The Melted Statue of Charcot: The Nazi Occupation of Paris During World War II

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Abstract

The authors describe the construction of a statue in honor of Professor Charcot, the father of modern neurology, in Paris in 1898, 5 years after his death. The Nazi invaders destroyed the statue, which was erected near the entrance to the Salpêtrière hospital with the support of his disciples and the international neurological community, in 1942 during World War II. An international campaign is now needed to rebuild the statue of this great neurologist.

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Jean-Martin Charcot (1825–1893) was a famous professor of neurology in the 19th century [1, 2]. Working at the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris, France, he became known worldwide as the father of modern neurology [1, 2]. Among Charcot's immeasurable contributions to neurology, of particular note are his pioneering clinical-pathological descriptions of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (Charcot's disease), multiple sclerosis and Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease, and his outstanding studies on Parkin-

son's disease, aphasia and hysteria [1–5]. After his sudden death in August 1893 due to cardiovascular problems, Charcot's pupils started a subscription to raise funds to build a statue of their very illustrious master [1–9]. In this review, we describe the statue and some events related to it, in particular its destruction by the Nazis in 1942 during the occupation of Paris in World War II.

The Statue of Charcot

A statue of Charcot, erected by the sculptor Alexandre Falguière (1831–1900) with the collaboration of the distinguished architect Ernest Sanson (1836–1918), was placed in front of the main entrance to the Salpêtrière hospice on December 4, 1898, 5 years after Charcot's death [1, 2, 6, 7, 10, 11]. Melted down in bronze by the *Société de fonderie artistique* (1894–1901), *filiale des Établissements Thiébaud frères* (1844–1926), and sitting on a large stone base to the left of the entrance hall, the statue shows Charcot standing majestically in academic dress with his right hand resting on the head of a dead body lying beside him, indicating the temporal region,

Fig. 1. The statue of Charcot in front of the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris. Left figure taken from *Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository* (Retrieved 14:42, April 3, 2019). https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:La_statue_de_Charcot_-_Paris_CIPA0799.jpg&oldid=333678274. Right figure taken from *Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository* (Retrieved 14:39, April 3, 2019). https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Statue_de_Charcot_-_Paris_CIPA0800.jpg&oldid=333456022.

and his left hand making a gesture the great master often made when lecturing [2, 7, 10]. The funds for the statue were raised from donations, and foreign physicians subscribed half of the money from Europe and the Americas [2, 7, 10]. An inscription at the base of the statue read, “To Charcot: His Students – His Friends” [10] (Fig. 1). The inauguration ceremony was held in the presence of M. Georges Leygues (1857–1933; Minister of Public Instruction), Justin de Selves (1848–1934; Prefect of the Seine), Paul Brouardel (1837–1906; Dean of the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Paris), Paul Navarre (1853–1921; a physician, President of the Municipal Council), Édouard Lockroy (1838–1913; Minister of Marine), M. Thuiller (President of the General Council), Henry Napias (1842–1901; Director of the *Assistance Publique*) and Joseph Bertrand (1822–1900; Perpetual Secretary of the Academy of Sciences) among other important authorities. Dr. Jean-Baptiste Charcot (1867–1936), Charcot’s son, and Augustine-Victoire Charcot (1834–1899), his widow, represented the Charcot family [10].

From the Tense Relationship between France and Germany to the Nazi Occupation

Before World War II, the relationship between France and Germany during the 19th and 20th centuries was frequently marked by conflicts, notably during the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871) and, later, World War I. During the Franco-Prussian War, when Prussia threatened to invade Paris, Charcot continued working at the Salpêtrière hospice, which was turned into a non-surgical hospital for the war wounded [11]. At this time, Charcot expressed his sentiment in a drawing (Fig. 2) [11].

In May 1940, World War II (1939–1945) started in France. From Sedan, the Germans had initially penetrated fronts to the north and south. On June 22, France signed an armistice at Compiègne with Germany that gave Germany control over the north and west of the country, including Paris and all of the Atlantic coastline, but left the rest, around two-fifths of France’s prewar territory, unoccupied. On 1 July, the government moved to

Fig. 2. *L'avenir* (In the future) by Charcot. The German soldiers were kicked out of France during the Franco-Prussian War (1870). Personal collection (O.W.).

Vichy, and Marshal Henri Philippe Pétain (1856–1951) became “*chef de l’État français*” until August 1944, making Pierre Laval (1883–1945), a major sympathizer of Nazi causes, his Premier [12–14]. In September 1944, after the liberation of Paris, the new government declared Pétain’s French State abolished [14].

The Statues During the Nazi Occupation

When the Nazis threatened with their plan to recover the bells of all French churches for metal recycling, the Vichy government feared an intensified and problematic resistance to the occupation. The Vichy regime launched in July 1941 a collection of metal objects from the French, paying 30 francs per kilo of copper or alloys (bronze, brass, etc.), 6 francs per kilogram of lead; the campaign was a failure and the quantities harvested proved insufficient. So, they gave in and offered an alternative. By the law of 11 October 1941, the Vichy Government issued a law ordering the removal of “statues and monuments of copper alloys situated in public places and administrative locales in order to recycle the metallic components for industrial production”, officially to help agriculture and French industry but, in reality, metals were shipped to Germany. The stated intention was “to replace these metal monuments subsequently with ones of stone.” Throughout France during the Second World War, 17,000 statues, both commemorative and decorative, disappeared (Fig. 3) [15–18].

An initiative of aesthetic purification by ideology can also be considered. A commission was set up to consider which statues were to be removed. A majority of those sculptures symbolized democracy, liberal policies, progression, and also was considered offensive to the Germans, ugly or radical. If they were considered historical or of artistic interest, then they would be saved from being destroyed. A number of statues that were spared were categorized as “indisputable national glories.” Those statues were of Joan of Arc, Henry IV, Louis XIV, and Napoléon Bonaparte, as well as statues of Saints, Kings, and Queens. The list of monuments to be melted down was divided into 11 sections [16–19]. Those in the first 9 sections were removed by February 1942 and on December 12, 1942, the commission considered melting down of at least 144 statues in Paris. Statues in the last 2 sections, including that of Philippe Pinel (1745–1826; outside the La Salpêtrière, in the Square Marie Curie, by Ludovic Durand [1832–1905], erected in 1885), were spared [16–20]. The contrary mechanisms of collaboration and resistance within the French administration must not be underestimated. Together with the statue of Charcot, the original statues of the following doctors disappeared from the Paris scene – Claude Bernard, Paul Broca, Jean-Paul Marat, Auguste Métivier, Jules Péan, François-Vincent Raspail, Théophraste Renaudot (erected with the coordination of Gilles de la Tourette) and Philippe Ricord [17–22]. Of the monuments to doctors that survived the cull in 1942 was that of Louis Capitan (1854–1929), which was chosen for preservation; the statue of Georges Clé-

Fig. 3. Destruction of French statues during Nazi occupation. Pierre Jahan clandestinely captured many of the noble sculptures in their final moments before being melted down. His remarkable photographs were later published in a book *La Mort et les Statues (Death and the Statues)* combined with John Cocteau's commentary [16].

menceau (1841–1929) which was on a provisional list. The statues of Dominique Larrey (1766–1942) and Xavier Bichat (1771–1802) were not listed originally, presumably because they were not situated in “public places or administrative locales.” Others were spared because they were of marble or stone [19]. The French authorities of Vichy also undertook to replace the statues of “authentic” famous men, in accordance with their ideology. These replacements by new stone statues were intended to support contemporary artists, but did not become effective until after the Liberation. Some statues remain in their

place probably also because the manpower necessary for their removal was lacking at the time. Many of the pedestals were not removed.

Replacement of the Statues After World War II

The only one replaced by stone statue after the war was that of Claude Bernard (1813–1878), arguably the greatest of all physiologists [19, 21]. Bernard's scientific discoveries were made through vivisection, of which he was

the primary proponent in Europe at the time [23]. The Anti-Vivisection League disrupted the inauguration of the original bronze statue erected outside the Collège de France in 1886 because a dog, representing an experimental animal, protruded behind the figure of the physiologist. A new stone statue by Raymond Couvègnes (1893–1985) was placed on the same site in 1946, without the dog. Charcot would certainly endorse this attitude because he vehemently disapproved animal experiments and vivisection [1].

The statue of Charcot was not replaced. On 31 March 1955, the City Council of Paris expressed the wish that the Charcot's monument be replaced but the funds to rebuild it could not be collected. Finally, the base was removed in 1967. In his famous book about Charcot, *J. M. Charcot. His life – His work*, Georges Guillaumin (1876–1961) wrote a very pertinent commentary on the disappearance of the statue of Charcot: “I am certain that the name and work of Charcot, which is more durable than bronze, will always be admired by every scientific generation in the future” [2]. There, in the Boulevard in front of the Salpêtrière hospital, remains only the statue of Philippe Pinel, considered by many as the father of psychiatry, the exponent of French alienism [24]. The parallels between Pinel and Charcot were not few. There is a common impression that Charcot inherited from the alienist more than the Salpêtrière environment [24, 25].

The plaster's model of Charcot's statue was presented at the *École nationale des Beaux-Arts* during an exhibition devoted to Falguière in 1902. There is actually no trace of this replica. A scale model has been preserved for several decades at the Charcot Library in La Salpêtrière. It is

probably now at the *Assistance Publique Hôpitaux de Paris* Museum, which has unfortunately been closed for several years [26].

Conclusion

The destruction of the statues of French personalities was a tiny, although symbolic, part of the atrocities practiced by Nazis on the French people and on mankind. The horrific memories of the Nazi occupation in France and Germany neighboring territories are alive through images and sounds, as well as new monuments built in honor of those who fought in World War II for a free world.

The continuation of the new and just homage does not authorize us to forget the previous honors. The melted statues represent the story of great people, as well as the history of those who helped them build, and the environment in which they stood. Therefore, while nowadays it might be deemed foolish to pay homage to masters of the past by building statues, it seems to us eminently reasonable to recognize Professor Charcot's greatness in this way and that it is now time to organize a new international campaign to raise funds to rebuild the statue of him in front of the Salpêtrière hospital, in Paris. “Recognition is the sweetest sentiment”, paraphrasing the obituary of Professor Charcot by Brissaud and Marie [27].

Disclosure Statement

There is no conflict of interest to declare.

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