In nineteenth-century Russia, women had greater access to medical and higher education than anywhere else in contemporary Europe. This book explores the remarkable expansion and upgrading of women's education during those turbulent decades following the Crimean War. Focusing on the relationship between developments in women's education and the domestic politics of the post-war era, the author reveals how the peculiar nature of autocratic rule under Alexander II facilitated the establishment of university-level courses for women. She also demonstrates that those women who co-operated with the government to increase their educational opportunities far outnumbered the more publicized female revolutionists who sought to overthrow it. Although Russian radicalism gave enormous encouragement to women's pursuit of university study, it was the support of reform-minded academics and government officials that made possible the creation of advanced educational facilities for women.

The author highlights ministerial disputes and public debate over women's education. She also examines the social and economic circumstances that promoted women's struggle for higher education. Special attention is given to female physicians, whose medical skills and commitment to social service were tested in the Russo-Turkish War and the tradition-bound peasant village. Women's advanced educational facilities fell victim to the conservative reaction following the assassination of Alexander II: most were shut down. They did not reopen until the last Romanov tsar, Nicholas II, allowed the second burgeoning of educational opportunities for Russian women.

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To my mother and to the memory of my father