Frontiers of Neurology and Neuroscience

Vol. 38

Series Editor

J. Bogousslavsky  Montreux
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War seems inherent to humanity, a view suggested by any observation of history. Since we have traces of their existence, one of the characteristics of human groups is thus the attempt to dominate another human group, in general by force and coercion. However, War and Neurology are two themes that are rarely linked, and War Neurology is not a subject in its own right. War is certainly considered as a curse, but it is interesting to observe that, as with other medical specialities, war has enriched neurological knowledge over the past three centuries. Little is known on this subject, and this book intends to lay the foundation for the study of Neurology in war. The book does not aim to write an additional chapter in the history of Neurology, but rather employs an original approach, shared with other volumes in this collection, that investigates the links between history and Neurology.

The term ‘Neurology’, used in this volume, should be understood in a broad sense that encompasses the fields of study shared by Neurology, Neurosurgery and a section of Psychiatry. This definition corresponds to the one that covers the term ‘Neurosciences’ today. Neurology is also a recent medical subject, so it was necessary to limit our subject to the modern age, faced with the difficulty of finding reliable sources concerning older periods. The first chapter nonetheless summarises interesting information on the history of War Neurology before the modern age.

To write the different chapters, we chose to solicit specialists in the different wars and periods discussed. For the most recent conflicts (Vietnam or Afghanistan), we asked first-hand witnesses, or neurologists in the armed forces, to write accounts of their war experiences. The careers of neurologists and neurosurgeons in earlier wars are alluded to with several examples, including Georges James Guthrie in the Napoleonic Wars, Silas Weir Mitchell in the American Civil War, and Clovis Vincent in the Great War. Being at the heart of conflicts shaped their neurological research and, for some, changed their career.

War must also be seen as an undeniable factor in advances in knowledge within the field of Neurosciences. Certain sections of Neurology have made huge strides thanks to the large number of people with neurological injuries of many different types. For example, knowledge of visual...
pathways and peripheral nerve lesions owes a lot to the wars of the beginning of the 20th century. Neurosurgery, the care of traumas to the nervous system and their rehabilitation have also really flourished thanks to the study of war injuries.

The drifts of Nazi medicine did not spare the Neurosciences, giving rise to diverse and sometimes deviant practices amongst German neurologists. Neurology, maybe even more so than other specialities, was confronted with the problem of eponyms originating from the research of Nazi physicians. It was therefore important to explore this issue, which remains a sensitive subject.

The point of view of physicians faced with neurological war injuries is not the only one broached in this book. It was essential to throw light on soldiers’ neuropsychiatric experiences during war, a novel subject rarely mentioned until now. The ‘nostalgia’ of soldiers of the wars of the 17th and 19th centuries and acts of malingering or self-mutilation in the Great War are two significant examples of real-life experiences of war. Artists suffering from injuries or from war-related neuropsychiatric disturbances were able to transcend their pain in their artistic creations. The works of certain writers and poets of the avant-garde of the beginning of the 20th century, like Guillaume Apollinaire, André Breton or Blaise Cendrars, are testimonies to this inclusion of war in artistic creativity. In contrast, we have not alluded to how human cerebral functioning can lead to war, first, because knowledge on this subject remains sparse and, second, because this fascinating subject goes beyond the scope of War Neurology, strictly speaking.

We would like to thank the authors, specialists in their fields, who took part in this endeavour and who supported the accomplishment of this book. We hope that this book will delight all those interested in the development of Neurology throughout the ages.

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