

FAMOUS FIGURES

Ernst Conrad Holtzendorff

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In our country, we think of Germany as the powerful nation against whom we had to fight two Great Wars. But the German nation is a comparatively new one; it did not exist as an entity until the 19th century. In the 18th century the Great European powers were still France, Spain, and Austria, with England rising as the century progressed. The area now comprising Germany lay to the North and West of Europe, and had not been part of the Italian renaissance nor had access to the Arabian skills in medicine and surgery which Spain had enjoyed.

It was Prussia which began the creation of a larger power. Frederick Wilhelm I the 'Soldier King', when he came to the throne, saw quickly that his state had to have forceful men in important positions, in order to strengthen it by highly efficient administration, trade, and by the creation of a strong army. The Prussian Army had no trained medical officers. The story of our Famous Figure Holtzendorff illustrates the beginning of this search for efficiency in medical support for the army.

Ernst Conrad Holtzendorff was born on 27th September 1688. Aged only eighteen, he went with the Guards of Prussia, the élite, as a regimental surgeon to take part in the War of the Spanish Succession. There were no others available, so poor was the military medical support. His career was rapid owing

to his youthful talent, and to the absence of any other experienced surgeons. The generals saw that they had a problem to solve – they had no choice but to invent a means of training capable men. Another surgeon, Lorenz Heister, only twenty years old, wrote a report on the military hospitals in this war, warning the King of the urgent need for training. Holtzendorff meanwhile spent time studying in Italy, Switzerland, and lastly Paris, then the best centre for army training of the type needed. Holtzendorff graduated there in Medicine, which was highly unusual for the time.

From 1709, when he came back to the Guards in Brandenburg, he did just what was essential for the Soldier King. He set up facilities for practical teaching. The King was, however, sceptical about research or any science, and Holtzendorff did no research in his career.

In 1716, he was appointed 'Surgeon-General, Royal Surgeon, and Director of all Surgery.' His claim to fame now was the creation of an anatomical college in Berlin from 1719 onwards. This was a medical-surgical college where field surgeons had to do three years of specialist military training, and the few medical officers already serving with the Guards had to train there also before being posted back to their regiment or unit. The joint training was also new: in civilian medicine and in other armies, doctors were not allowed to do both medicine and surgery.

Finally in 1727 the Charité school was established in Berlin. It continued teaching at bedside and theatre, and was the same as our Millbank and Queen Alexandra Hospitals once were, for all career medical officers. Regulations were as strict as Germans demanded, and the pattern of the later centuries was set up there and then.

The King transferred the Charité to the Privy State and War Minister Christoph von Katsch (1665-1729). It was written at the time *'These and similar so useful as necessary institutions were the fruits of mature reflection by the outstanding Royal Personal and General Surgeon Herr Holtzendorff, who by planning and setting up the Collegium Medicum-Surgicum, which has found such approval among intelligent persons, has put all these students under limitless obligation to him.'*

The relationship of trust between Frederick Wilhelm I and Holtzendorff deepened when the King became seriously ill in 1719 in Brandenburg. Prince Leopold of

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Anhalt-Dessau and Friedrich Wilhelm von Grumbkow undertook the setting up of a Regency Council (with their own participation) in anticipation of the King's death. The King got to know of this and there was a major row. The illness, whose nature was never clarified, worsened. Holtzenordoff then treated the King – among other things by an emetic – and cured him. Later Holtzendorff again treated Wilhelm, for a 'burst abscess', and later again for a bony infection of an eye-socket.

On his own account, Holtzendorff caused the re-introduction of an English method of removal of bladder stones. He ordered a surgeon called Gabriel Senff to carry out the procedure in his presence at the Charité in October of 1728.

Things changed for Holtzendorff in 1740, when Frederick Wilhelm II came to the Prussian throne. He was a stricter disciplinarian and among his innovations he was the first European General to make his troops march in step when the ground was smooth enough. Holtzendorff's relationship, called '*à la smoker' club*', as he had had with the Soldier King, was not continued with the new '*roi charmant*.' Wilhelm II, as he planned a new war, turned to the General Staff Doctor, J. Th. Eller. The text of two commu-

nications have been preserved, which show that in 1741 during this first Silesian war, Holtzendorff was sent to an Army camp at Strehlen, where he was sent directions as to how embezzlement of medical funds could be prevented!

It is not known how Holtzendorff fell from grace. There was never any suggestion of his having done anything dishonest, in spite of the most odd directive about medical funds mentioned above. He quietly took his leave and retired to his estate in Colbitz on the Letzlinger Heath. He died in 1751, the first German military person to set up the most vital component of military medical service, the proper training of the Medical Officers.

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Reference

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