

Book Reviews

dissertation, undertakes an analysis of the sixty or so consulting psychiatrists (*beratende Psychiater*) who advised military–medical authorities about a range of psychiatric and neurological illnesses during the Second World War. These doctors were, for the most part, university psychiatry professors whom the Wehrmacht enlisted at the beginning of the war, most were born in the decades surrounding the turn of the century, had served in the First World War and had been propelled into political conservatism by the Revolution of 1918/19. Based on a meticulous survey of their official reports and correspondence—though neglecting the voluminous published medical literature—the study covers the consulting psychiatrists’ ongoing discussions of the etiological, diagnostic and therapeutic dimensions of the conditions they most frequently observed. Berger combines this with a biographical and institutional analysis of this medical cohort, which he locates politically and generationally in Germany’s medical and military landscape.

Berger concludes that, with few exceptions, these psychiatrists showed less concern for the welfare of individual patients than with Germany’s military needs. Roughly one-third of the sixty were Nazi Party members, several had joined the SS and five were directly involved in the Nazis’ murder of the mentally ill. Thus, Berger argues that genuine medical care was sacrificed for ideological concerns and political expediency. Particularly in the case of “hysterical reactions” or war neuroses, psychiatric judgements were suffused with moral and political values, and treatments were often harsh, painful and dangerous.

This book unearths a great deal of useful information, presenting a quantitative breakdown of the most common psychiatric and neurological illnesses seen both at the front and in reserve hospitals in home territory (nerve damage being the most common), biographical sketches of the consulting psychiatrists and insight into the

structure and function of the Wehrmacht’s military–medical hierarchy. Several chapters helpfully contextualize their subjects with brief overviews of psychiatric practice from the First World War and the Weimar period. And interesting and little-known areas, such as psychiatric discussion of bed-wetting and impotence are brought to light. However, readers hoping for broader conclusions about psychiatry, the war and National Socialism will come away disappointed. Hitler receives no mention in this book; nor do Jews, anti-Semitism or concentration camps. The Nazi Physicians League is likewise absent, as are references to other national contexts. The war itself is presented without mention of its unprecedented brutality or its ideological underpinnings, which is particularly unforgivable in light of recent revelations about the complicity of the Wehrmacht in carrying out the “Final Solution”. These omissions limit the relevance of this useful, but frustratingly narrow treatment of a dark episode in the history of psychiatry.

Paul Lerner,

University of Southern California

Robert Barer, *One young man and total war (from Normandy to concentration camp, a doctor’s letters home)*, Edinburgh and Durham, Pentland Press, 1998, pp. xviii, 298, illus., £18.00 (1-85821-569-2).

Robert Barer was my Professor of Anatomy, and as such he came across like a “Doctor in the House” character—a non-sense, gruff personality, clearly unapproachable by a lowly undergraduate. He was famous for conducting the introductory, 6-hour practical class in histology, by the end of which we students had been permitted to remove the plastic covers from our microscopes, although actually plugging them in and looking down the eyepieces was not allowed until the

Book Reviews

second class. It was only when he spent an hour and a half trying to persuade me to read for a BSc in Anatomy that I saw a glimmer of the generosity and genuine kindness underneath that bluff exterior. When his obituaries appeared in 1989, I, my former student colleagues, and indeed many of his professional associates, learned for the first time of his distinguished military career and of the horrific experiences he had had during the latter part of the Second World War. As a medical officer in the Guards Armoured Division he had established a casualty clearing station beneath the bridge at Nijmegen, and had been the first allied officer to enter Sandbostel concentration camp, where typhus was raging. This book, edited by his wife Gwenda, herself a distinguished medical scientist, contains the letters Barer sent her throughout his military career, from the time of call up at the beginning of 1943 until his de-mob in January 1946. They married in March 1944, on his last leave before D-Day, and his letters are largely from the time he subsequently spent in the final campaign in North West Europe as the Division fought their way from Normandy to the mouth of the Elbe. It would have been fascinating to learn more of Gwenda Barer's life at this time, then working as a bacteriologist in Watford testing the newly available penicillin, but presumably her half of the correspondence vanished in the battlefields of Europe.

The letters are lightly edited—some explanatory material has been inserted identifying key events and figures, but they remain largely untouched. They cover personal and domestic matters that one would expect from a young couple in love and forced apart by the war, but there is also much discussion about science—articles from the biomedical press and the medical books they are both reading are regularly dissected, and gossip and news about medical colleagues, mainly from University College Hospital where they both qualified, permeate the letters. There is often a

charming modesty, as when Barer gets his Military Cross for his bravery under fire in entering Sandbostel, and in dealing with the medical horrors he found there. He writes to Gwenda "I can add two extra letters to my name. It's not an exam but some people might think I'm a Master of Surgery."

Two additional records are included—they both make harrowing reading. One is an official report of Sandbostel written by Barer in 1945, the other is a diary by a young German girl sent into the camp after its liberation to clear it up. Familiar, although sickened, as we may now be with the horrific images of the Holocaust and its victims, these accounts are all the more appalling simply because they are so fresh. Nothing was then known about Nazi genocide. The rumours that were beginning to circulate after the liberation of Bergen-Belsen were frequently dismissed as just too awful to believe. Barer could scarcely write to his wife of what he saw, and recognized even then that some people would simply not believe the horror. A postscript recalls that for many years Barer had nightmares about what he had seen, and at a scientific conference in Munich in 1972, when asked about the suitability of a ten-year-old visiting Dachau, simply burst into tears, still haunted by unbearable memories.

The letters remained untouched until 1997, when the Imperial War Museum, prompted by the unexpected finding of a copy of Barer's report on Sandbostel, contacted Gwenda, and learned of their existence. The originals and related material have all now been deposited in the Museum. Staff from the Department of Documents also encouraged their publication, and thus these fascinating and moving letters are available for a wider public to read.

E M Tansey,
Wellcome Institute for
the History of Medicine