

ANDRÉ SOUBIRAN: "NAPOLÉON ET UN MILLION DE MORTS"¹

In this book which is interesting for more than one reason, with a history of army medical services in the XIXth century, Dr. Soubiran explains certain aspects of the Napoleonic wars, through the medium of 17 imaginary letters written by a young medical officer between 1796 and 1814 to Bonaparte, first as a General, then as the First Consul and finally as the French Emperor. The letters are the more meaningful as their fictitious author served in all the campaigns with the exception of the second campaign in Italy: like the head-surgeons Percy and Larrey, he bore witness for thousands of his fellow medical officers to the terrible scenes he had seen after the fighting. Percy himself, in his "Journal des campagnes", stated that on 14 and 15 October 1806, after the battle of Iéna, just one of his ambulances had to tend nearly 3,000 wounded Frenchmen, including 400 officers, and on many of whom he had to perform an amputation.

By his letters, which Dr. Soubiran has preceded with an outline of the diplomatic and military situation, Turiot hoped to inform Napoleon Bonaparte of the worst shortcomings of the hospitals and ambulances. In any case they did reveal that the situation was critical in spite of the heroism and dedication of a great many doctors. In addition, Dr. Soubiran explains how slow were the improvements; Larrey's son, who was also a surgeon and Head of the Army Medical Service in Italy in 1859, drew attention to the same inefficiency during a campaign in which, in the author's own words, "on the field of battle at Solferino, assistance was so lacking that it inspired Henry Dunant's humanitarian vocation and the foundation of the Red Cross".

The inertia of the administration was to a great extent responsible for this state of affairs. By contrast, the medical service of the *Garde Impériale* was well organized, with mobile ambulances, teams of stretcher-bearer-nurses and a body of physicians and pharmacists selected with care and very experienced in surgery in wartime. The excellent results achieved by that medical service

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showed clearly that improved organization could considerably lower the mortality rate.

At the beginning of the XIXth century, an effort was made to provide military hospitals with protection and neutral status. However, not until the First Geneva Convention was signed was any permanent effective protection given to the wounded of all parties to a conflict and to the institutions which gave them shelter.

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