



## Editorial

## Of the Necessity of Rigor and Critical Sense in Historical Research ☆☆☆



As in any other scientific discipline, research in history should be carried out with the most demanding rigor, honesty and critical sense. Any assertion should be documented with the best available pieces of evidence. The paper by Lentschener et al in this issue is an excellent illustration of this point.<sup>1</sup>

The authors examined the alleged medical misconduct of physicians working for I.G. Farben (Bayer) during World War II. These physicians have been suspected of asking the commander of the Auschwitz camp to procure them 150 women in order to carry out experiments on a new “soporific” drug. For this, Bayer would pay 170 marks per woman. This accusation, in fact, rests mostly on 5 letters supposed to have been exchanged between Bayer and the commander of Auschwitz. This typical example of unethical human experiment has often been used for teaching purposes to support and illustrate the unethical behavior of Nazi physicians, in this case, anesthesiologists.<sup>2</sup>

Lentschener et al have attempted to find unquestionable evidence for this accusation. They also wanted to identify the supposedly “purchased” women and the tested drug. For this purpose, they investigated three major historical sources: the archives of the Auschwitz camp (kept at the Auschwitz-Birkenau state museum), those of Bayer at Leverkusen, and those of the former Soviet Union. They also re-examined the files of the Nuremberg I.G. Farben trial. At the end of these extensive investigations, the authors failed to find any record of the purchase of these women, either in the archives of the Auschwitz camp, or in those of Bayer or of the Soviet Union. In addition, no reference to the letters exchanged between Bayer and the Auschwitz camp was found in the files of the I.G. Farben trial in Nuremberg.

This paper is thus a remarkable example of scientific rigor applied to historical research.

In this context, it is interesting to note that anesthesiology as a discipline has greatly benefited from technical and organizational

advances during World War II.<sup>3</sup> The number of specialists increased dramatically between 1940 and 1960. Teaching was developed and the use of some anesthetic agents, for instance penthotal, was much safer after improvements introduced by military physicians. Physicians-anesthetists gained greater respect from surgeons and other specialists, due to new techniques and skills.<sup>3</sup> This is another example of medical and surgical progress observed during wars. It is exactly the opposite of the medical misconducts that took place during the Nazi period in many medical disciplines.<sup>4</sup> The paper by Lentschener et al supports the idea that, even during this dark period, anesthesiologists did not participate in such horrors.

Serge Erlinger

*Honorary Professor of Medicine, University of Paris 7  
Master in contemporary history, Aix-Marseille University  
E-mail address: [serge.erlinger@gmail.com](mailto:serge.erlinger@gmail.com)*

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☆☆ **Presentation to meetings:** no.