

FLORENCE FARMBOROUGH'S PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE RUSSIAN FRONT DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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Abstract. This article offers a rare insight into the Russian experience of the First World War from a British woman's perspective. Florence Farmborough (1887 – 1978) was a British nurse, photographer, writer, university lecturer and traveller. In 1908, aged 21, Farmborough travelled to Russia where she worked as a governess in Kyiv, Ukraine, before moving to Moscow. Here she taught English to the daughters of Dr Pavel Usov, a Russian heart surgeon. When war broke out 1914, Farmborough trained as a Red Cross nurse at the Golitsyn military hospital in Moscow. She subsequently served with a Russian mobile army surgical hospital on the Russian front in Poland, Austria and Romania until the Bolshevik revolution forced her to flee Russia in 1918. Farmborough documented these experiences as a photographer and diarist. Her collection is now preserved by Imperial War Museums, Britain's national museum of modern conflict.

Keywords: War photography; Women photographers; First World War; Medicine; Russian Front

The international commemorations of the First World War's centenary in 2014–2018 provided a welcome opportunity to celebrate the contribution of a small group of female photographers who documented the conflict at close quarters. These exceptional women created a unique pictorial record of events, circumventing military controls imposed on the use of cameras and the presence of women in the front line. A few were professional journalists. But most were nurses, whose role was to provide emergency care for sick and wounded soldiers. In Britain, thousands of women volunteered to nurse the wounded under the banner of the Red Cross. They were sent to work in every major war zone, including those without a formal British military presence.

The introduction of cheap 'point-and-shoot' cameras by manufacturers, such as George Eastman's Kodak corporation, had triggered an unprecedented enthusiasm for amateur snapshot photography in the early twentieth century. Many Red Cross nurses therefore possessed a personal camera and the ability to photograph their wartime experiences. Professor Val Williams notes:

'Many women took their cameras with them when they travelled abroad to become war workers, and the intensity of this new experience resulted in photographs which firmly established women as social documentarists'.¹

Photography was never a priority for the nurses. But their exceptional situation and experiences compelled many to take photographs whenever their duties allowed. The war shaped and influenced their photography, often transforming it from a private activity, conducted in moments of leisure for personal remembrance, into a deliberate act of bearing witness for a wider audience. This transformation was characterised by a broadening and deepening of subject coverage, enhanced attention to the quality of the image and, on occasion, the substitution of a better camera.

The contribution and achievements of Red Cross nurses attracted considerable publicity during the war but faded into obscurity after the war ended in 1918. During the war's fiftieth anniversary, their stories and

¹ Williams, Val: *The Other Observers: Women Photographers from 1900 to the Present*, Virago, London, 1991, p. 24.

photographs began to reappear in the public domain and reach new audiences. The Imperial War Museum (IWM), Britain's national museum of modern conflict, undertook a major project to collect and preserve the photographs and stories of these pioneering women.²

Florence Farmborough was born in 1887 at Steeple Claydon, an English village near Aylesbury in Buckinghamshire. She was the fourth of six children born to Frederic and Zilpah Farmborough and was named after Florence Nightingale (a famous British nurse who had pioneered military nursing during the Crimean War). Her father was a prosperous farmer who could support his family in reasonable comfort. Florence Farmborough was therefore educated at home by a governess³. By the standards of the day, she received a good education and had a gift for languages. Naturally independent, with a romantic thirst for adventure, she longed to travel.

*'I always knew that I should have to travel. The longing was strong within me from my earliest years'*⁴

This was a time when many young people in Britain felt stifled or constrained by the limited opportunities available to them in their own country. Women, disenfranchised and barred from many jobs, were campaigning for political, social and economic rights. It was also a time of empires. Thanks to a well-developed network of railways and passenger ships, long-distance travel was not only possible but affordable. Many young Britons therefore sought a better life in British colonies overseas. Farmborough's desire for adventure would take her in a different direction.



Fig. 1. Florence Farmborough outside her tent in the 1st Letucha's forest encampment near Kozaki, Russia (now Poland), June 1915. (IWM Ref: Q 107170)

Anglo-Russian relations, poor for many years, improved in 1907. Heightening tensions in Europe and the need to counter the military alliance formed by Germany, Austria Hungary and Turkey, forced Russia and Britain to settle their long-standing colonial disputes. Together with France, they formed an informal military coalition known as the Triple Entente. These improved connections brought Florence Farmborough, then aged 21, to Russia in 1908. She was employed initially as a governess by a wealthy family in Kyiv, Ukraine (then part of Russia). In 1910, Farmborough moved to Moscow where she was employed as an English tutor and companion to the two daughters of Pavel Sergeyvitch Usov (1867–1917), a distinguished Russian heart surgeon.

Farmborough formed a close bond with the Usov family. When war broke out in 1914, she remained in Russia and, helped by Dr Usov, trained as a surgical nurse with the Russian Red Cross at the Princess Golitsyn hospital in Moscow. Her training required Farmborough to improve her knowledge of Russian. She studied late every night to master the extensive medical terminology required by her new role. Once qualified, Farmborough joined the 10th Surgical Unit of the Russian Red Cross in March 1915. The Unit, known as an 'Otryad', consisted of three flying columns or 'Letuchas'. The Letuchas were mobile frontline surgical units which provided emergency medical treatment to battlefield casualties. Their purpose was to stabilise a casualty's condition until he could be evacuated to a military hospital away from the front or return to duty.

² Details of IWM's Florence Farmborough collection (comprising her photographs, diaries, medals, mementoes, publications and a full length audio interview, recorded by with Farmborough shortly before her death) can be accessed via Imperial War Museums' online database at: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections>

³ A female private tutor.

⁴ Farmborough, Florence: *Nurse at the Russian Front: A Diary 1914–1918*, pub. Constable, London, 1974, Preface.

Attached to the 1st Letucha, Farnborough spent three years travelling the length and breadth of the Russian Front. She rarely stayed more than a week in any location, working successively in Poland, Belarus, Ukraine, the Crimea and Romania. She experienced many key events on the Russian front at first hand. She witnessed the contribution of Russian female soldiers and the maltreatment of Polish, Romanian and Jewish civilians at the hands of Russian troops. She also witnessed the gradual disintegration of Imperial Russia into revolution and civil war.

Farnborough was plunged into a world for which nothing could have prepared her. She wrote later:

*'I think I saw it all more as challenge than calamity. Certainly I had no comprehension of the change that was about to engulf Russia'*⁵

The work was extremely arduous and traumatic. Farnborough dealt with horrific injuries, often close to the front line in very dangerous conditions. She endured shell fire, poison gas attacks and outbreaks of infectious diseases, such as cholera and typhoid. Capture by the enemy was a frequent possibility. Food and other essential supplies were often in short supply. Not surprisingly, exhaustion and stress took a heavy toll on Farnborough's physical and mental health. Nevertheless, she displayed astonishing resilience and empathy for the people she treated, regardless of their nationality and affiliation.

Farnborough was not the only British nurse to serve on the Russian front, but her absolute determination to document her experiences in photographs and in writing was exceptional. This determination, combined with her mobility and her proximity to events on the front line, enabled her to create a record which offers a unique insight into the Russian and Eastern European experience of war and revolutionary change.

Farnborough's photography was funded by her nursing pay of 50 roubles a month, supplemented by her savings (lodged in a Moscow bank). She always carried at least one glass plate camera and tripod with her, despite being constantly on the move. The 1st Letucha's extensive, well-guarded baggage train transported her heavy photographic equipment and supplies as well as her personal belongings. Her first camera was a basic model for amateur photographers. However, Farnborough was able to purchase a second, professional grade camera in 1916.

Negatives were developed by Farnborough herself, although this work was often interrupted by the arrival of the wounded or the need to move camp, resulting in many ruined plates. She was assisted by the Letucha's Russian liaison officer, who made regular rail trips to Moscow for medical and other supplies. He purchased her photographic materials and arranged for her negatives to be printed (and in some cases developed) during his visits to Moscow. The Usov family forwarded the photographs to Farnborough's sister in England for safekeeping. Given the chaotic conditions in Russia, the vagaries of war and the immense distances involved, the fact that any of Farnborough's photographs survived is miraculous.

Farnborough's diary reflects her difficult circumstances, often consisting of a few hurriedly scribbled notes in Russian or English on loose scraps of paper. Nevertheless, the diary provides vital context to Farnborough's photographs. Despite her affection for the Russian people, Farnborough's written observations retain an outsider's perspective. Her diary shows Farnborough to be a partial, occasionally naïve, but increasingly critical observer of the Russian Army. But Farnborough's diary is also ambiguous, if not disingenuous, regarding her status and purpose as a photographer. Her photographs present a nuanced eyewitness account yet also pose unanswered questions.

⁵ Farnborough, Florence: *Russian Album 1908–1918*, pub. Michael Russell, Wilton, Wiltshire, 1979, p. 26.



Fig. 2. The 1st Letucha's forest encampment near Kozaki, Russia (now Poland), June 1915. (IWM Ref: Q 097836)



Fig. 3. Drivers of the 1st Letucha pose for a group photograph during a meal break near Kozaki, Russia (now Poland), June 1915. (IWM Ref: Q 098415)

'My camera proved a great popular success, with the men all clamouring to be photographed at once.'

Florence Farmborough's diary, June 1915

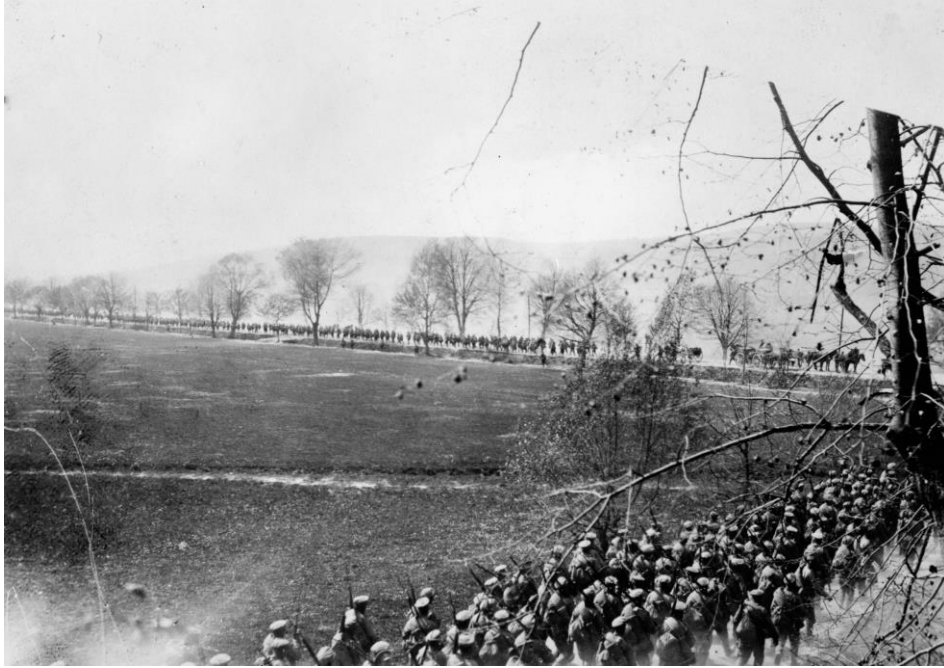


Fig. 4. The Russian 61st Division in retreat after its defeat at the Battle of Jaroslav during the Gorlice–Tarnów offensive, Austrian Galicia (now Poland), May 1915. (IWM Ref: Q 098441)

'So much has happened. I am dreadfully tired. We are retreating!'

Florence Farmborough's diary, 22 April 1915



Fig. 5. Russian soldiers, wounded during the Gorlice–Tarnów offensive, wait for treatment at the 1st Letucha's temporary dressing station at Molodiatycze, Austrian Galicia (now Poland), 17 June 1915.

One tent was reserved for those with non-fatal wounds; the other was for the mortally wounded.

(IWM Ref: Q 098433)

'For three full days we had been on the road – day and night; the rare hour or two of respite had surely not been enough for the exhausted animals. [...] The following morning a First Aid Post was opened by the roadside, where the Sister-on-duty took up her position. We were only two and a half versts from the Front line and liaison was promptly established with our Regiments.'

Florence Farmborough's diary, 17 June 1915



Fig. 6. A carefully posed photograph, taken during the Great Retreat, shows medical staff of the 1st Letucha treating an injured Russian soldier at Belopolye, Austrian Galicia (now Ukraine), July 1915. (IWM Ref: Q 098427)

'In Belopolye, we spent six hot days in July tending the men of our Division. [...] The young soldier was hit by a stray bullet near our station. Sister Anna and one of the doctors soon had him bandaged and resting comfortably.'

Florence Farmborough's diary, 11–17 July 1915



Fig. 7. Nurses of the 1st Letucha snatch a few hours' sleep under a haystack near Folvark Volka near the Polish-Russian frontier during the Great Retreat, August 1915. (IWM Ref: Q 098444)

'On and on we ambled until night again enveloped us, and still the long line of dvukolki and wagons swayed forward, though constantly impeded by the ever-increasing traffic. The morning mists were showing grey and indistinct over the landscape as we stopped outside the large Folvark Volka; here, for a couple of hours at least we might rest.'

Florence Farmborough's diary, 12 August 1915



8. A Russian soldier lies dead on the battlefield near Monasterzhiska, Austrian Galicia (now Ukraine) during the Brusilov Offensive, 31 July 1916. (IWM Ref: Q 098431)

'...we passed more than one battlefield. The dead were still lying around, in strange, unnatural postures – remaining where they had fallen; crouching, doubled up, stretched out, prostrate, prone. Austrians and Russians lying side by side.'

Florence Farmborough's diary, 31st July 1916

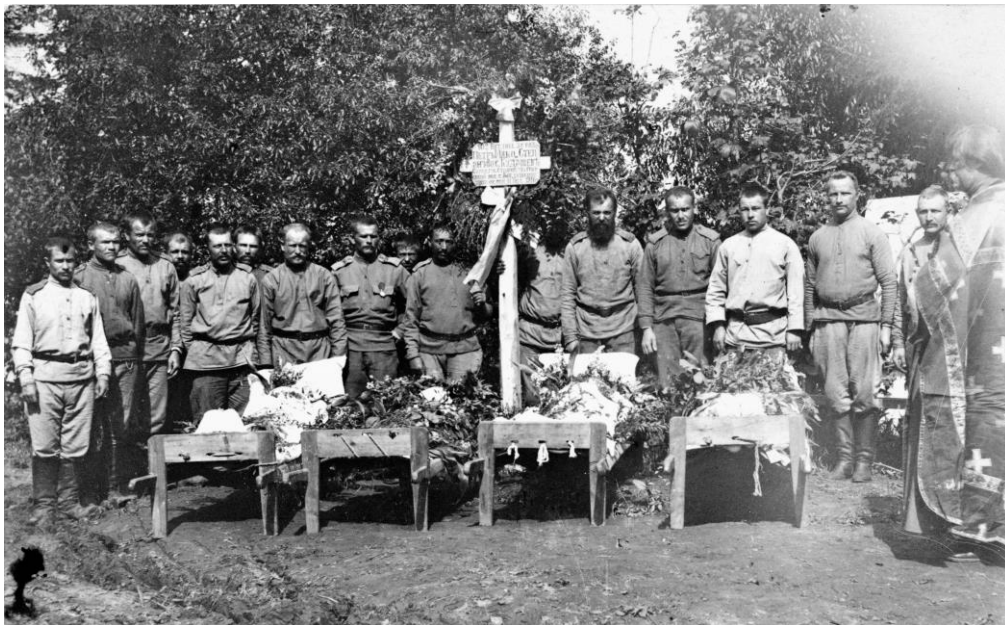


Fig. 9. The 1st Letucha's chaplain conducts a burial service for Russian troops who died from their wounds at the unit during the Brusilov Offensive, Austrian Galicia (now Ukraine) July 1916. (IWM Ref: Q 097838)

'Our surgeons say that the deaths at our Red Cross station must be considered few, taking into account the vast number of severely wounded brought to us. There are funerals here every evening; we seldom have time to attend them.'

Florence Farmborough's diary, July 1916



Fig. 10. A Russian artillery unit during the Brusilov Offensive near Khutanova, Austrian Galicia (now Ukraine), August 1916. (IWM Ref: Q 098430)

'It was difficult to believe, but the tumultuous firing of the past night had been all in vain. The enemy's lines were still intact and our men had been beaten back every time.'

Florence Farmborough's diary, 4th August 1916



Fig. 11. Florence Farmborough's first Romanian patients included a group of children who had been badly injured by shellfire. The children's grandmother, their sole surviving relative, was also injured, Seret, Romania, 11th August 1917. (IWM Ref: 098421)

'One of them, a tiny mite, Gheorghiu by name, only two-and-a-half years old, had had an arm blasted off by shrapnel. The boy's baby face still bore traces of shock and suffering. Panaria, his elder sister, had a wound in both head and stomach; Melania, the younger sister, had sustained a fractured thigh.'

Florence Farmborough's diary, 11 August 1917



Fig. 12. Turkish prisoners, brought to the 1st Letchucha for treatment, are guarded by Russian soldiers Mazanayeshiti, Romania, 3 September 1917.

'To our surprise, a batch of vociferous, mud-caked Turkish prisoners were brought in. They were a sorry group, dirty and ill-kempt beyond description. We had, literally, to scrape the mud and vermin off [...] Many of them actually resented the treatment, as though reluctant to part from their wartime crust.'

Florence Farmborough's diary, 4 September 1917

Farmborough maintained that her photographs were a personal record and that she was the only person in the Letucha who had a camera. Nevertheless, her diary confirms that the Russian military and medical authorities knew that she had a camera and facilitated her photography, procuring supplies and granting her access. It also confirms that she was often asked to take photographs for the Russians on a semi-official basis. Shortly before her death, Farmborough wrote:

*'Being the only sister with a camera, I received many commissions in unexpected places.'*⁶

This may explain why the Russians never seem to have suspected her of espionage. But it also renders Farmborough vulnerable to the charge of being an occasional Russian propagandist.

There is no evidence that Farmborough's photographs were published in Russia or elsewhere during the war itself. But it remains the case that those who interrogate Farmborough's photographs today are almost entirely dependent on her own account for information. Farmborough is often unclear on whether she chose, was requested or was ordered to take a photograph. The fact that she appears in some of the photographs herself confirms that she did not take all the photographs in her collection.

In view of this, it is unsurprising that Farmborough's collection fails to demonstrate a consistent photographic style, aesthetic or technical standard. Some photographs are carefully arranged constructs, featuring a stilted or sentimentalised aesthetic but also demonstrating an effective use of light and composition. Others are rough-and-ready snapshots. Some images are extremely graphic. As Farmborough's diary makes clear, she witnessed horrific scenes nearly every day but felt guilty about photographing the dead. Yet, the dead are shown lying on the battlefield, in open coffins or piled in mass graves. In some instances, her diary notes official requests that she take these photographs, but it is not clear whether this applied in all instances.

⁶ Farmborough, Florence, *ibid.*, p. 56.

The Russian revolution and the disintegration of the Imperial Army forced the 1st Letucha to disband in Romania in December 1917. Farmborough said later:

*'It was an inexplicable transformation. We were prepared for any hardship and danger at the front. But when our own men wanted to kill us because we were educated or religious, it was much more frightening.'*⁷

Farmborough undertook a perilous and chaotic journey from Romania to the Usov family home in Moscow. Penniless and having lost most of her possessions, she was forced to sell her professional camera to fund her escape from Russia. As the country descended into civil war, Farmborough travelled by freight train across Siberia, reaching Vladivostok in early 1918. Here, the cattle truck in which she had travelled was shunted into a railway siding while its passengers waited a month for a ship to take them to the United States. Farmborough eventually arrived back in England in July 1918. She never saw her Russian friends and comrades again and abandoned her photographic practice.

Farmborough's experiences in Russia affected her deeply and their consequences shaped the rest of her life. She became a vehement opponent of communism in all its forms. After leaving Russia, Farmborough worked in Spain as a journalist and lecturer at the University of Valencia. She was an active propagandist in support of General Franco during the Spanish Civil War and organized care for the conflict's refugees. Forced to leave Spain when the Second World War broke out in 1939, Farmborough then worked for the British Government in Jamaica, censoring correspondence to South America. She ended her career teaching languages, including Russian, in a British school. Farmborough returned once to Russia, visiting the Soviet Union as a tourist at the height of the Cold War in 1962. She found the country unrecognizable.

Florence Farmborough donated her photographs and diary to the Imperial War Museum in 1977, a year before her death, aged 91. While it is difficult to interpret or evaluate Farmborough's photographs of the Russian front with complete certainty, they constitute a personal documentary record which also incorporates fascinating elements of propaganda and art. The collection remains an invaluable resource for researchers with an interest in Russia and Eastern Europe.

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