

**ON FAMINE FEVER AND SOME
OF THE OTHER COGNATE
FORMS OF TYPHUS, A
LECTURE, FEBRUARY 9, 1868**

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On famine fever and some of the other cognate forms of typhus, a lecture, February 9, 1868 by
Rudolf Virchow

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RUDOLF VIRCHOW

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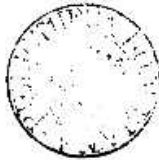
A LECTURE

HELD FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE SUFFERERS IN EAST-PRUSSIA

FEBRUARY 9. 1868

BY

RUDOLF VIRCHOW
PROFESSOR IN THE UNIVERSITY OF BERLIN.



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Twenty years have passed since last that form clad in terrors — famine fever — appeared among us. In vain do we seek to deny its presence now in one of our German Provinces. Behold it! That dual-nature in which seem to unite the two most terrible scourges of mankind, famine and disease! It is no longer the pauper inhabitants of villages and small towns merely, that are exposed to its baleful influences; its empoisoned breath has already touched others in a higher station — witness the doctors and nurses who have fallen a sacrifice to their devotion.

And still science is reproached with taking no cognizance of famine fever! It is for science to rebut this charge. Wherefore let it be our task this day to vindicate the truth and throw such light on it that to us at least no blame may attach.

But *does* science gainsay the connection between famine and typhus? It would be hard to attempt to gainsay a thing for which since thousands of years the history of mankind has ever and again supplied new examples. I do not mean by this the so-called Universal History as it is mostly taught in schools, and of which a French Admiral lately said, it was little else but a story of wars and treaties! Fortunately that is not the opinion held in Germany, England and Ame-

rica. And after having repeatedly heard, even from the mouths of government officials, that the Prussian school-master bore his full share in the victories on the Bohemian battlefields, it is not asserting too much when I say, that the history of warfare is merely the external history of peoples. Their internal history is made up from very different sources. On the one hand it notes the glorious victories of civilization, the progress of the human mind in knowledge — that we call the history of culture; on the other, it preserves the remembrance of the ever new impediments in the path of life, of the painful sufferings of humanity, — that is the history of medicine, known I grant but by few, though not therefore a less instructive branch of general history.

In our present enquiry we must follow up three courses of investigation; for from the terrors of famine and pestilence, the third, — war — is never far off. Like three brethren, — the apocalyptic riders — they go forth “to kill with the sword, with hunger, and with death”. Camp fever is a mate in all respects worthy of famine fever! The one cannot be disjoined from the other in a scientific enquiry. Within the memories of many still living they have always been thought of as combined.

Thucydides speaking of the Athenians when they were visited by the great pestilence, which swept away Pericles and numberless others besides, during the second Peloponnesian War (B. C. 430 — 25) says: — “In those times they remembered themselves of the following saying, which, as the oldest inhabitants gave out, had been foretold a long while ago: Come will a Doric War, and hand in hand with it the plague. Now”, he

goes on, "people contend that in this saying of the Ancients not hunger (*limos*) was meant, but plague (*loi-mos*)." An idle contest, for they, dearth and famine, prevailed as well as pestilence. The popular saw of the Middle Ages was more correct. It ran thus:

War, pestilence and scarcity,

D'ye hear o' the one, soon the other you see.

And there was opportunity enough in the Middle Ages of testing the correctness of this rhyme; for, for many a century, the history of wars and sufferings alone chronicled the fates of nations. We call them the dark ages, because the history of culture found little or nothing for her pen.

As the light of knowledge grew brighter, the intervals between the wars became longer. The prolonged terms of peace quickened the intercourse between nations, and promoted agriculture, industry, art and science. Notwithstanding the increasing dearness of corn, famine became rarer, and at last so rare that even the old proverbs dropped into disuse. —

The famine in Upper-Silesia (1847—48) was the first in Germany for more than 70 years, the last great famine fever having raged in the years 1770—72. Camp fever had not re-appeared since the great Napoleonic campaigns, when, of a sudden before Sebastopol in 1855—56 it broke forth again with all its ancient virulence. Amongst the other rich blessings which a long and prosperous peace had bestowed on nations, was also that of a higher condition of health. Two generations had passed, and pale famine had not reared her head on German soil. Was it astonishing that even in science the old knowledge once possessed had fallen into abeyance?

In the course of this long period medicine had made gigantic strides. Whole new territories of science had been annexed; pathological anatomy had come into being, teaching to note the changes in the internal organs, with a far greater closeness and precision. New methods of examination at sickbeds were introduced, rendering the diagnoses more nicely discriminative. New names for diseases came into vogue; well-known terms, hitherto bearing a general and vague meaning, were sharply defined, and restricted to one idea, while others which had a limited signification were widened and generalized.

Such had been the case with the word typhus — a very old one. We find it in the writings of the oldest Greek Physician which have come down to us — in Hippocrates who was living during the time of the Athenian plague. It literally means fog or vapour, and figuratively from that, a clouding of the mind, insensibility; likewise a condition of the brain in which its action is hindered or impeded, as when the consciousness is obscured and dimmed. We often say our head is so dull and heavy — the thinking powers obfuscated. It used to be supposed this dulness, or torpidity of the brain was accompanied with fever, or was a necessary condition of the same. Anyhow the word upon the whole was little in use in ancient times and still less in the middle ages. In modern times, however, it has been more frequently employed, though it first came into general use during the great Napoleonic wars when it was chiefly applied to *war typhus* or camp fever. Which disappearing with the years 1815—16, the name was retained and applied to other fevers, otherwise known as mucous, nervous and such like. These were likewise

described as a strong fever accompanied with obfuscation of the brain, and great relaxation of the nervous system. To avoid confusion permit me for the present to call this manner of attack in contradistinction to the above, home-fever (Friedenstyphus).

About the last year of the war 1813 two Frenchmen, Petit and Serres, discovered that the abdominal organs, namely the intestinal glands suffered material changes under this fever. Not long afterwards in Germany, where similar observations had been made in the last century, the fact of these changes in the organs was confirmed, chiefly by von Pommer and Schoenlein, and thereby the conviction gained that this phase of the disease was essentially the enteric typhus (Typhus abdominalis, Pleotyphus). It lasted to be sure some 20—30 years, before this conviction was generally accepted. At present it is a common scientific acquisition.

What meanwhile had been done for camp and famine fever? For many a year no opportunity either in Germany or France offered for more exact investigation, and in England where it did exist, it was not observed with due attention. However the plague of 1848 in Upper-Silesia, the fever in the Crimean armies in 1856 furnished the experience (which had meanwhile been made in England) that those changes in the abdominal organs which were the unfailing accompaniments of home-typhus did not appear. Thus was the fact established of there being *two different sorts of typhus*, the one of which, our common typhus, having nothing in common with either camp or famine fever, while the other certainly did present points of connexion. In a former