THE “TORPILLAGE” NEUROLOGISTS OF WORLD WAR I: ELECTRIC THERAPY TO SEND HYSTERICS BACK TO THE FRONT

Laurent Tatu, Julien Bogousslavsky, Thierry Moulin, and Jean-Luc Chopard

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The French neurologists and psychiatrists who were mobilized during the Great War were confronted with numerous soldiers with war neuroses, often with novel clinical manifestations such as campocormia. They addressed hysteria and pithiatism according to concepts that had been formed before the war, and many doctors considered these soldiers to be malingerers. As a result, the use of aggressive therapies to enable their prompt return to the battlefield was advocated. In 1915–1916, Clovis Vincent (1879–1947) developed a method called torpillage, a “persuasive” form of psychotherapy using faradic and galvanic electric currents, to treat soldiers with “intractable” neuroses. However, since the treatment was painful, soldiers began to refuse it and, following a publicized trial, the method was discontinued. Given the influx of soldiers with seemingly incurable neuroses, Gustave Roussy (1874–1948) made an attempt in 1917 to develop a new method of psychoelectric treatment. In January 1918, he too came up against soldiers refusing electric treatment. Following a new trial and an unfavorable press campaign, the psycho-faradic method gradually died out. These extreme medical practices developed to treat psychological trauma during the First World War subsequently led to the delineation of posttraumatic stress disorder in more recent wars.

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