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The Spanish Flu Was Forgotten: Will COVID-19 Be As Well?

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With lockdowns and social distancing continuing in many countries, it's hard to imagine the COVID-19 pandemic ever ending, let alone being forgotten. But, strange as it may seem, the past has shown us that events as world-altering as pandemics can be consigned to the margins of history, mentioned only in footnotes. The Spanish Flu is perhaps the most famous of forgotten pandemics, with few firsthand accounts existing in the literature, and historians often discussing it only in relation to its effect on World War I. In recent decades, more scholarship has focused on unraveling its history and why it became the “forgotten flu”—discussion that seems especially relevant today as we reckon with a pandemic many feel they will never forget.

The Forgotten Flu

There are many theories as to why the Spanish Flu became a footnote to history. Given that it occurred on the backdrop of the first World War, many historians believe it may have become a casualty to the war narrative [1], a blow delivered by nature that seemed insignificant in the context of the great violence the human race was perpetrating on itself at the time. It probably didn't help that many governments around the world censored information about the flu in an effort to maintain public morale and support for the war [1]. During the autumn second wave, when the majority of deaths occurred, the war finally came to an end with the mid-November armistice, a much anticipated event that one could imagine sidelined news about the pandemic's continuing rampage.

On top of the war, the pandemic may have been almost purposefully forgotten by those it affected. The extreme human toll of the flu would have been felt either directly or indirectly by most people on earth—and in the years afterwards, many may not have wanted to think or talk about such a wide-reaching trauma. Professor of English Elizabeth Outka describes a phenomenon called “contagion guilt,” in which people feel personal responsibility for passing infections to loved ones [2]. In the wake of such guilt, it would be understandable if individuals preferred to forget the role they may have played in the deaths of those close to them. On top of this, people working in medicine may have had further reason to put thoughts of the pandemic behind them. The decades before 1918 had ushered in a new era of medical science that seemed to promise an end to infectious disease, but against a foe like the 1918 virus, science was rendered nearly helpless [3]. This feeling that the pandemic had bested medicine may be why it was conspicuously absent from the writings of many doctors who lived through it [4].

Pandemics In Memory

As historian John M. Barry argues, contributing to the phenomenon of “forgotten epidemics” could be something intrinsic to pandemics themselves [1]. Humans prefer to tell stories which feature obvious heroes and villains—tales of some grand *purpose*. This is why war is so common in popular storytelling—there are distinct villains and indisputable driving forces at play, from the fight against Nazis to a reckoning with slavery. These aspects of narrative appeal to humans—and pandemics lack almost all of them.

Who are the heroes and villains of pandemic disease? Infection would be the obvious evil, but it is faceless, formless—unseen. Those who succumb to disease are not typically viewed as dying for a greater purpose. There is no heroic narrative to contextualize the deaths—they are meaningless, senseless.

Wars pit humans against each other, but no matter who wins, it is *people* who occupy centre stage. Disease could be described as an act of violence by nature. During pandemics, humans are struck down indiscriminately by an unseen natural enemy. We’re reminded that, no matter the progress we make, we will always be at the mercy of natural forces. A feeling pervades of humanity’s insignificance—our vulnerability, our *helplessness*.

Barry asserts that, perhaps for this reason, the Spanish Flu is almost entirely absent from the literature of the early 20th century. This was a period that saw F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway craft masterpieces that put the American psyche under a microscope. Yet there were almost no references to the pandemic that had torn across the world mere years before, even though these authors were affected by it [5]. The Spanish Flu, defying explanation, a reminder of human frailty, had been—perhaps willfully—forgotten.

Implications for the Present

This raises the question: will COVID-19 be forgotten too?

In the digital age that we live in, it’s hard to imagine the countless Tweets, Facebook posts and blogs chronicling the events of the pandemic fading into distant memory. And in contrast to the Spanish Flu, COVID-19 has taken on a prominent role in pop culture already, from masked characters on TV shows to pandemic-themed pop songs. Additionally, historians are already taking action to preserve records of peoples’ everyday lived experiences, collecting stories, mementos and remembrances of the pandemic [6].

Even now, it seems apparent that there will be plenty of records documenting COVID-19’s impact. What seems less clear is whether or not COVID-19 will remain a significant player in the popular consciousness, a shaping force in the narrative of the 21st century. Or will it be just another blip in the timeline, gone from everyday memory? Do we purposefully consign epidemics to the footnotes of history because they do the same to us—relegating humans to the sidelines, forcing us to rethink our position in the world?

Perhaps a better question is: What are the consequences of a forgotten pandemic? In the globalized world that we live in, with environmental destruction, farming and animal markets bringing humans and zoonotic viruses into ever closer contact, epidemic disease is only going to

become more common. Remembering is not only a way to honour the victims of past pandemics, but critically, it is also a way to ensure we remain prepared for the next one.

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