

# Why historians ignored the Spanish flu

September 4 2018, by Mark Honigsbaum

---



Policemen wearing masks provided by the American Red Cross in Seattle, 1918.  
Credit: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

To judge by the popularity of films like [World War Z](#), pandemics are in vogue and none more so than the Spanish influenza of 1918-19. To mark the centenary of the pandemic this autumn, the BBC has commissioned

Spanish Flu: In their own words, a major [television docudrama](#) on the pandemic, while 2018 has already seen the publication of several new titles revisiting the science and history of the flu.

Curious then that for the first 50 years after the Spanish flu swept around the globe, killing about 50-100m people, no one – least of all historians – gave it much thought, concentrating instead on the far more compelling story of the Great War. Indeed, in 1924 the Encyclopedia Britannica didn't even mention the [pandemic](#) in its review of the "most eventful years" of the 20th century.

This neglect of the "Spanish influenza" – so-called because Spain was one of the few countries in 1918 to report the spreading illness – extended to the public sphere, hence the marked absence of memorials to the nurses and civilians, most of them young adults, who perished in the three waves of infection.

Why this should have been the case puzzled commentators at the time. "Never since the Black Death has such a plague swept over the face of the world ... [and] never, perhaps, has a plague been more stoically accepted," [commented The Times](#) in December 1918, at the height of the deadly second wave of the pandemic.

Major Greenwood, who co-wrote Britain's official report on the pandemic, was similarly perplexed, remarking in 1935 that "there is some psychological interest in the fact ... that actually the emotional impression created [by the influenza pandemic] was fainter than that produced by much less grave epidemiological happenings".

## **Bad timing**

One obvious reason was the way that the pandemic was overshadowed by World War I. The second wave of the pandemic coincided with the

Allied assault on Cambrai in October 1918 and the collapse of the Hindenburg Line. Then in mid-November, just as flu deaths were peaking, came the armistice. The result was that many families buried their dead to the sounds of bells and hooters as people flocked to the streets to celebrate the peace.



Burying flu victims, North River, Newfoundland and Labrador (1918). Credit: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Another was that at the time people had little appreciation of the scale of the mortality (in 1927, epidemiologists estimated the global death toll at just 21m).

But perhaps the most important reason is that, unlike the soldiers who gave their lives for king and country, the flu dead did not readily lend themselves to narratives of nationalism and sacrifice. Instead, they became the forgotten fallen.

So when did historians [wake up to the 1918 pandemic](#)? The answer appears to be around 1968. That was the year that the author Charles Graves, prompted by a new pandemic of "Hong Kong" flu, published *Invasion by Virus*. This was followed in 1974 by Richard Collier's *Plague of the Spanish Lady*. Drawing on the personal testimonies of over 1,700 flu survivors, Collier was the first to capture the horror and panic as the flu circumnavigated the globe. However, his narrative was episodic and lacked a true historical perspective.

It was left to the environmental historian Alfred Crosby in his 1976 book *Epidemic and Peace* to place the pandemic in the context of other great scourges of the past, such as the Black Death, which killed an estimated 40-70m in the middle decades of the 14th century.

Crosby was also the first to argue that the pandemic had had a significant impact on history by sickening the US president, Woodrow Wilson, at a critical juncture of the Versailles peace negotiations in Paris in April 1919. The result was that the American delegation acceded to French president George Clemenceau's demands that the Germans pay harsh reparations, sowing the seeds, claimed Crosby, for the rise of Nazism and the second great conflict of the 20th century.

## **Anything but forgotten**

However, Crosby's book made little impact until 1989 when, in the wake of the AIDS pandemic, his publishers reissued it under the new title of [America's Forgotten Pandemic](#). The sobriquet struck a chord, prompting historians from other countries to pen similar accounts recalling the

impact of the "forgotten pandemic" on Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Spain.

Today, the Spanish flu is [anything but forgotten](#). On the contrary, the interest in the 1918-19 pandemic is so great that one prominent medical historian, better known for his writings on the Black Death, has taken to referring to the Spanish flu as "[the Great One](#)". It would be hard to imagine a clearer admission that the 1918 pandemic's time is now.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Why historians ignored the Spanish flu (2018, September 4) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-09-historians-spanish-flu.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.