

A SPECIAL REPORT FROM THE BARNES REVIEW



# PANDEMIC

## How They've Changed the Course of History

ABOVE: The Angel of Death and its assistant are depicted striking the door of the next victim during the Plague of Rome. Engraving by Levasseur after Jules-Elie Delaunay (1821-1891). In the left background are shown the steps leading up to the Church of Saint Maria Aracoeli. To the right of those stairs is a statue of Aesculapius (the ancient Roman god of medicine) with an inscription on the column that reads, "Aesculapius Observing." Aesculapius carried a staff intertwined with two snakes, a symbol still used by the medical profession even today.



**Columbus meets the Taino Indians.** Scholars estimate the Taino population may have been more than 3 million in 1491; many thousands fell prey to smallpox, measles and other European plagues—a third of the population died of smallpox alone. About 85% had vanished by the early 1500s.

## INTRODUCTION

By TBR Editor John Tiffany

The Covid-19 novel coronavirus flu-like outbreak of disease—a pandemic—has forced people all over the globe to change how they live, at least for a while. A pandemic is like the more familiar term epidemic, except that a pandemic affects a continent or the entire world. During such an outbreak, humanity's main goal is simply to survive.

Many if not all of these diseases are zoonotic, meaning that they originated in animals as parasites, and, usually mutating, jumped to humans. It all starts with the domestication of animals, about 10,000 years ago. During most of prehistory, humans lived as small, scattered bands, rarely contacting other bands, and disease was a rare thing. Even the common cold was unknown.

Once we domesticated animals, and came into close contact with them, trouble began. The dense, settled communities of the Neolithic age also made contagion more possible. Influenza, leprosy, malaria, smallpox and tuberculosis appeared during this period. The more civilized humans became—building cities and forging trade routes to connect with other cities—the more likely epidemics and pandemics became.

Cows and sheep have a disease called rinderpest; this jumped to humans as measles and has killed hundreds of millions of people.

From camels we got smallpox, another great killer. From pigs we got the highly contagious whooping cough or pertussis. From chickens

we got typhoid. From ducks we got influenza. From water buffalo, leprosy. AIDS virus, or HIV, came from our fellow primates, maybe from the African custom of eating monkeys or “bush meat.”

The most impressive way zoonotic pandemics have changed the course of history is how European diseases wiped out native American cultures, because Europeans had been in contact with domesticated animals for centuries and had developed considerable immunity to their diseases. American Indians had very few domesticated animals—the dog, turkey, guinea pig and the llama are about it.

According to a March 2019 study published in *Quaternary Science Reviews*, there were probably 60 million natives in America in 1492. The best estimate indicates a death toll of 56 million by the beginning of the 1600s—90% of the pre-Columbian indigenous population and around 10% of the global population at the time. For example, upon his arrival on Hispaniola, Christopher Columbus encountered the native Tainos. By 1548, European diseases had wiped out most of them.

In the past 30 years or so, many new diseases have been the result of the onset of factory farming, “confined animal farming operations.” Thousands of chickens, pigs or other animals are crammed together in buildings, shoulder to shoulder, standing in their own feces and dosed with antibiotics to keep them alive.

The result is the emergence of new, antibiotic-resistant zoonotic diseases. ★

# Here is a quick rundown of the world's worst pandemics and their effect on history. There were many more that could have been included.

### 430 B.C.

The earliest recorded pandemic occurred during the Peloponnesian War. After the disease passed through Libya, Ethiopia, and Egypt, it crossed the Athenian walls as the Spartans were laying siege. As much as two-thirds of the population of Athens died. The symptoms included fever, thirst, bloody throat and tongue, red skin, and lesions. The disease, suspected to have been typhoid fever, weakened the Athenians appreciably, and was an important factor in their defeat by the Spartans, a significant setback to civilization.

### CYPRIAN PLAGUE A.D. 250-C. 550

The Cyprian plague entailed diarrhea, vomiting, throat ulcers, fever and gangrene in the hands and feet. Possibly originating in Ethiopia, it traveled through north Africa, into Rome and elsewhere. There were recurring outbreaks over the next three centuries. In 444, it hit Britain and obstructed Romano-British defense efforts against the Picts and Scots, causing the Brits to seek help from the Saxons, who would soon control much of the island.

### ANTONINE PLAGUE A.D. 165-C. 180

One of the earliest known pandemics is the Antonine plague, or plague of Galen, of 165. The microbial cause is unknown, although it is thought to have been either smallpox or measles. The disease, originating with the Huns, who gave it to the Germans, was brought back to Rome by returning soldiers from Germania. The disease, unknown in Rome before, killed more than 5 million people and severely weakened the Roman ability to wage war. Emperor Marcus Aurelius is counted among its victims. Symptoms included fever, sore throat, diarrhea and, if the patient lived that long, pus-filled sores.

### THE PLAGUE OF JUSTINIAN A.D. 541-742

The pandemic of Justinian was an outbreak of the bubonic plague that afflicted the Byzantine empire and Mediterranean port cities, killing up to 25 million people initially (A.D. 541-542) and leaving its mark on the world by killing up to a quarter of the population of the Eastern Mediterranean and devastating the city of Constantinople. At its height, the



An illustration (ca. 1498) depicts the plague of Justinian, ca. A.D. 541.

plague was slaying an estimated 5,000 people per day in Constantinople, eventually resulting in the deaths of 40% of the city's population.

Ultimately, over the next two centuries, repeated outbreaks would kill about 50 million. At the time, that was 26% of the world's population.

The plague changed the course of the empire, squelching Emperor Justinian's plans to bring the Roman empire back together and causing massive economic chaos. It is credited with creating an apocalyptic atmosphere that spurred the rapid spread of Christianity.

### THE LEPROSY PANDEMIC 11TH CENTURY

Hansen's disease (also known as leprosy) is an infection caused by slow-growing bacteria called *Mycobacterium leprae*. It can affect the nerves, skin, eyes, and lining of the nose. Although it had been around for a long time before, in the 11th century leprosy grew into a pandemic in Europe, resulting in the building of many hospitals to accommodate the vast number of victims.

### THE BLACK DEATH 1348-1353

The Black Death, caused by a bacterium, ravaged Africa, Asia and Europe, and killed 75-200 million people, one-third of the world's population. Rats and fleas bearing the bubonic plague stowed away aboard merchant ships, spreading the disease from port to port. The vast suffering led people to question their religious faith, and many rejected organized religion, blaming holy men for their plight. It also had tremendous effects on serfdom and the coming of the Industrial Revolution.

Dead bodies became so common that many simply rotted where they lay, making a constant stench in cities. England and France were so debilitated by the plague that they called a halt to their warfare. The feudal system in England collapsed due to the labor shortage. Meanwhile, the Vikings were suffering. They halted their exploration of North America and abandoned their settlements in Greenland.

### YELLOW FEVER EPIDEMIC 1790-1803

While not strictly speaking a pandemic, the yellow fever epidemic of 1790-1802 in Haiti had a major effect on history. When Napoleon sent a great armada to restore slavery in Haiti, he failed because the ex-slaves had an immunity the white men in Napoleon's army did not have. More



**Epidemics left their mark on the psyches of many artists.** This work, entitled "The Triumph of Death," by Dutch painter Pieter Bruegel the Elder, created in 1562, reflects that. In the center of this allegorical painting of the Black Plague, sits the figure Death—wielding his scythe—on a reddish-brown horse. Cities are laid waste. Ships are burning in the harbor. Victims—young and old, rich and poor—are terrorized by an army of skeletons. Until the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918, this plague was the worst in history that we know of.

importantly, the yellow fever led to Napoleon's decision to abandon the idea of projecting French power in the New World and thus to agree with Thomas Jefferson in 1803 to the Louisiana Purchase, doubling the size of the United States.

### CHOLERA PANDEMICS

The first of seven cholera pandemics over a period of 150 years originated in Russia, where 1 million people died. British soldiers brought it to India, where millions more died. The British empire spread this unwelcome gift to Africa, China, Japan, Spain, Italy, Germany, and America.

### THIRD CHOLERA PANDEMIC 1852-1860

The third cholera pandemic was a bad one, killing 1 million. It started in India before tearing through the globe. In 1854, 23,000 people died in Great Britain—but fortunately, in the same year, Dr. John Snow succeeded in discovering contaminated water was the means of transmission for the disease, leading to successful control measures. In one instance, a mother had washed her baby's diaper in a town well. This touched off an epidemic that killed 616 people.

### THIRD BUBONIC PLAGUE 1855-1860

Starting in China, the third bubonic plague claimed 15 million victims. The plague is considered a factor in the Panthay and Taiping rebellions. The Panthay rebellion was a Muslim revolt, crushed with great cruelty by imperial Chinese troops. The Taiping rebellion, possibly the bloodiest revolt in world history, was a peasant revolt against the Qing dynasty led by a Chinese man who believed himself to be the younger brother of Jesus Christ. The plague spread and is also considered a causative factor in the ensuing populist rebellion in India against the British occupiers.

### 1875 FIJI MEASLES EPIDEMIC

After Fiji joined the British empire, a Fijian royal party paid a visit to Australia, where they encountered measles. They brought the disease back to their island, where it spread like wildfire. Soon the island was littered with corpses—food for wild animals. Entire villages died, and homes were burned—sometimes killed only juveniles and the elderly or weakened victims, this "Spanish flu" struck down hardy and healthy young adults, while leaving children

### RUSSIAN FLU—1889-90

The pandemic of 1889-1890 was called the "Asiatic" or "Russian" flu, but the first cases in May 1889 were observed in three different locations: Bukhara in Turkestan, northwestern Canada and Greenland. Before long it spread across the Earth and claimed the lives of at least 360,000—some say a million.

### SIXTH CHOLERA PANDEMIC 1910-1911

In 1910-1911 the world's sixth cholera pandemic originated in India, where it killed more than 800,000, spreading to the Middle East, Russia, Eastern Europe, and north Africa. In the United States, authorities quickly moved to isolate the infected, and only 11 deaths occurred.

### SPANISH FLU—1918

This disturbingly deadly form of influenza swept across the globe, snuffing out the lives of 20-50 million people. Strangely, and unlike other influenzas that had always previously killed only juveniles and the elderly or weakened victims, this "Spanish flu" struck down hardy and healthy young adults, while leaving children



The world was overwhelmed with patients who had contracted the Spanish flu.

and those with weak immune systems alive. The exact origins of the pandemic are not known, but it is believed to have mutated in China. It first appeared on the frontlines of WWI at a hospital camp in France. Spain, however, had some of the most numerous cases, and thus the name Spanish flu stuck. The first U.S. cases appeared at Fort Riley military camp in the spring of 1918. Many claim it was transmitted from a nearby pig farm.

By October 1918, America's deadliest month, hundreds of thousands of Americans had died, and body storage capacity was at a crisis level.

The threat, however, disappeared in the summer of 1919, when most of those infected had either died or developed immunity.

#### ASIAN FLU PANDEMIC—1956-58

Asian flu (H2N2) originated from an avian influenza virus believed to have started in China. It killed 1.1 to 2 million—116,000 (estimated) of which were in the United States. The first cases, however, were reported in Singapore. A vaccine was developed, effectively containing the disease.

#### HONG KONG FLU—1968

The first reported case of the Hong Kong flu was on July 13, 1968 in Hong Kong; 17 days later there were outbreaks of this virus in India, the Philippines, Australia, Europe and the United States. This pandemic killed more than 1 million people, including 500,000 residents of Hong Kong, about 15% of its population.

#### LYME DISEASE—1999 TO PRESENT

Another serious zoonotic disease is Lyme disease, transmitted from deer by ticks; it killed 114 people in the United States from 1999 to 2003, as an example. So far there is no known cure and it is estimated that millions of Americans may have this bacterial infection with symptoms ranging from loss of the ability to move one or both sides of the face, joint pains, severe headaches and/or heart palpitations. Deer, elk and moose also have a disease called chronic wasting disease, similar to mad cow disease, but luckily this has not yet jumped to humans. Mad cow disease, or bovine spongiform en-

cephalopathy, of course, comes from cows. It causes variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD) in humans. As of 2018, 231 cases of CJD were reported.

#### THE AIDS PANDEMIC

In the 1980s, five cases of a strange disease were reported in California. AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome), thought to have developed from a chimpanzee virus, goes on to kill 36 million, reaching its peak about 2005-2012. Thanks to new treatments, the annual global deaths from AIDS dropped from 2.2 million to 1.6 million. It began back in 1920.

#### SARS EPIDEMIC—2003

First identified in 2003 after several months of cases, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) is believed to have possibly started with bats in China. It then hit 26 other countries, infecting 8,096 people, with 774 deaths. China was blamed for trying to cover up information about the virus. Quarantine efforts proved effective. By July the virus was contained and has not reappeared.

#### SWINE FLU EPIDEMIC—2009

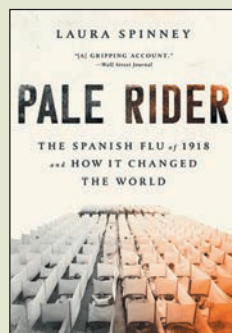
When swine flu hit, in April 2009, President Barack Obama declared a national emergency, responding to what some health officials feared could be the leading edge of a global pandemic emerging from Mexico. The emergency declaration let the government free up more money for antiviral drugs and to give some previously unapproved tests and drugs to children. In June 2009, swine flu was declared a pandemic, but 12,500 Americans died.

#### EBOLA EPIDEMIC—2014-2016

The first recorded outbreaks of Ebola, a deadly viral disease, occurred in what are now called the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan. It is believed outbreaks are caused by factors including overpopulation, expansion into forested areas and contact with wildlife. Cases have occurred in the U.S. President Obama resisted restricting travel to the U.S. from Africa. ★

## Pale Rider The Spanish Flu Epidemic of 1918

With a death toll of between 50 and 100 million people and a global reach, the Spanish flu of 1918-1920 was the worst human disaster of the 20th century—and possibly in history. Why did this virus not kill the elderly or the young, but instead seemed to target the healthiest segment of the population? What did we learn about pandemics? What happened to the millions of children who were left as orphans? Are there lessons for today in that experience? In *Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How it Changed the World*, Laura Spinney traces the pandemic from Alaska to Brazil, Persia to Spain, and South Africa to Russia. Telling the story from the point of view of those who lived through it, she shows how it affected the ultra-rich and the poorest of the poor, from the tip



of South America to the frigid tundra of Siberia—seemingly no continent, no nation, no state, no region, no culture, no race, no square inch of the globe remained unaffected. Drawing on the latest research in history, virology, epidemiology, psychology and economics, Spinney narrates a catastrophe that changed humanity for decades to come, and continues to make itself felt today. In the process, she demonstrates that the Spanish flu was as significant—if not more so—as two world wars in shaping the modern world. *Pale Rider* (softcover, 352 pages, #864, \$20 plus \$5 S&H inside the U.S.) is available from THE BARNES REVIEW (TBR), P.O. Box 550, White Plains, MD 20695. (Outside U.S. add \$25 per book for S&H.) Call toll free 1-877-773-9077 to charge, Mon.-Thu. 9-5 or visit [www.BarnesReview.com](http://www.BarnesReview.com).



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