folder 8, Letter 2; Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 3 July 1921, Box 2, Folder 9, Letter 7.

with information about every other daughter: “Dorrie is getting on with work at the Middlesex Hospital. Jennie, having left Clandon, hopes to go in a few weeks to St. George’s Hospital Hyde Park for general nursing training. May [is] very busy managing the accounts etc. for the Workshop...so as to procure work for our own compatriots deprived of means. Vera has been doing secretary work for Lady Mirrielees.”²³³

The shift in content signaled a more profound shift in how Edith and her daughters understood themselves and their lives. Questions about, and descriptions of, paid labor began to dominate the letters. Eugenia’s letters from South Africa to her mother and sisters detailed individual medical cases and gave precise numbers regarding wages and spending.²³⁴ Dorothy’s letters from Middlesex listed her working hours for each day and described the wards where she worked.²³⁵ May wrote to Edith about the stress of private nursing and the difficulty of arranging any extended leave.²³⁶ The daughters’ entire lives became consumed by nursing; they stopped writing about plays, books, and their own health and started writing about their professional satisfaction and financial concerns. By the mid-1920s, the sisters no longer began letters with questions about life; they wrote specifically about nursing. Genia opened a letter to Dorothy by writing “Dorrie dear how goes yr work, I hope by now you have some interesting nice cases in view? Do you have to pay for yr rooms always?” and another time, “How is the

²³³ Lise Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 29 December 1918, Box 5, Folder 8, Letter 12.

²³⁴ Eugenia Poutiatine to Edith, Olga, and Dorothy Poutiatine, 1 January 1924, Box 2, Folder 13, Letter 1; Eugenia Poutiatine to her mother and sisters, 23 July unknown year, Box 1, Folder 5, Letter 2.

²³⁵ Dorothy Poutiatine to her mother and sisters, 14 January 1923, Box 2, Folder 11, Letter 5; Dorothy Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 17 June 1923, Box 2, Folder 11, Letter 4; Dorothy Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 16 September 1921, Box 2, Folder 9, Letter 16; Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 9 September 1921, Box 2, Folder 9, Letter 11.

²³⁶ May Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 9 June 1925, Box 2, Folder 14, Letter 6.

world treating you these days? + who are you nursing + where?’’²³⁷ They came to see each other as professionals in addition to being sisters and women. When Dorothy was considering a job in South Africa, May lamented to Edith:

It [would] be a great shame for a girl like [Dorothy] who has made a real success of her career over here after X years of hard work to throw everything up & go out there & work under second rate doctors, get out of touch with all modern inventions & discoveries &...even if she went over for a year she would lose touch with things here, which would be a terrible pity...to go to White River [South Africa] to work under one doctor (who certainly can't be as good as the London men she works for) & do chiefly maternity work which is not her speciality. She is a surgical nurse which is quite a different thing. Any old Mother Gamp can do Maternity work.²³⁸

May saw Dorothy's life not in terms of social opportunity or of distance from family, but purely in terms of professional advancement. This marked a clear shift from earlier letters that focused on the women's health and leisurely pursuits.

VI. Conclusion

The transition to labor changed the Poutiatine women's family relationships. By the same token, mishaps, health problems forced them to adjust their paid work. The constantly changing needs of different family members made any stable arrangement of work and family impossible. On this score, the Poutiatines resembled many other British women making the same transition in the post-war period. Their particularly far flung family, however, created distinctive problems. In the two years immediately following the war, all of their extended family lived in Russia, Denmark, or South Africa, and by

²³⁷ Eugenia Poutiatine to her mother and sisters, 23 July unknown year, Box 1, Folder 5, Letter 2; Eugenia Poutiatine to Dorothy Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 1, Folder 4, Letter 2.

²³⁸ May Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 15 September 1926, Box 2, Folder 15, Letter 7.

the time Mary and Lise moved to Britain, they were reliant on Edith and her daughters for lodging and care. Thus the immediate Poutiatine family could not rely on day-to-day support from extended family. They also had to take into account Olga, who could not support herself financially or even live alone. These circumstances meant that the family side of the work-family equation weighed heavily on May, Dorothy, and Eugenia. At the same time, all three of these women often wrote about positive experiences they had had at work: gratitude from patients, praise from doctors, and private patients generous with lodging, food, and vacation time. As nurses, the Poutiatine women derived a sense of purpose and personal fulfillment from their work, which is not mirrored in the family's descriptions of teaching or taking in boarders. Nursing provided a career that brought rewards beyond financial stability, and the Poutiatine women thrived because of these rewards. The success of their professional lives allowed them to cope both financially and emotionally with illnesses and deaths within their own family.

Chapter 5: Illness and Death

I. Introduction

Illness, injuries, and death played a constant and sometimes transformative role in the lives of the Poutiatines. Even before Eugene married Edith, his health was poor. Earlier in life, as a colonel in the imperial Russian horse artillery, Eugene had suffered a head wound at the Battle of Shipka Pass during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877. As a result, Eugene became partially deaf and tired easily; he was too weak to continue his military career or take up another profession.²³⁹ He may have been suffering from what was later considered shell shock; symptoms identical to those of World War I shell shock were noted in veterans of the Russo-Turkish War. During and after the Russo-Japanese War of 1905, Russian psychiatrists noted the same symptoms and began to suspect the existence of an illness triggered by modern warfare. Their research was widely credited as early documentation of shell shock. Eugene's lethargy fit within the symptoms of shell shock, and he may have been suffering from shell shock for the entire time he was married to Edith and raising his daughters.²⁴⁰

His daughters grew up with the limitations imposed by his illness. He often had to leave the family home in Russia to receive medical treatment in Germany, where he

²³⁹ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 8.

²⁴⁰ Catherine Merridale, "The Collective Mind: Trauma and Shell Shock in Twentieth-Century Russia," *Journal of Contemporary History* 35.1 (2000): 40; Angela Brintlinger, "Introduction: Approaching Russian Madness," *Madness and the Mad in Russian Culture*, Eds. Angela Brintlinger and Ilya Vinitsky (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007) 12; Irina Sirotkina, "The Politics of Etiology: Shell Shock in the Russian Army," *Madness and the Mad in Russian Culture*, Eds. Angela Brintlinger and Ilya Vinitsky (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007) 118-120; Paul Wanke, *Russian/Soviet Military Psychiatry, 1904-1945* (London: Frank Cass, 2005) 10-11.

stayed with his sisters, Mary and Lise. Eugene may have visited Germany to use the natural baths, which were a popular cure among elite Europeans in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, or to receive psychiatric care in one of the new research-based asylums attached to German universities.²⁴¹ Either way, he was often unavailable to his daughters. The girls wrote to him, but sometimes he did not even have the energy to read their letters. In response to a letter from fourteen-year old Olga, her aunt Mary wrote: “I told that to Daddy out of your letter to amuse him and I think it did: he was not well enough to listen to the whole. He was in bed, but we were glad to find him pretty comfortable.”²⁴² When Eugene was not bedridden, he spent his time learning botany and tending to gardens, which is how his daughters preferred to remember him.²⁴³

By 1898, however, Eugene’s health required him to move to Dresden, Germany for constant medical supervision and his family, including his in-laws, moved with him. The girls hated Dresden. Olga described it as “a horrid place to live” and missed her extended family in Russia.²⁴⁴ By this time, Olga’s grandparents were not in the best of health either, and her grandfather died in 1908, a decade after the move to Dresden. His death and Eugene’s confinement to a nursing home left the family without a man in residence, triggering Edith’s conversation with Olga about becoming the man in the

²⁴¹ Eric J. Engstrom, *Clinical Psychiatry in Imperial Germany: A History of Psychiatric Practice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003) 1-2, 18-19; Janet Oppenheim, “*Shattered Nerves:*” *Doctors, Patients, and Depression in Victorian England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 126-137; Roy Porter, *Madness: A Brief History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 87, 98, 116, 139; Edward Shorter, *A History of Psychiatry: From the Era of the Asylum to the Age of Prozac* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1997) 23-24, 35-39, 66. 118-120.

²⁴² Mary Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 30 July 1905, Box 3, Folder 19, Letter 7.

²⁴³ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 69.

²⁴⁴ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 8.

family.²⁴⁵ A year later, Eugene died, and the family became all-female. Eugene's sisters, Mary and Lise, were the family's only tie to Dresden, and Sarah Jane missed her family in England. So in 1910, the women moved to England, hoping for a healthy new beginning.²⁴⁶

II. Aches & Pains

After Eugene's death, the family had a four-year period of relatively good health, but in the absence of more serious health problems, every ache and pain became fodder for family worry. Edith, especially, worried over her daughters' health, chronicling her daughters' minor aches and pains in her letters. She wrote home from abroad, asking about Dorothy: "Surely my Dorrie was not unwell again? Within 2 weeks, surely? That is very bad. She must continue to be careful for several days. You do not say if you had any more nosebleeding, my child, & how do you feel?"²⁴⁷ This letter, written on March 6, 1911, implied that Dorothy was ill both at that time and in the middle of February.

A letter written two months later, on May 1, 1911 allows one to comprehend either Edith's constant worrying or her daughters' constant weakness. Writing to Olga, who was traveling abroad with May while Edith stayed home with the other three daughters, Edith described the poor health of the three girls in great detail:

There is poor V.! trying to whoop. Her nights are rather better, & both D. & Jen coughed less last night. D. is v. low, & complains of having nothing to do. I let her read a little, & McKen & I read to her & V. & Jen

²⁴⁵ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 8.

²⁴⁶ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 8-9.

²⁴⁷ Edith Poutiatine to Vera Poutiatine, 6 March 1911, Box 1, Folder 12, Letter 4.

play games with her...Dr. C. says he will soon let her go out. The nurse leaves on Tuesday...Dr. C. is v. please with D., whose temperature remains normal, & who now eats a little more, & coughs less. (At no time has her cough been half as bad as V.'s, & Jen's is much less bad, tho' both 'choke up' a good deal.)...Today, [Dorothy] is dressed, & sitting up in my room. On the bed now, of course. I look after her from 11a.m. to 9p.m. When the nurse finishes her sleep & supper...The coughs are really better now, thanks partly to a new German remedy Dr. C. has given them 'Pertussin.'"²⁴⁸

Dr. C was Dr. Cowper, a regular fixture in the Poutiatine household, and the nurse was one of many live-in nurses hired between 1910 and 1914. The spate of coughs described above occurred in May 1911, when Edith was living at home with Vera, Dorothy, and Eugenia, and Olga was visiting relatives with May. Between her descriptions of coughs at home, Edith also asked Olga about Olga and May's health: "Does May cough much at night? & does it hurt her? Make her sick? Take away her appetite? How is your cough? Does it make you 'choke up?'"²⁴⁹ A week later, Edith wrote to Olga again:

I am glad [May] saw the Dr., & hope his medicine has done her good? How is she? My patients are troubled ones, for Dorrie has had high fever since Friday afternoon, & can hardly eat anything – only a little chicken brooder, toast, & Beuger's food, & today she has rheumatism in her back & shoulders. Dr. Cowper came yesterday & again today, & comes tomorrow. He says they have begun at the wrong end for influenza – fever should have come first, & then coughs. Jen was feverish last night & the night before under 39° but has none today, so has been allowed to get up this afternoon for 1½ hours. Vera is quite a crock again, after much sickness...V.'s cough is much better in the day, & D.'s less hard & constant. Jen's loose, but often."²⁵⁰

²⁴⁸ Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 14 May 1911, Box 1, Folder 12, Letter 6.

²⁴⁹ Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 14 May 1911, Box 1, Folder 12, Letter 6.

²⁵⁰ Edith Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 7 May 1911, Box 1, Folder 12, Letter 1.

Two weeks later, Edith wrote to Olga yet again describing the three girls' coughs in the same amount of detail.²⁵¹

Edith's fretting seems to have come from her own anxiety. If Vera, Dorothy, and Eugenia were as prone to illness as Edith's pre-war correspondence indicates, their health would have continued as a topic of discussion once the war began. But colds, coughs, headaches, nosebleeds, and other minor ailments disappeared from Edith's letters after 1914. This discrepancy leads one to ask why Edith was so consumed with her daughters' aches and pains from 1910 to 1914. Her concern was part of a long tradition of mothers anxiously monitoring their children's health, especially for illnesses that could lead to death, like whooping cough. In *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850*, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall describe the rise of scientific medicine in the early nineteenth century, partially as a response to mothers' desire for advice on caring for sick children. Entire manuals for childcare helped assuage maternal fears by providing instructions for dealing with minor illnesses, and doctors took a prominent role in well-off homes, providing personal care for ill children and giving explicit directions to the mothers.²⁵² Edith's reliance on Dr. Cowper and her anxious letters demonstrate the ascendance of the medical profession and the tenacity of maternal fears, even after medical care had decreased childhood deaths.²⁵³

²⁵¹ Edith Poutiatine to her daughters, 20 May 1910, Box 1, Folder 12, Letter 3.

²⁵² Davidoff, *Family Fortunes* 339-340; Deborah Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982) 66-67.

²⁵³ Gorham 67.

III. Vera's Illness

Edith's anxieties over minor issues may not have ended with the war but with Vera's more severe health problems, which started in the early months of 1914. While visiting family outside of Moscow, Vera developed what the family referred to as neuritis, or nerve pain. No one mentioned the location of the pain in or on the body, but Vera and Edith wrote to each other frequently about the illness. Edith had to tend to Dorothy and Eugenia in England, and Vera was not well enough to travel. Vera entered a sanatorium in Moscow and began treatment. Though Vera would have preferred to return to England as soon as she was well enough to travel, her family overruled her and took the doctors' advice – that Vera needed weeks or months of their ministrations.²⁵⁴ May expressed the family view when she wrote to Vera: “you must not risk it in the middle of the cure.”²⁵⁵ Instead, May traveled to Moscow to be with Vera; from there, both May and Vera wrote to Edith frequently describing Vera's symptoms and treatments.²⁵⁶

Vera always tried to minimize the severity of her illness; though it is impossible to know if Vera's view or the family's more worrisome views were correct. Vera's attitude may have reflected her exhaustion in the sanatorium. She described just one round of treatment to Edith: “I have 3 different electric treatments &...douches in a few

²⁵⁴ May Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 22 May 1914, Box 1, Folder 16, Letter 2; Vera Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 10 June 1914, Box 1, Folder 16, Letter 11; Vera Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 7 June 1914, Box 1, Folder 16, Letter 13.

²⁵⁵ May Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 22 May 1914, Box 1, Folder 16, Letter 2.

²⁵⁶ May Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 14 June 1914, Box 1, Folder 16, Letter 3; Vera Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 7 June 1914, Box 1, Folder 16, Letter 13; Vera Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 10 June 1914, Box 1, Folder 16, Letter 11.

days. The 30 injections are over & I believe have done their share of good.”²⁵⁷ She went on to write, “My ‘illness’ is so little of a real illness that it is quite difficult to say anything very definite about it.”²⁵⁸ Vera’s understanding of her own illness rested on its categorization as a “nerve illness,” which was a vague but oft-used term in the early twentieth century. Upper and middle-class patients were often diagnosed with the general “nerve illness” or one of its more specific members, such as “neurasthenia.” These diagnoses were reassuring to doctors and patients in multiple ways. First, nerve illnesses were not thought to be hereditary, so their diagnosis did not endanger the health and reputation of the entire family. Second, nerve illnesses were considered physical, not mental, allowing patients to avoid asylums and the dreaded label of insanity. Finally, the presumed physical nature of a nerve illness allowed doctors and patients to believe in a physical cure. The cultural usefulness of nerve illnesses, however, did not disguise their vague nature and disparate symptoms. Unfortunately, Vera never described her symptoms in depth, only mentioning insomnia and headaches in passing. These two symptoms, along with many others, often led to a nerve-related diagnosis when no other physical cause could be found.²⁵⁹ The only definite physical issue Vera mentioned involved her weak lungs, which the doctors discovered after a series of X-rays. Though

²⁵⁷ Vera Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 7 June 1914, Box 1, Folder 16, Letter 13.

²⁵⁸ Vera Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 7 June 1914, Box 1, Folder 16, Letter 13.

²⁵⁹ Tom Lutz, “Neurasthenia and Fatigue Syndrome: Social Section,” *A History of Clinical Psychiatry: The Origins and History of Psychiatric Diseases*, Eds. German Berrios, Roy Porter, and Michele Eliason (New York: New York University Press, 1995) 535-537; Oppenheim 143; Shorter 117.

the doctors immediately began lung-strengthening treatments, Vera did not think her lungs had “anything to do with the neuritis.”²⁶⁰

At this point, she had been in treatment for over a month and was feeling trapped in the sanatorium. She referred to her stay there as “my term of captivity” and hoped that her health could “come last on the list of topics of thought & conversation.”²⁶¹ A good deal of Vera’s medical treatment consisted of rest and food, and she was allowed very little recreation other than that for fear that it would exacerbate the neuritis. This “rest cure” was a popular treatment for nerve illnesses in the early twentieth century. Whether it was implemented in spas, asylums, sanatoriums, or at home, the rest cure always involved forced idleness as a means to restore nerve force, which was believed to be a finite quantity of energy patients had somehow exhausted. Doctors often combined the rest cure with a limited and bland diet and electric shock treatment. Vera received all of these treatments during her stay at the Russian sanatorium.²⁶² The way Vera saw it, she had had “so much rest & such good feeding that it must have all gone somewhere as a huge store for future health” and she was ready to go home.²⁶³ Unfortunately for Vera, her doctor told her to stay for yet another two weeks. She complained, not for the first time, that her doctor’s “ideal of health remained on too high a pinnacle.”²⁶⁴ However, her family sided with the doctors again, and Vera remained in the sanatorium for two more weeks. She returned to England just before the start of World War I.

²⁶⁰ Vera Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 7 June 1914, Box 1, Folder 16, Letter 13.

²⁶¹ Vera Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 7 June 1914, Box 1, Folder 16, Letter 13.

²⁶² Shorter 126-127, 133; Oppenheim 110-123; Lutz 533, 537.

²⁶³ Vera Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 7 June 1914, Box 1, Folder 16, Letter 13.

²⁶⁴ Vera Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 10 June 1914, Box 1, Folder 16, Letter 11.

IV. Deaths

Vera's illness marked the first in a long line of serious illnesses and deaths, if not within the immediate Poutiatine family than within their circle of friends and relatives. Around the time Vera entered the Russian sanatorium, her maternal grandmother, Sarah Jane Mirrielees, passed away from natural causes.²⁶⁵ Then during the war, the family lost an uncle, Gustia, in the fighting. The Poutiatine daughters also lost childhood a friend who had joined the army: Christopher Dreamer. Finally, Edith lost one of her friends, John Lee, not from fighting but from Spanish influenza, which his sister referred to as an "epidemic" in her letter to Edith. Describing her brother's last days, M. Lee wrote, "My dear brother came home from work stating that he felt very bad we had the doctor in and he stated that John was suffering from influenza, and if his heart kept good he would get over it...but unfortunately his heart valves gave out and he gradually sank and died on Wednesday evening only being ill five days."²⁶⁶ John's death would foreshadow Vera's death in 1919 also from Spanish influenza.

V. Olga's Nervous Breakdown

Vera's death may have been the final trigger for Olga, who suffered a nervous breakdown following her departure from Russia and Vera's death in 1919. During the war, Olga had firsthand experience with shell-shocked soldiers on both fronts. What was more, she had also lived through the chaos and violence of the February and October Revolutions and she had experienced bombardment when working in field hospitals on

²⁶⁵ Bulgy to Poutiatine daughters, 15 March 1914, Box 4, Folder 15, Letter 6.

²⁶⁶ Mrs. M. Lee to Edith Poutiatine, 5 July 1918, Box 5, Folder 8, Letter 5.

the Eastern Front. Olga lost not only patients, but other nurses to weapons and diseases during the war. Her work with shell shock and her own traumatic experiences left Olga, like many war-time nurses, in an interesting position. Following medical opinion, they classified shell shock as a 'soldier's illness,' but they were prone to similar mental and physical symptoms.²⁶⁷

In Olga's case, these experiences were prolonged by the October Revolution and its aftermath. By the time Russia withdrew from the war and the Kauffman Sisterhood dissolved, Olga had no way to return to England. The Bolshevik government refused to acknowledge her British passport. The regime also nationalized her family's department store in Moscow, which had supported Olga and her family since the mid-nineteenth century. With no money and no way to travel home, Olga lived with friends and relatives in Moscow. Food was scarce, and Olga struggled to make ends meet by teaching English and French to Russian children.²⁶⁸

It was only in 1919, after a year in Moscow, that Olga received permission to travel to Denmark, where her aunts lived in Copenhagen. Upon her arrival, Olga suffered what she called a nervous breakdown and was hospitalized in the psychiatric ward of Kommunehospitalet in Copenhagen.²⁶⁹ In the psychiatric ward, Olga was treated for a variety of symptoms by two doctors, George Schrøder and Nicolai Schütte.²⁷⁰ Without

²⁶⁷ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 10-11, 13, 25, 69.

²⁶⁸ Olga Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 9, Folder 5, Item 5; Olga Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 9, Folder 5, Item 6; Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 89-91.

²⁶⁹ Olga Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 9, Folder 5, Item 5; Olga Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 9, Folder 5, Item 6; Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 89-91.

²⁷⁰ Olga Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 9, Folder 5, Item 5; Olga Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 9, Folder 5, Item 6.

the doctors' notes, it is impossible to know the official diagnosis, but Olga's writings while in the hospital offer her own interpretation of her illness and a firsthand look at her symptoms. Olga's symptoms made it impossible for her to continue life outside the hospital. The transformation was abrupt. She became the patient as opposed to the nurse. After years of independence and work, she was forced to be dependent and idle.

Nightmares were the symptom that Olga recorded most often, and these nightmares involved a wide variety of fears, both war-related and not. The most common nightmare involved deaths of family members. While Olga was hospitalized, her sister Vera did die of Spanish influenza, but Olga also dreamt of the deaths – and resurrections – of friends and family who were still living. In August of 1919, Olga wrote “My May [her sister] lived then was gone. Mother was dead then lived again...My Vera lived all day but during the concert she...& Mother were all dead. My Dorrie must be very ill and Dr. Schütte” and two weeks later: “It seemed to me during my afternoon rest that suddenly Vera & Dorrie [her sister] lived again...I was sure my [nursing] Sisters Wedderburn, Goss, & Helen MacDonald were dead.”²⁷¹ She also had nightmares about her nursing work, specifically her time in field hospitals on the Eastern Front: “once in night Lutzk [a field hospital] fancied fed by military music door slamming patients muttering All came back to me the wounded then I decided to face my self not to fear jumps but to sleep & not keep awake. Then came the real nerve shock with Lut. Nicholls voice You must remember & a clear picture & I think I screamed & started up.”²⁷²

²⁷¹ Olga Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 9, Folder 5, Item 17; Olga Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 5, Folder 10, Letter 3.

²⁷² Olga Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 9, Folder 5, Item 7.

Calling her dreams and nightmares “fancies” and her sudden waking a “jump,” Olga recorded her own sleep patterns and dreams; she clearly had tried to stay awake in the past in order to avoid her nightmares. Her acknowledgement and even interpretation of her nightmares revealed her awareness of her illness, even if she could not extrapolate a diagnosis from the symptoms. These symptoms, nightmares and insomnia, belonged to every nervous illness diagnosed in the past century, from hysteria to shell shock.

Olga also recorded headaches and other symptoms, attributing them to her time as a nurse and in Moscow. These recordings took the form of long train-of-conscious scribbles on hospital stationery, which Olga may have written as part of her cure or because she was bored by her doctor’s prescription for rest. In a long scribble describing her medical history, Olga first mentions the English doctor who told her she “was as strong as a horse,” and another English doctor who told her she “had no nerves.” She then describes her changing health once she began nursing:

a little neuritis [nerve inflammation] on the left side when nursing for the first time...headaches twice or three times at the front (left side of head after nursing in Lutzk & the bombs & all my strain of translating & of mad patients with little rest or food. At Minsk [a field hospital] something like malaria with headaches at times...In Moscow Jan 1918 – Sept 1919 I only remember having had migraines badly pain in back of neck & spine...palpitations & my feet swelled...I had pain as now but was weaker from starvation – For a month I was worse than now much thinner...Dr. Viozlinsky [in Russia] declared it was starvation & nerves...²⁷³

Olga rejected another Russian doctor’s claim that she had a heart defect, instead describing her heart as “nervous.”²⁷⁴ Even a year after being on the front, Olga wrote that she “still [disliked] to stand noise or shaking when awake” and that she continued to

²⁷³ Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 9, Folder 5, Item 3.

²⁷⁴ Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 9, Folder 5, Item 3; Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 9, Folder 5, Item 5.

suffer from exhaustion: “Am I the only one who is to work for ever without a rest. If only I could just lie down and sleep, sleep, sleep.”²⁷⁵

Olga also experienced delusions, anxiety, and paranoia during her hospital stay, which she recorded with great anxiety. She describes a visit from her aunts while she was in the hospital: “The whole day was a strain watching for echoes & chain members & listening to Aunties with my right ear & to little Jen [her sister] & many others with my left.”²⁷⁶ Since Jen was back in England, Olga was imagining her voice in the room in Copenhagen. On April 21, 1919, Olga admitted, “Yesterday I cried & would not speak English, because I thought my Mother dead,” though her mother, Edith, was alive and well in England.²⁷⁷ Olga had intense anxiety surrounding the deaths of friends and family. Referring to her friends and family as links in a “great chain,” Olga often wrote of deaths in the chain, when in actuality her friends and family were alive: “Dr. Schröder was suffering a great deal all day. Dr. Schütte is I think dying...The Hughes are dead my poor wee Spencer I saw yesterday in the surgical department. It has again been a day of tragedies in the chain.”²⁷⁸ None of these men and women had passed away, but Olga expected them to at any moment. Her life had become suffused with death so thoroughly that she was convinced that all near to her would soon die.

Olga was particularly paranoid about her effect on other patients in the hospital.

She worried about the young visitors who came to see her fellow patients: “The little girl

²⁷⁵ Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 9, Folder 5, Item 8; Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 9, Folder 5, Item 19.

²⁷⁶ Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 9, Folder 5, Item 10; Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 9, Folder 5, Item 22; Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 5, Folder 10, Item 3; Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 9, Folder 5, Item 16.

²⁷⁷ Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 9, Folder 5, Item 2.

²⁷⁸ Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 9, Folder 5, Item 17.

in the life was daughter or niece to my neighbor in this room. When her Aunt did not let her look at me I thought I must have killed Clems [another patient] wee boy by loving him too much at first sight.”²⁷⁹ At this point, Olga believed it possible to kill someone through loving too much. This belief may have come from all of her beloved patients in the Anglo-Russian Hospital, many of whom had died in her arms. Though she never explicitly wrote about guilt in her letters, she must have felt guilt at being unable to save those she cared about so deeply. Olga also believed that she was a disturbance to those around her. During her time in section C, the section of the psychiatric ward reserved for the most disturbed patients, Olga worried about her effect on the neighboring patient Elsa: “But did Elsa sleep well or was she crying did I do her harm I cannot understand Can I really do no good to Elsa or did I do her harm in C? If I think of her & trouble about her does that harm her.”²⁸⁰ What Olga most wanted was to “help Elsa & others like her” in any way she could.²⁸¹

Olga was bothered by the nightmares, insomnia, headaches, anxiety, paranoia, delusions, and sensitivity to noise and movement, but above all, by amnesia. Amnesia troubled Olga more than her other symptoms, possibly because it prevented her from using her experiences to help those around her. Olga wrote of her memory as a calendar and her goal was “to fill in the dark parts.”²⁸² Was loss of memory to be her “heavy

²⁷⁹ Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 5, Folder 10, Item 3.

²⁸⁰ Willy Hojer-Pedersen, “The Centenary of the Psychiatric Department of Kommunehospitalet, Copenhagen (1875-1975),” *The Department of Psychiatry: Kommunehospitalet, Copenhagen, 1875-1975*, Eds. F. Schulsinger, N. Reisby, Willy Hojer-Pedersen, J. Weiner, B. Bell (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1975) 9; Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 9, Folder 5, Item 8.

²⁸¹ Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 9, Folder 5, Item 8.

²⁸² Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 9, Folder 5, Item 10.

heavy cross?” “May I find it now?,” she wrote, distraught, “Can I not help Elsa & others like her?”²⁸³ To Olga, remembering would allow her to help those who did not want to remember their experiences: “Can I do good to my contrasts (those who want to forget) – morphinists?”²⁸⁴ She thanked God “for the gift of memory” and thanked her doctors for helping her regain it.²⁸⁵

Olga’s symptoms, as she described them, aligned closely with those of hysteria and shell shock. How did she understand her own illness? Her hospital writings capture her mixed feelings and thoughts both about the origin and the nature of the illness. Though Olga describes her illness in lists of symptoms, she also seems to accept its mental or psychological nature, hoping “to be the Mental Wonder Case” of *Kommunehospitalet*.²⁸⁶ In a letter to her doctor, Olga describes her symptoms as “our little family madness,” possibly referring to her father’s illness that lasted from 1898 until his death in 1908 and may have been “nervous” in nature.²⁸⁷ Later, in an unaddressed scribble, Olga states “If my cross is to be loss of Memory or Dead or Madness it was worth the while if the 3 Grand Ideals continue to exist & they will for Ever.”²⁸⁸ That Olga considered madness a possibility deserves analysis. Turn of the century medicine believed madness, as opposed to nervousness, to be a largely working-class affliction, and one that might require permanent institutionalization. Such a possibility would have

²⁸³ Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 9, Folder 5, Item 8.

²⁸⁴ Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 9, Folder 5, Item 8.

²⁸⁵ Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 9, Folder 5, Item 4; Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 9, Folder 5, Item 5; Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 9, Folder 5, Item 9.

²⁸⁶ Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 9, Folder 5, Item 3; Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 9, Folder 5, Item 8.

²⁸⁷ Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 9, Folder 5, Item 5; Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 8-9

²⁸⁸ Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 9, Folder 5, Item 10.

terrified Olga and her family; that Olga used the term indicates her own understanding of the severity of her illness. On the other hand, Olga also referred to her illnesses lightly – as “a nervous heart.”²⁸⁹ She recalls being “nervous” and being “scolded for letting myself go & being hysterical” during her stay in the hospital, indicating she believed she suffered from a nervous affliction, not insanity.²⁹⁰ That she vacillated between these two very different ways of describing her state might indicate the blurring of madness and nervous conditions in the early twentieth century. Of course, these vacillations might also reflect Olga’s own mental vacillations during her hospital stay.

Olga’s musings on her illness varied from day to day and filled pages of hospital stationery. Her family and friends’ handling of the situation was more consistent and discreet, possibly indicating their discomfort with the idea of mental illness or simply their limited options in trying to care for her from another country. Her sister May wrote to Olga a few months after Olga’s arrival at Kommunehospitalet: “I was so glad to hear from Aunt Mary that you are getting on nicely + are gaining weight... You must do your very best to get stronger daily so as to be able to come over here soon.”²⁹¹ Perhaps May was aware of Olga’s psychological symptoms and only felt comfortable commenting on the concrete topic of weight, but perhaps May saw Olga’s problem as one of starvation and exhaustion as opposed to a true illness such as hysteria. Olga’s cousin, Percy Cazalet, wrote to her after her stay in the hospital and voiced his understanding of Olga’s situation:

²⁸⁹ Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 9, Folder 5, Item 5.

²⁹⁰ Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 9, Folder 5, Item 22.

²⁹¹ May Poutiatine to Olga Poutiatine, 3 June 1919, Box 2, Folder 7, Letter 3.

you had arrived home + were really quite fit again + only needed real quiet + congenial employment like gardening to re-establish you again quite the long time in Copenhagen has evidently done you a lot of good, even if it was monotonous! You must be careful though + not get into an active minded life too soon + particularly not live too much in a crowd or wear enough to London to be in danger of being drawn into that insidious life of...+ keeping appointments + catching tubes + busses + trains: beware of that life for a long time + don't let yourself get drawn into it.²⁹²

Percy's vague description of Olga's health and time in Denmark starkly contrasts with his specific advice regarding an active lifestyle. Where did Percy derive these recommendations? Was he recalling the popular treatments for neurasthenia and hysteria in the nineteenth century or had he been more influenced by public discussions of shell shock treatments in the year following the war? Percy's pat description of Olga's improved health does not indicate where he sees her in relation to the nervous illnesses of the day, but his treatment recommendations clearly stem from his belief in Olga's weak nerves, which could not cope with city life.

Two of Olga's nursing friends also wrote to congratulate her on her improved health and encourage her to maintain it. Helen T. MacDonald wrote to Olga from a hospital in Baghdad: "I wanted to thank you for sheer joy when I read that your health was so much improved. You deserve, you dear thing, never to be ill again as long as you live...What a splendid physique you must have now with 10st. 9lbs.! Just keep like that + all will be well."²⁹³ MacDonald's strong belief that Olga deserves never-ending good health indicates the level severity MacDonald ascribed to Olga's illness in Copenhagen,

²⁹² Percy Cazalet to Olga Poutiatine, 12 October 1919, Box 5, Folder 10, Letter 10.

²⁹³ Helen T. MacDonald to Olga Poutiatine, 2 October 1922, Box 5, Folder 18, Letter 8.

but beyond that, the letter is quite vague. The advice is purely physical, implying that Olga's illness was physical, not psychological, in nature. MacDonald, who had nursed in Russia with Olga, would have known the symptoms of shell shock or hysteria. Did she still subscribe to the idea that shell shock was a somatic illness or did she not recognize Olga as having anything resembling shell shock or hysteria? Perhaps, MacDonald was simply being sensitive to the cultural implications of mental illness, and so she avoided mentioning it.

Olga's other nursing friend, Mary Cooke, spoke more directly to the psychological issues. Responding to a letter from Olga, Cooke wrote, "I did not like your letter this morning...the depressed part of it...I'm sure the weather has got a lot to do with one feeling depressed but don't think about it + please please don't talk about being ill again...Just make up your mind that you are not going to be ill and always tell me anything that worries you. Cooke's letter demonstrates an understanding of the psychological nature of Olga's illness: "depressed," "worries," "just make up your mind," but again avoids a putting a specific name to Olga's state.²⁹⁴ Cooke's letter also reveals the way that Olga's symptoms could be minimized. Using everyday language such as "worries" and "depressed" and blaming the weather indicate ways in which those around Olga could have consciously or unconsciously rejected the uncomfortable idea of mental illness in someone close to them.

²⁹⁴ Mary Cooke to Olga Poutiatine, 19 July 1922, Box 5, Folder 18, Letter 3.

With no clear diagnosis and symptoms that belonged to a myriad of illnesses, how might Olga have been understood by her contemporaries? She was the daughter of a Russian aristocrat and a British heiress; the combination of her gender and class likely would have led to a diagnosis of hysteria or neurasthenia before the war, and her treatment might have been hydrotherapy or the “rest cure.” In the post-war world, however, Olga might have been diagnosed differently, especially if she had been a man. The famous war-time psychiatrist, W. H. R. Rivers, described shell shock as the repression of the conflict between duty and self-preservation. By this definition, Olga may very well have suffered from shell shock. Even in the psychiatric ward, she repeatedly referred to her “greatest wish,” the desire to help Russia, and from as early as age fourteen, Olga confided in her journal, “I’m rather bothered because I think I won’t be able to give up anything to do with my own pleasure or advantage for the sake of my mission for Russia.”²⁹⁵ She spoke of nursing in Russia as “helping our own country in her need,” yet her actual experiences in Russia involved great danger and fear.²⁹⁶ The field hospitals were crowded and dirty, with no mattresses or beds for the nurses, though many of the nurses had little time to sleep during the actual battles. Finally, Olga’s field hospitals were so close to the fighting that exploding shells destroyed buildings. After one attack, Olga wrote: “we all or nearly all found ourselves groveling on the bandage-room floor in a most undignified way – the result of combined shock of the air and noise

²⁹⁵ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 9; Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 9, Folder 5, Item 1; Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 9, Folder 5, Item 9; Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 9, Folder 5, Item 10; Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 9, Folder 5, Item 14; Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 9, Folder 7, Item 2; Poutiatine, unknown date, Box 10, Folder 10, Item 5.

²⁹⁶ Olga Poutiatine to Edith Poutiatine, 15 April 1915, Box 2, Folder 3, Letter 11.

and instinct for self-preservation.”²⁹⁷ The conflict between duty and self-preservation may have been as present in certain nurses as it was in many soldiers. There is no evidence that Olga or her family considered shell shock a possibility. There is evidence, however, that Olga never fully recovered her mental health. Her mother and sisters wrote to each other about caring for Olga from 1919 until they placed Olga in a nursing home in 1939. At this time, Olga was suffering the same symptoms she had suffered in 1919, triggered again by the German bombings during World War II. Though the nursing home released her in 1940, deeming her cured, Olga hanged herself shortly thereafter.

VI. Conclusion

In one way, Olga’s illness fit into the broader family narrative of mental illness. Her father had suffered from a similar un-titled illness in the aftermath of the Russo-Turkish War and had never fully regained his health. His family had cared for him until his death, of undisclosed causes, at the age of thirty-seven. Olga’s illness was, in a way, more un-nerving to her family. Her father’s illness had begun years before he married and had children, so the family had never known anything different. Olga’s illness struck in the midst of chaos, separation, exile from Russia, Vera’s death, financial instability. Olga, healthy, might have provided support for Edith during these changes. Instead, Edith and the other daughters not only had to adapt to Olga’s dependence on them, but to watch their younger sister come unhinged.

²⁹⁷ Poutiatine, *War and Revolution* 31

Illnesses and deaths had changed their family more than financial worries or revolutions, fundamentally restructuring Olga's relationships with her mother and her sisters and leaving the family without a male head once again. The severity of Olga's illness and Vera's death gave new perspective to Edith's concerns about childhood aches and pains. The leisurely letter-writing about each girl's cough and the home visits from doctors and nurses must have seemed positively luxurious in the family's new circumstances. Each woman, however, successfully adapted to her new reality. May, Dorothy, and Eugenia found fulfilling work that allowed them to care for and provide for their mother and sister, while Olga and Edith established a new relationship dynamic that allowed them to run a boardinghouse and care for each other. The women took advantage of the professional and service opportunities created by the war and they allowed themselves to adopt the looser cultural standards for respectability which emerged in post-war Britain. Their willingness to embrace these changes and opportunities made it possible for them to adapt, emotionally and financially, to dramatically new circumstances.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The Poutiatines' letters reveal the extent to which gendered, familial, and social factors influence the lives and relationships of individuals during times of crisis. From their father's worsening health in 1898 to their loss of Russian citizenship in 1922, the Poutiatine women endured common tragedies, such as illness and death, in the shadow of calamities, such as war and revolution. However, theirs was not simply a passive endurance. The Poutiatine women reacted to these events in active and sometimes even proactive ways. They moved to Britain, joined military nursing units, took up professional careers, and even liquidated as many of their Russian assets as possible before the Bolsheviks nationalized their family business. The women took advantage of the tumultuous time in which they lived to join thousands of women who entered military and professional realms during and after World War I. In many ways, the crisis of World War I and its aftermath allowed these and many other women greater personal freedom than had hitherto been possible. At the same time, the revolutions in Russia had negative repercussions, and the Poutiatine women could do little to negate these effects. By the end of the Russian Civil War in 1922, the Poutiatine women had lost their income from the family business, their aristocratic titles, and their right to return to their homeland. The loss of these pieces of their Russian identity deeply hurt the women emotionally and financially.

However, the Poutiatine letters also reveal the ways in which individuals and families can successfully adapt, even to negative changes. As individuals fell ill or died,

other family members took on additional roles and responsibilities to maintain the functionality of the family unit. When the family suffered financial losses, more family members took on paid labor to support not only themselves but also each other. This would have been unthinkable to the family even a couple of decades before, when they were firmly ensconced in the Russian aristocracy with substantial income from the family business. Their nursing careers and especially their boarding house marked a definite shift in terms of both class and gender. In Russia, only the men in Eugene's family had worked outside of the home, and they thought of it as serving the tsar. In Edith's family, the men ran a business, leaving the day-to-day work to their underlings. Women in both families refrained from working outside of the home and had domestic servants within the home. Their granddaughters took up nursing, which required physical labor every day, and took in boarders, which at times required doing housework that previously belonged to domestic servants. This shift to paid labor demonstrates the drastic ways in which families adjusted during crises.

On a more personal level, the crises caused the Poutiatine women both to adhere to and then to change their gendered roles within the family. Olga's designation as Jack, the head of the family, had little effect on her life decisions before World War I. Like her sisters, Olga attended a girls' boarding school in London and traveled to visit family and friends after she finished school. Though Edith may have relied upon her more heavily, Olga's life closely resembled those of her sisters. However, when war broke out, Olga felt it was her duty as the head of family to serve in Britain and Russia. The crisis of the

war forced her to either fulfill or forsake the gender role that she and Edith had defined for her, and she chose to fulfill it by becoming a VAD and serving in Russia. Like many young men who fulfilled their duty during World War I, Olga suffered mentally and emotionally. By the end of the October Revolution, Olga's health forced her to forsake her position as head of the family, and Edith turned to her other daughters for support and leadership. May and Dorothy took over as family leaders, finding work that paid enough to maintain the family home and calming Edith's worries about money and Olga. War, revolutions, and illnesses forced the Poutiatines to reconfigure the power and gender structures within the family.

The Poutiatine women even maintained their Russian identity in the face of the October Revolution. Through religion, culture, and language, the women taught each other how to stay connected to their place of origin. The women's reactions to the different crises they faced demonstrated not only their ability to adapt but also their refusal to cede certain aspects of their lives and identities. They never gave up attending Russian religious services and writing to each other in Russian. They always welcomed family members such as their aunts Mary and Lise, even when they could not really afford the cost. If the women had to change where they lived or where they worked in order to care for another family member, they did so. The family used Russian culture to maintain familial bonds; the Russian language and religion enhanced their sense of themselves as a family unit. These two touchstones, Russia and family, remained constant even as everything else in their lives changed. Thus the Poutiatines' letters

reveal not only how women could adapt to and change their surroundings but also how they could maintain their identities and priorities in the face of crisis.

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