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“Carry On”: State Censorship and Denial
of Spanish Influenza in Great Britain (1918-19)

Two months before the official end to World War I, in September 1918, British Prime Minister David Lloyd George caught hold of a new viral respiratory illness: Spanish influenza. No one would have known this at the time. Not out of total lack of knowhow, but out of efforts to hide his status from the public. The English printing press may have known, but under censorship and/or even voluntary commitment to the larger war effort, any concerns related to the already fast spreading virus was downplayed. Looking at Great Britain as an example of the period, it is clear that the 1918-20 Spanish Flu has often been often been omitted from history as a result of, often voluntary, press censorship and state leader negligence in a time when countries couldn't afford to look weak. As part of their failures to address the country's pandemic, Great Britain (Made up of England, Scotland, and Wales) would see a quarter of its 34 million population being affected with Two hundred and thirty thousand deaths.¹

For as widespread and destructive as the Spanish Flu was, what is perhaps the most surprising thing about it, is how little we actually know. This was an H1N1 A influenza strain, a far more deadly distant cousin of the one that many will remember emerged in 2009. Similar to that pandemic, it was a result of an animal virus, again probably related to pigs, which when spread to humans who lack immunity.² Just as confusing, we still do not know its exact origin point.

¹ Niall Johnson, *Britain and the 1918-19 Influenza Pandemic: A Dark Epilogue* (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), ProQuest Ebook Central, 73.

² Mark Osborne Humphries, “Paths of Infection: The First World War and the Origins of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic,” *War in History* 21, no. 1 (January 2014): 58, JSTOR Journals.

Historians and scientists have debated this since its emergence, but evidence has suggested military camps in Great Britain or France, a US base in Kansas, or China.³ What is clear, however, is that there was nothing “Spanish” about it, as soon will be explored. Regardless of where it came from, both then and now there has been no doubt that the spread of virus was facilitated by the coinciding world war. Of course, this only makes sense given the mass mobilization across borders, soldiers being stuck together in tight and dirtied spaces, and then the return of these men to the domestic sphere.⁴ Primarily spread through air droplets, those who got this flu often felt the conditions two to four days after and could feel symptoms that included nasal discharge, dry coughs, and fever.⁵ Like the current COVID-19 pandemic those with existing health complications were most at risk. However, in a cruel continuation of deadly blows dealt to them, those aged 18-40 belonged to this group as well. This would include many of the young men who had fought in the war, who would end up dying on the frontline or later at home of an invisible disease, adding more meaning to this so called “Lost Generation”. For something unique to this pandemic, these young people who were in the healthiest period of their lives suffered some of the highest mortality rates.⁶ To this day we still don’t have an exact reason as to why this is, but the leading theory is that those between 18-40 had not lived through the 1889-90 “Russian Flu” pandemic or had only experienced it to a limited degree, so their bodies, unlike those older than them, were less exposed to a somewhat similar respiratory bacterial strains.⁷ Spanish Flu would wreck havoc and infect anywhere between one-fifth to one-half of the world’s then two billion population, killing anywhere between 40 and

³ Humphries, “Paths of Infection,” 59.

⁴ Arthur Newsholme, “Discussion on Influenza,” *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine* 12 (November 13, 1919): 16, <https://doi.org/10.1177/003591571901200502>. Johnson, *Britain and the 1918-19 Influenza Pandemic*, 191.

⁵ Johnson, *Britain and the 1918-19 Influenza Pandemic*, 3.

⁶ Humphries, “Paths of Infection,” 59.

⁷ G. Dennis Shanks and John F. Brundage, “Pathogenic Responses Among Young Adults During the 1918 Influenza Pandemic.” *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 18, no. 2 (2012): 201-7. doi:10.3201/eid1802.102042

100 million.⁸ Interestingly, when compared to the first World War which saw the much less (but still significant) deaths of under 10 million,⁹ that conflict has almost completely overshadowed most memory of the virus.

In June of 1918, when the people of Great Britain first read of the “Spanish Flu” that had just reached their shores, most really didn’t make anything of it. In fact, it was often only given a few short paragraphs in what was usually a small newspaper dominated by war developments, lists of those killed in combat, and most significant to this topic, propaganda. The last hear speaks to what the press had been in this time of war, something to be controlled. On August 8, 1914, just days after the start of combat, Britain implemented the Defence of the Realm Act. Amongst other motions which gave federal government more powers, such as the detention of foreigners and conscientious objectors of conflict, was the law that “No person shall by word of mouth or in writing spread reports likely to cause disaffection or alarm”.¹⁰ This effectively censored the press from criticizing anything which could hurt the country’s morale, including the danger of a rapidly spreading and deadly disease. This is not to say some journalists and publishers completely objected to it, as they themselves often took on a jingoistic role. Most notably this was media mogul Alfred Harmsworth, the first Viscount Northcliffe, who had owned major newspapers the *Daily Mail*, *Evening News* and *The Times* and whose power and influence was so substantial he would be given the position of director of propaganda just months before the influenza’s

⁸ Guy Beiner, “Out in the Cold and Back: New-Found Interest in the Great Flu,” *Cultural & Social History* 3, no. 4 (December 2006): 496, doi: 10.1191/1478003806cs070ra. Milne, *Stacking the Coffins*, 1-2. Johnson, *Britain and the 1918-19 Influenza Pandemic*, 82.

⁹ Johnson, *Britain and the 1918-19 Influenza Pandemic*, 82.

¹⁰ “Defence of the Realm Act,” *London Gazette*, September 1, 1914, *The Gazette Official Public Records*. <https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/28887/supplement/6968#>.

emergence.¹¹ As a result of Northcliffe's propagandistic and warmongering efforts to antagonize the enemy, he even earned himself the nickname the "king of lies" in Germany.¹²

In an effort to mask the truth of the 1918 virus, which had to potential to cause public panic in the last few crucial months of the war, deliberate efforts were made, such as by Northcliffe and his press, to downplay any concerns and present it as something foreign. This was not entirely unique to Britain. Both the Allied and Central power countries were limiting what was being said about the Influenza in an effort to not show their enemy any internal weaknesses they may have.¹³ The notable exception to state censorship was Spain who, as a neutral country in the war, freely reported what was known about the new illness and the statistics of those infected including its own very ill King Alfonso XIII.¹⁴ This of course stands in stark contrast to the media suppression in Britain where one its own heads of state, Prime Minister David Lloyd George, was reported to have only caught a "severe chill" from rainy weather.¹⁵ It must also be said that Spain was reported as having the highest mortality rate in Europe for the influenza, an estimated 12 deaths per 1,000 of its population. This amount stands in sharp contrast to Great Britain's then published rate of 4.9 deaths per 1,000 and much of the rest of Europe who reported anywhere between 3 to 6 deaths per 1000.¹⁶ However, as most of those other countries were at war, press or state censorship likely was an import reason as to why their rates often appear so low in comparison. As Spain was the main source of information in regards to the virus and countries at war having their own censorship, it

¹¹ Mark Honigsbaum, "Regulating the 1918-19 Pandemic: Flu, Stoicism and the Northcliffe Press," *Medical History* vol. 57, no. 2 (April 2013): 170-71, doi:10.1017/mdh.2012.101.

¹² Honigsbaum, "Regulating the 1918-19 pandemic, 171.

¹³ Ida Milne, *Stacking the Coffins: Influenza, War and Revolution in Ireland, 1918-19*(Manchester University Press, 2018), EBSCOhost, 1.

¹⁴ Johnson, *Britain and the 1918-19 Influenza Pandemic*, 182.

¹⁵ Johnson, *Britain and the 1918-19 Influenza Pandemic*, 179.

¹⁶ Johnson, *Britain and the 1918-19 Influenza Pandemic*, 80.

came to be discussed and reported as the “**Spanish Flu**”¹⁷ in what today could draw parallels to the xenophobic labelling and use of the terms “China virus” or “Wuhan flu”.

The other foreign scapegoat associated with the Flu was one already being portrayed as the harbinger of death: Germany. It was after all already so easy to belittle and blame the enemy as being joined with or even the source of the problem, as Northcliffe owned papers, for example, continuously made claims that the plague “was raging in Germany”¹⁸ and that “no doubt whatever...[it had] been recurring in a very severe form in Germany, Austria, and the territories occupied by the central powers”.¹⁹ Fascinatingly, re-calculated influenza data shows that these statements likely told of the opposite of what was really occurring, as Germany was estimated to have a death rate of 3.8 per 1,000 of its people when Britain’s is believed to have been 5.8.²⁰ But again, these rates most likely would have been higher had not both of the countries been under censorship. Nevertheless, these statements speak to the power of propaganda and disinformation. The same newspapers sometimes went even further in reporting that the disease could even have been a potential result of the aftereffects of poison gas used by the enemy²¹ or even created by them to use as a biological weapon.²² Propaganda only led to further hate of the enemy while disassociating any potential blame that could be put on their own federal government, for failing to curb the Influenza.

While the press put responsibility for the Spanish Influenza on others, the British national government did almost nothing. They were often quick to label it as “only flu”, in an effort to

¹⁷ Milne, *Stacking the Coffins*, 22-23.

¹⁸ "Imperial and Foreign News Items," *Times*, October 2, 1918, 7. *The Times Digital Archive*, <https://link-gale-com.ezproxy.macewan.ca/apps/doc/CS119606082/TTDA?u=edmo87290&sid=TTDA&xid=a1e03bf4>.

¹⁹ "The Spanish Influenza," *Times*, June 25, 1918, *The Times Digital Archive*, <https://link-gale-com.ezproxy.macewan.ca/apps/doc/CS153160409/TTDA?u=edmo87290&sid=TTDA&xid=fae9ee61>.

²⁰ Johnson, *Britain and the 1918-19 Influenza Pandemic*, 80.

²¹ Johnson, *Britain and the 1918-19 Influenza Pandemic*, 186.

²² "The Spanish Influenza," *Times*.

trivialize it as something weak and only “too common” in that no one should take it too seriously.²³ Cabinet records of the time very rarely even mention the virus that raged their populations and when they do, a serious lack of concern was present.²⁴ However, this was occurring the same time as the Defence of the Realm Act, so the ministers of the crown did have in their power to shut down breakout sites, commander spaces for quarantining or medical use, and freely use economic wealth and resources, yet they never did. The main body in charge of the response to the new flu was the Local Government Board. Occasionally, they would issue some memorandums on the current state of things and speak of the importance of sanitizing surfaces, which as we know in the present is not the biggest concern, but overall, they did almost nothing.²⁵ With no national healthcare system in place yet, local authorities and medical practitioners were left almost completely in charge of any flu response, to varying levels of effort and success.²⁶

Out of the lack of knowing what it was and few policies put in place to stop it, the disease ran rampant. However, it should be noted that few would have objected to this federal response.²⁷ This was an age where respiratory diseases such tuberculosis, chronic bronchitis, and pneumonia were all too common in the tight and poor quarters of urban cities, and many, including statisticians, often failed to realize the new flu was something far different.²⁸ People had generally been expected to continue to work throughout the whole pandemic.²⁹ However, this plan proved to be a failure. Over the summer of 1918, 70% of all English employees were not working as a result of being sick or having their workplaces closed.³⁰ Buses, trains, hospitals, schools, policing, and

²³ Johnson, *Britain and the 1918-19 Influenza Pandemic*, 203.

²⁴ Johnson, *Britain and the 1918-19 Influenza Pandemic*, 194.

²⁵ Johnson, *Britain and the 1918-19 Influenza Pandemic*, 131, 139.

²⁶ Johnson, *Britain and the 1918-19 Influenza Pandemic*, 199.

²⁷ Johnson, *Britain and the 1918-19 Influenza Pandemic*, 120.

²⁸ Milne, *Stacking the Coffins*, 6, 74.

²⁹ Johnson, *Britain and the 1918-19 Influenza Pandemic*, 122.

³⁰ Milne, *Stacking the Coffins*, 24.

places of business had all been impacted with services limited or even closed.³¹ This was also on top of the wartime restrictions that had already limited all of these to begin with. Many local administrators asked for help in managing the crisis from the higher up powers, saying that they needed more healthcare personal or wishing for a small allocation of the ones involved in the war effort. However, these pleas almost always fell on deaf ears.³² Had state level action been taken, there would be no doubt that it would have limited the contagion to at least some degree.

In reaction to this mass spreading of disease, public health officials found themselves justifying their inaction. This was perhaps best represented by Sir. Arthur Newsholme, of the Local Government Board, who just after peace was achieved in November 1918, spoke of how “it was necessary [during the war] to ‘carry on,’ and [that] the relentless needs of warfare [had] justified incurring this risk of spreading infection.”³³ Newsholme would speak of how virus waves had been unpredictable,³⁴ something not entirely true as most people generally expected disease to come from warzones,³⁵ and a third predictable wave, most likely caused by soldiers’ return home, proved that the same month and the next. Newsholme legitimized this hands-off approach by the state saying he knew “of no public health measures which [could] resist the progress of pandemic influenza”.³⁶ Regardless, the “carry on” mentality and stoicism during the war and its immediate aftermath represented a failure of leadership.

In studying the Spanish Influenza pandemic, it is easy to conclude that our own numerous discussions and debates in the present, such as the construction of “fake news”, leadership

³¹ Johnson, *Britain and the 1918-19 Influenza Pandemic*, 118.

³² Johnson, *Britain and the 1918-19 Influenza Pandemic*, 136.

³³ Arthur Newsholme, “Discussion on Influenza,” *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine* 12 (November 13, 1919): 13, <https://doi.org/10.1177/003591571901200502>.

³⁴ Newsholme, “Discussion on Influenza,” 16.

³⁵ Milne, *Stacking the Coffins*, 3.

³⁶ Arthur Newsholme, “Discussion on Influenza,” *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine* 12 (November 13, 1919): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1177/003591571901200502>.

priorities in a pandemic, and even state figures (such as a British prime minister) catching a deadly pathogen, is really nothing new. Yet, for being the largest pandemic of all time (in terms of infection rates) it has mostly been forgotten. In this way that it could be argued that those ignorant to and censoring of the truth, like David Lloyd George, Arthur Newsholme, and Lord Northcliffe, were *somewhat* successful in stopping people from talking about it. As a result of the bound and blinded press as well as the disregard and lies of its political leaders, who didn't want to portray the already fragile state as weak, Great Britain ignored the Spanish Flu to grave and immoral results which has often been forgotten. However, it is interesting to note that this 1918-20 pandemic has recently seen more interest during our current one. If doing a quick search for "Spanish Flu" on a library or online search engine, the first thing you will find is a site or article published after March of the last year. 100 years after Spanish Influenza we would be remiss to ignore the practical and ethical lessons of this period and similar virus. Or, maybe that pandemic is an example as to what our own current one could have looked like without restrictions or federal government responses. Regardless, perhaps the most important message we can take away is that a return to normalcy and even prosperity soon follows.

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