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The Spanish Flu of 1918 in the Selected American Press of the Period

Epidemia grypy hiszpanki z roku 1918
w wybranej amerykańskiej prasie epoki

Abstract

The article examines press reports on Spanish flu in the American daily press from 1918. The name of the disease is misleading, and it was coined due to the fact that Spain, which was not involved in the military conflict at the time of the epidemic, was one from the first countries of the world reported new cases of a disturbing disease.

The press reports mainly concealed the actual state of the epidemic, as well as the number of sick and dead people. Germany, Spain and Russia were cited as countries with a high incidence rate to reassure the American public and raise morale.

Abstrakt

Przedstawiony artykuł bada doniesienia prasowe, dotyczące zachorowań na grypę hiszpankę w amerykańskiej prasie codziennej z 1918 r. Nazwa jednostki chorobowej jest myląca, a została stworzona w związku z faktem, iż Hiszpania, która w czasie wybuchu epidemii nie była zaangażowana w działania wojenne, jako jedna z pierwszych krajów świata donosiła o nowych przypadkach niepokojącej choroby.

W związku z toczącymi się działaniami wojennymi w doniesieniach prasowych ukrywano faktyczny stan epidemii, a także liczbę chorych oraz zmarłych. Wskazywano Niemcy, Hiszpanię i Rosję jako kraje o wysokim współczynniku zachorowalności, by uspokoić społeczeństwo amerykańskie i podnieść morale.

Keywords: American press, history of the 20th century, world history

Słowa kluczowe: prasa amerykańska, historia XX wieku, historia powszechna

Recent events connected with the coronavirus pandemic, caused by SARS-CoV-2, have fueled growing discussion on the topic of epidemics. Serious illnesses transmitted by travelers have formed a persistent part of history and have accompanied mankind since antiquity. One of the first well-documented pandemics was the so called Justinianic Plague¹ which took its toll on the Mediterranean world between 541 and 549 A.D. It is said to have decimated the population of the time, killing 100 million people².

The second documented disease that could be referred to as a pandemic, due to its extent, was the “Black Death”³: an epidemic that first broke out in Central Asia, probably in China, from where it spread to Crimea, and then to Europe. It was transmitted through the trade routes, reaching as far as such remote locations as Scandinavia.⁴ Similar to the Justinianic Plague, it is believed to have been caused by *Yersinia pestis*⁵ fleas. The disease decimated the population: “In the years 1347 to 1351, one out of every three people in Europe died”⁶ due to it.

In the mid-19th Century, the plague appeared again in China, from where it was transmitted to North America by fleas in the fur of rodents. Fortunately, this third pandemic occurred in the times of advanced medicine, and “Once fatal to slightly more than half the people who contracted it, plague in recent decades has become routinely curable, if timely diagnosis and medical supplies permit”⁷, most commonly by antibiotics. Nevertheless, in spite of the more advanced Medicine of the time, the plague spread quickly, “along the commercial routes of the grain trade”⁸.

¹ Also referred to as the “Plague of Justinian”.

² I.W. Sherman, *The Power of Plagues*, Washington DC 2020, p. 65.

³ By 1800 it was called “the pestilence”, See: N.F. Cantor, *In the Wake of the Plague: The Black Death and the World It Made*, New York 2014, p. 7.

⁴ L.K. Little, *Plague And the End of Antiquity: the Pandemic of 541-750*, Cambridge 2007, p. 5.

⁵ R.S. Bray, *Armies of Pestilence: The Impact of Disease on History*, Cambridge 2004, p. 19.

⁶ S. True Peters, *The Black Death*, New York 2005, p. ix.

⁷ L.K. Little, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

⁸ R.S. Bray, *Armies of Pestilence: The Impact of Disease on History*, Cambridge 2004, p. 84.

Not surprisingly, the plague has not been the only disease to decimate the world population. The H1N1 virus, or Spanish flu⁹, as it was nicknamed, caused the death of millions in the years 1918-1920. Although it is difficult to precisely determine the exact number of casualties, estimates range from 50 to 100 million¹⁰. The disease was given various names by the press: “Spanish Influenza, Russian Influenza, Lagrippe, Catarrhal Fever, Three Day Fever, and Flu, are one and the same thing”¹¹. The outbreak of the flu coincided with the military efforts of WWI, which made the public less focused. Considered to be the most deadly disease since the Black Death, it was unique in its toll, causing mostly the death of young adults¹². The mortality rate was high, ranging from 15% to 50% in adults.

The name “Spanish flu” comes from the fact that despite not being the first country to experience the disease, Spain was the first to report it.¹³ Being neutral in WWI, Spain was not under any reporting restrictions and was hence ready to alert the public as soon as the epidemic struck. This was not the case in other countries engaged in the war: “When the epidemic first struck, most of the warring countries restricted what newspapers could print. They didn’t want their enemies to know that they were weakened by the flu”¹⁴.

The first case of Spanish flu was noted in Haskell County, Kansas as early as in January 1918¹⁵. As mentioned above, not to reveal too much to the other side, this fact was not made public. However, local physician Dr. Loring Miner, kept a record of this unusually critical illness and reported it to the US Public Health Service¹⁶. His biggest fear was the spread of influenza to a nearby Camp Funston, which eventually happened. The first symptoms were reported to the doctor by the camp cook, and soon after, a great number of other soldiers also contracted the disease¹⁷.

⁹ Also known as “The Spanish Lady”, See: K.C Davis, *More Deadly Than War: The Hidden History of the Spanish Flu and the First World War*, New York 2018, p. 14.

¹⁰ R. Davis, *The Spanish Flu: Narrative and Cultural Identity in Spain*, 1918, New York 2013, p. 3.

¹¹ *Comments on Spanish Flue*, “Willston Graphic”, October 10, 1918, p. 1.

¹² S. Bonslaugh, L.-A. McNutt, *Encyclopedia of Epidemiology*, Los Angeles-London-New Delhi-Singapore 2008, p. 534.

¹³ *Ibidem*, s. 534.

¹⁴ K.C. Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 126.

¹⁶ C. Goldsmith, *Health Reports: Diseases and Disorders. Influenza*, Minneapolis 2011, p. 25.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

Nevertheless, the American press remained silent in informing about the spread of the illness. One of the earliest reports of the spread of influenza was by George T. Bye, who assured the public that the disease was of a mild character: “This new Spanish enza¹⁸ is not at all serious, excepting that it is causing a great many holidays in munition plants and government offices. Two deaths have been reported but these are also attributal to other causes”¹⁹. The article, signed as written in London, ridicules the malady, describing its symptoms: “Now some comical facts. Beginning with the third day you change into a comedian - and your very appreciative audience. The most foolish ideas come into your head, and if you can get anyone to listen to you, you yourself are a fountain of giggles and laughs”²⁰. The optimistic tone of the piece was surely meant to calm the domestic readership and to confuse the enemy.

Influenza is highly contagious, and soon the disease spread not only to other regions in America, but also worldwide. The American troops brought it to France, and soon Italian and French soldiers has also been infected²¹. Newspapers used the malady as a means of propaganda against Germany. In August 1918, it was reported that: “The Fourth and Sixth German armies were out of fighting for weeks with the disease and great ‘flu camps’ have been established in Belgium and France, where the Germans were sent to receive treatment and to prevent the disease from spreading to the Hun armies”²². Unsurprisingly, the American press wrote about poor health of war enemies, neglecting to mention that the American soldiers also suffered from the malady: “In Russia both Spanish flu and cholera have claimed hundreds of victims and are both spreading”²³ as if the disease were a only threat to the enemy.

The flu was transmitted by American soldiers, who swarmed across Europe: “By the early summer of 1918, more than two hundred thousand British soldiers in France had been taken out of service – down with the flu”²⁴. The American newspapers acknowledged this fact, calming the situation and assuring that

¹⁸ Influenza.

¹⁹ G.T. Bye, *Look Out for Germs of the Spanish Flu*, “The Evening Missourian” (Colombia, Mo.), July 25, 1918, p. 2.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ C. Goldsmith, *op. cit.*, s. 26.

²² *Spanish “Flu” Spreads over All of Europe*, “The Chattanooga news” (Chattanooga, Tenn.), August 5, 1918, p. 10.

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ K.C. Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

“the greatest toll, if reports are to be believed, is being taken by the epidemic in Austria, also victim of cholera and diseases arising from malnutrition”²⁵.

It was impossible to hide the instances of sickness in America, but the press assured that no dire consequences were possible: “Treatment under direction of the physician is simple, but important, consisting principally of rest in bed, fresh air, abundant food, with Dover’s powders for the relief of pain. Every case with fever should be regarded as serious and kept in bed”²⁶. The article mentions the Surgeon General, Rupert Blue, who “has made a telegraphic survey to determine the extent of Spanish influenza in the United States”²⁷, and reports several instances of the disease in the US.

Further cases of the disease were reported in September 1918: “Medical officials of the first naval district reported 257 new cases of influenza today. There were ten deaths at the naval hospital”²⁸. Even though the appearance of the epidemic in America was acknowledged, the public was told that the disease was “in mild form”²⁹ and “there was no cause for alarm over the presence of the disease”³⁰. The paper also reported 184 new instances of the malady in New York³¹. The general impression was that the disease, however dangerous, could be easily cured and that American citizens were safe. It was said that “plenty of fresh air, keeping feet and body warm, sleeping warm, avoiding colds, getting ready for the Spanish influenza offensive are sensible and necessary”³².

Not even the royals were immune from the flu. A newspaper article from September 20th reported: “Prince Eric, Duke of Vestmanland, youngest son of King Gustaf³³ died here today of pneumonia which developed from Spanish ‘flu’ He was twenty nine years of age”³⁴, while another noted that Wilhelm II,

²⁵ *Grippe Kills Its Hundreds in War Inlands*, “The Washington Herald” (Washington, D.C.), August 6, 1918.

²⁶ *Steps Are Taken by Blue to Head Off Epidemic of Influenza Here*, “Albuquerque morning journal”, (Albuquerque, N.M.), September 14, 1918, p. 1.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁸ *Spanish “Flu” Gaining Grip on Eastern Cities*, “Omaha Daily Bee”, (Omaha, Neb), September 17, 1918, p. 1.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

³² *Spanish “Flu”*, “Evening Times – Republican”, (Marshalltown, Iowa), September 30, 1918, p. 4.

³³ Gustaf V of Sweden.

³⁴ *King’s Son Dead*, “The Bismarck Tribune” (Bismarck, N. D.), September 20, 1918, p. 1.

the Kaiser, was also sick: "The Kaiser is reported ill. A few million people could wish him nothing more devilish than Spanish flu"³⁵.

In spite of such news, various articles assured the public that influenza was dying out. One article insisted: "The number of Spanish influenza cases reported to the health department in this city today³⁶ showed a decrease compared with the previous two days, there being 20 new victims as compared with 31 yesterday and 38 the day before. Only one death has resulted thus far"³⁷. Spanish flu was described as mild and the American soldiers, who were infected, were said to be "able to return to duty within a short time"³⁸.

There were numerous theories connected with the origin of the epidemic. One of them said that the malady was brought to America by a German U-boat³⁹, as a form of biological weapon. It was also compared to medieval plague, "sweeping towards the west and south"⁴⁰. The disease was present in various army camps in the US, and due to that fact, Provost Marshal, General Crowder decided to halt "the entrainment of the draft registrants"⁴¹. The sudden appearance of the malady was intriguing and heated debate over the origin of influenza began: "Is this new disease which has already killed hundreds and stricken thousands of soldiers and civilians a new German war offensive? If not, how did it happen that this epidemic appeared so suddenly and extensively in such widely scattered cities and army camps throughout the country?"⁴².

Later, the situation was becoming critical, with greater numbers of medical professionals being directed to helping the soldiers engaged in the war. As the access to hospitals became more limited, "People are being stricken down in the street, offices, subway, theatres and shipyards. The hospitals are crowded

³⁵ *The Kaiser Is Reported Ill*, "The Washington Herald", (Washington, D.C.), September 28, 1918, p. 6.

³⁶ New York.

³⁷ *Spanish "Flu" Is Prevalent in Navy Yards*, "Omaha Daily Bee", (Omaha, Neb.), September 22, 1918.

³⁸ *Spanish "Flu" Epidemic at Camps*, "Evening capital and Maryland Gazette", September 23, 1918.

³⁹ *Boston Panic-Stricken by Spanish Influenza*, "The Washington Herald", (Washington, D.C.), September 23, 1918, p. 2.

⁴⁰ *Spanish "Flu" Has Boston in Tragic Grip*, "The Seattle Star", (Seattle, Wash.), September 26, 1918, p. 8.

⁴¹ *Halts Draft Calls*, "The Democratic Advocate", (Westminster, Md.), September 27, 1918, p. 1.

⁴² *Spanish Influenza*, "The Midland Journal" (Rising Sun, Md.), October 4, 1918, p. 1.

to the limit, and under strict quarantine to visitors”⁴³, the press began to promote a healthy lifestyle to help the citizens avoid the contraction of the disease: “You can also help the government in its fight against Spanish flu, by keeping yourself in condition to resist such germs as come your way. Civilians as well as soldiers should keep fit to fight”⁴⁴. There were also attempts at finding a cure of the malady. According to the sources, a new serum was discovered to “combat the epidemic of Spanish influenza”⁴⁵. The government was said to be of great help, spending one million dollars on the production and distribution of the vaccines⁴⁶.

The second wave of the epidemic, which began in September 1918, was characterized by higher infection rates and consequently, a greater number of cases. A considerable number of infections were observed among soldiers due to the poor hygiene standards in military camps. Daily reports about the pandemics were horrifying: “More than 20,000 new cases of Spanish influenza were reported from army camps during the 48 hours ending at noon today. Pneumonia cases reported numbered 733 and deaths 277. The total pneumonia cases now is 5,766 and deaths 1,577”⁴⁷. Towards the end of WWI, the media started to report the cases more openly. Some articles note a decrease in the number of sick soldiers, but a corresponding growth in civilian cases⁴⁸.

Also, new restrictions were introduced, and public gatherings, like dances, were prohibited. For example, in October 2, 1918 it was reported that : “There will be, consequently, no dance for the men of the service given this week by the War Camp Community Service”⁴⁹. Similar restrictions were put on sports:

⁴³ *Spanish “Flu” Has Boston in Tragic Grip*, “The Seattle Star”, (Seattle, Wash.), September 26, 1918, p. 8.

⁴⁴ *You can also help...*, “The Oklahoma City Times”, (Oklahoma City, Okla.), September 27, 1918.

⁴⁵ *Spanish “Flu” to Be Fought with Vaccine*, “Omaha Daily Bee”, (Omaha, Neb.), September 29, 1918, p. 2.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁷ *Spanish “Flu” Is Making Headway in Army Camps*, “Omaha Daily Bee”, (Omaha, Neb.), October 1, 1918.

⁴⁸ *Spanish “Flu” Spreading Fast Over Country*, “Omaha Daily Bee”, (Omaha, Neb.), October 3, 1918.

⁴⁹ *Spanish “Flu” Puts Ban on Armory Dance*, “Evening Capital and Maryland Gazette”, (Annapolis, Md.), October 2, 1918, p. 1.

the schools in many regions were closed and football matches were banned⁵⁰. A number of newspaper articles proposed instead of social distancing, immunity could also be gained by steering clear of alcohol. The author states: “The civilian population will also be much better able to resist the ravages of Spanish influenza because alcoholic indulgence has been greatly curtailed by Prohibition”⁵¹. However, voices blaming Prohibition for public vulnerability to the disease could be also traced: “A mere man called at the city health office Tuesday morning to relieve his system of an idea he had regarding Spanish ‘flu’. ‘I am here to state that I believe that prohibition is the cause of the Spanish ‘flu’ in Omaha,’ he began”⁵².

Various other ways of avoiding infection were practiced, including limiting access to entertainment: “Beginning tonight at 12 o’clock all theatres will be closed”⁵³. Interestingly, the same press article informed that the schools in the area would continue to operate, but with windows left open: “The schools in the city proper will be allowed to run because of the fact that it is less dangerous to have the children coming in contact with each other in schoolroom, where they sit face to back, than it would be to have them come in contact in the playgrounds. All windows and doors of the schoolrooms will be left open, thereby making the spread of the disease less dangerous”⁵⁴. Oddly enough, as early as one day later, a new article was published, which listed further restrictions in school activity: “The public schools throughout the city and country, as well as all other schools and colleges, are ordered closed until further notice by the board of health”⁵⁵. Other locations of public gathering, such as churches, were also closed “with the exception of a very few in the country districts”⁵⁶.

Another factor proposed as a cure in the media was climate. The US, with its vast territories, was able to compare the number of the ill regionally: “Cases diagnosed by competent physicians as Spanish Influenza have appeared in Al-

⁵⁰ *School Squads Will Learn Today if Grid Game Will Be Continued*, “The Washington Times”, (Washington, D.C.), October 3, 1918.

⁵¹ *Alcohol and Spanish “Flu”*, “The American Issue”, (Westerville, Ohio), October 4, 1918, p. 4.

⁵² *Health Commissioner Gets Tip on Prevention of “Flu”*, “Omaha Daily Bee”, (Omaha, Neb.), October 9, 1918.

⁵³ *Close Theaters Tuesday to Stop Spread of “Flu”*, “The Chattanooga News”, (Chattanooga, Tenn.), October 7, 1918, p. 30.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁵ *All Schools Are Ordered Closed*, “The Wheeling Intelligencer”, (Wheeling, W. Va.), October 7, 1918, p. 8.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*.

buquerque. This was to have been expected. Albuquerque is a tourist city⁵⁷. The author continues: "We have here a climate which is highly efficacious in combating Spanish Influenza or any other kind of influenza. The sunshine of New Mexico is the best protection in the world"⁵⁸. Some authors advised using salt water: "Preventative for Spanish influenza that is being used successfully in the training camps is warm salt water gargled and snuffed up the nose SEVERAL TIMES DAILY. This ought to be practiced in the homes for the next two or three weeks."⁵⁹ Others, proposed the use of groceries, like lemons: "Spanish Influenza doesn't like lemons. Lemons are said to be flu foes"⁶⁰.

From time to time, new potential therapies for influenza were announced. One article in October 1918 reported: "Dr. George F. Baer, of the Homeopathic hospital staff here, announced this afternoon that he has found a successful cure an preventative for Spanish influenza. Dr. Baer said the preparation is not a scientific secret, but a combination of iodine and creosote"⁶¹. A new substance, nicknamed VapoRub, was produced: "Vick's VapoRub is the discovery of a North Carolina druggist, who found how to combine, in salve form, Menthol and Camphor with such volatile oils as Eucalyptus, Thyme, Cubeb, etc. so that when the salve is applied to the body heat, these ingredients are liberated in the form of vapors"⁶². It was believed to protect against the germs that were suspected to cause the disease.

In addition, readers were urged not to open caskets of the victims of the disease for fear of spreading the flu⁶³. In October 1918, the press began to offer a faint hope that the disease to stop spreading. One article noted: "In contrast to the general situation, however, reports from the various army camps showed

⁵⁷ *Today in The News*, "The Evening Herald", (Albuquerque, New Mexico), October 5, 1918, p. 1.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁹ *Preventative for the Flu*, "Dresden Enterprise and Sharon Tribute", (Dresden, Tenn.), October 11, 1918, p. 1.

⁶⁰ *Hand the Flue a Lemon*, "Deming Graphic", (Deming, N. M.), October 11, 1918.

⁶¹ *Remedy for Spanish Flu is Discovered*, "Albuquerque Morning Journal", (Albuquerque, N.M.), October 12, 1918, p. 2.

⁶² *Spanish Influenza – What It Is And How It Should Be Treated*, "The Chattanooga News", (Chattanooga, Tenn.), October 12, 1918, p. 8.

⁶³ *Orders Caskets of "Flu" Victims Sealed at Funeral*, "Omaha Daily Bee", (Omaha, Neb.), October, 5, 1918, p. 10.

a slight decrease, although pneumonia continued to increase”⁶⁴. Although the first wave of the disease, that struck in spring 1918, was quite mild, the second that began towards the end of the same year was far more severe. With it came a desperate need for medical workers to treat growing numbers of patients: “An urgent need for graduate, undergraduate and assistant nurses has just been issued by Surgeon General Blue”⁶⁵. The author asked all the women of Albuquerque, despite their qualifications, to help since the situation in hospitals was appalling. Social distance was advised since it was widely known that the disease spread through sneezing and coughing.

In October 1918, the disease continued to spread among civilians in the US; however, the number of cases had begun to fall among soldiers. Thus, the military officials believed that “the peak of the epidemic among the soldiers had been passed”⁶⁶. Other authors also predicted that the epidemic would end soon, being “on the wane in all other districts except the South Carolina and California”⁶⁷. The fall of 1918 indeed saw the retreat of the disease, and gradually the restrictions imposed on the citizens were lifted: “There is a marked improvement in Seattle and the ban will be lifted as to business tomorrow morning, when all theatres, picture shows and stores will be opened as formerly. The wearing of masks, however, must be continued for a few days longer”⁶⁸. With the number of people suffering from influenza decreasing, the ban on public gatherings could be lifted: “The Spanish influenza ban which has been in force and effect in Idaho since Oct. 10 for public gatherings and Oct. 21 on for the public schools, will be lifted on Sunday, Nov. 24”. However, some restrictions were still kept⁶⁹. In December 1918, short services were allowed to be held in churches on condition that people suffering from colds steer clear of the build-

⁶⁴ *Spanish “Flu” on the Increase All over the Nation*, “The Public Ledger”, (Maysville, Ky.), October 8, 1918, p. 1.

⁶⁵ *Red Cross Calls for Nurses to Help Fight Spanish Flu*, “The Evening Herald”, (Albuquerque, New Mexico), October 9, 1918, p. 1.

⁶⁶ *Spanish “Flu” Still Spreading Among Civilians*, “Bisbee Daily Review”, (Bisbee, Ariz.), October 17, 1918, p. 1.

⁶⁷ *“Flu” Epidemic Is on the Wane*, “The Bismarck Tribune”, (Bismarck, N.D.), October 19, 1918, p. 1.

⁶⁸ *Spanish Flu Is Subsiding*, “The Daily Alaskan”, (Skagway, Alaska), November 12, 1918, p. 1.

⁶⁹ *Ban in Idaho Will Be Raised*, “Bonners Ferry Herald”, (Bonners Ferry, Idaho), November 19, 1918, p. 1.

ings⁷⁰. Towards the end of the year, increasing numbers of regions were regarded as free of flu and the press could praise success: "The decline of the influenza is due to the vigilance of the health department and warning of the physicians and the observance by the public generally of the rules laid down"⁷¹.

In the US, Spanish Flu disappeared in the same mysterious way as it first appeared. There were occasional reappearances in 1919 and even 1920, fortunately the third wave was much less dangerous and far fewer people became infected. By the end of 1918, the number of new cases were already falling and it slowly became past news. Nevertheless, due to its contagious and deadly character, people still feared its reappearance, and in the fall 1919, the press reviewed the precautions against contracting influenza, claiming that "Doctors tell us that we are likely to have another epidemic of Spanish flu this winter"⁷².

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