The Great Influenza of 1918: An Honors Thesis Proposal

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In 1918 much of the world was still embroiled in war when a new, deadlier threat arose. It was called the Spanish Flu, and it would kill more people than the Great War in a quarter of the time.\textsuperscript{1} This influenza epidemic differed from previous influenza outbreaks because it didn’t just kill the young, old, and those with compromised immune systems; it took the lives of robust individuals in the prime of their lives. It came upon quickly and killed in a matter of days, often from complications such as pneumonia, leaving behind a society stunned and forever altered by the loss of so many people in such a short time. Historians differ in their estimates of how many died, but it ranges from as low as twenty-one million to between fifty to one hundred million.\textsuperscript{2} Historians also argue about where it actually started. Rather than focusing on these potentially unsolvable mysteries, many historians have opted to focus on its virulence, deadliness, and impact on the society left behind. Historians generally agree that the 1918 outbreak of influenza was one of the most devastating plagues the world has ever seen.

Historians largely ignored the outbreak for roughly 50 years, choosing to focus on the war that was raging at the same time. It wouldn’t be until the 1970’s that historians would start talking about the Spanish Flu, mostly in the context of how it affected the war.\textsuperscript{3} The seminal work on the flu was a book by Alfred Crosby Jr., \textit{Epidemic and Peace}, published in 1976. Crosby’s work is heavy in statistics and science, as well as speculation about where the flu might have started. Crosby uses medical archives and statistics from around the world to piece together

\textsuperscript{3} Barry, \textit{The Great Influenza}, 5.
a history of the epidemic. His work explores the spread of influenza throughout the world and the effects it had on society. Since its publishing, his work has been cited by dozens of works on the pandemic of 1918.

Another valuable work on the influenza is John Barry’s book *The Great Influenza*, published in 2004. While Crosby’s book explains the basic science aspects of the influenza, Barry goes into greater depth of detail about the biological components, and why it was so incredibly devastating. Barry also uses medical records and archives in his work. His book is not as heavy on statistics as Crosby’s. The majority of his work is about the 1918 influenza, but he gives background information about how plagues work and why they spread. Where Crosby focuses more on the worldwide impact of the 1918 influenza, Barry puts more emphasis on the United States, and personal stories of its citizens. He gives the reader a good grasp of why the army was so instrumental in the spread of the plague, explaining how the United States army barracks were overcrowded and undersupplied, making them prime breeding grounds for influenza. Once the soldiers left the United States barracks they were sent overseas, where they spread the flu to even greater reaches⁴. Barry also focuses on how civilian efforts to support the war spread the flu. As civilians held rallies and parades, influenza spread among them at alarming rates⁵. Barry and Crosby discuss the attempts by different U.S. cities to close theaters, schools, and other meeting places that could be breeding grounds for the flu. This tactic had varying success in different cities throughout the U.S.⁶

Other important works about the 1918 influenza include Kim Allen Scott’s article in the *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* “Plague on the Home front: Arkansas and the Great Influenza

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⁵ Ibid, 208-209.
⁶ Ibid, 221.
Epidemic of 1918”, published in 1988, which offers insight into how one state in the U.S. attempted to handle the outbreak of influenza overwhelming their hospitals. While Crosby and Barry take a more holistic view of the plague, discussing many places in the world and the U.S., Allen Scott focuses on one state, Arkansas, and three individual victims of the flu in particular, in order to bring to life the epidemic and the resultant changes to society. Allen Scott’s work is no less heavily scientific than Barry and Crosby’s works, and she does offer some explanation about how the influenza virus mutates and how this led to such an incredibly lethal version of the virus. Like Barry and Crosby, Allen Scott recognizes the difficulty in obtaining accurate statistics about where the flu started and how many died\(^7\). Allen Scott blames this inaccurate record keeping on the fact that so many doctors and nurses had been relocated due to the war efforts, and the fact that for much of the outbreak influenza was not a reportable disease\(^8\). Allen Scott agrees with Crosby and Barry’s interpretation that the war held prominence in the public’s consciousness and concerns about influenza were secondary\(^9\).

A collection of essays about the 1918 influenza outbreak appear in a work edited by Fred R. van Hartesveldt by the name of *The 1918-1919 Pandemic of Influenza: The Urban Impact in the Western World*. Each essay addresses how the influenza outbreak affected a different city or country around the world. Three of these essays focus on the United States, chronicling the outbreak and response to it in the cities of Chicago, Atlanta, and San Diego. Each essay is written by a different author, but there is a general consensus among the authors that each city made great efforts to halt the outbreak through the use of laws that forbid spitting in public,

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\(^7\) Allen Scott, “Plague on the Home front”, 318.
\(^8\) Ibid, 321.
\(^9\) Ibid, 318-320.
mandated the wearing of masks, and the closing of public venues that drew large crowds\textsuperscript{10}.

These essays are light on science about the influenza virus, unlike Crosby, Barry and Allen Scott. They focus more on the social implications of the virus and the massive devastation that these cities faced in its wake. The essays that focus on U.S. cities do not offer an explanation for where the virus originated or statistics on how many people died throughout the world, but they each offer a look into the social implications of such a rapidly spreading plague that no one understood how to fight.

Another notable work on the Spanish Flu of 1918 is \textit{Fever of War} Carol Byerly, published in 2005. Byerly focuses on the impact of the flu epidemic in the context of war. She discusses how the influenza affected U.S. soldiers, and why these soldiers were instrumental in spreading this plague. A point she makes is that the flu was so dangerous because the years preceding it had seen such advances in medicine and treating illnesses that doctors and scientists were lulled into a false sense of security about their ability to fight diseases, and the flu of 1918 disillusioned them. She also discusses the memory of the flu pandemic, and how it was that it fell out of social consciousness for so long. According to Byerly, one of the contributing factors was that the doctors involved in the treating of the flu ignored it once it had passed because they preferred to focus on the success stories of medicine at the time, rather than the failure to effectively treat the flu. She also mentions that the flu was overshadowed by the tragedies of first the Great War and then the Second World War\textsuperscript{11}.


A work by Nancy Bristow brings more of a personal story to the pandemic, as she discusses the lives and deaths of specific people affected by the flu. She also discusses the reasons that the flu seemed to have been forgotten for so long. She asserts that it is largely due to the optimistic outlook of medical professionals that the flu was behind them and that medicine was advancing at such a rate that such a devastating pandemic was unlikely to recur.\textsuperscript{12}

Finally there is John Aberth’s book \textit{Plagues in World History}, published in 2011. The focus of this book is on several different plagues, but a great deal of information about the influenza outbreak of 1918 is offered. Once again there is no definitive number of deaths or place of origin, but there are explanations about how the plague could spread so quickly and be so deadly. The science of the flu is explained, but there is no mention of the social implications of the deadliest plague in history. Aberth does compare and contrast the 1918 influenza to other influenza outbreaks throughout history and explains why this particular version was so virulent and how it killed so mercilessly.\textsuperscript{13}

There have been a great number of books and articles published about the flu since the 1970’s, but much of that work focuses on either the worldwide effects of the flu or the flu in the context of the military and war. My intention is to delve deeper into the details of the flu in the southern portion of the United States, especially as it relates to the lives of ordinary non-military people. I intend to focus on the cultural and social aspects of life while dealing with the threat of infection by a virus that no one understood. I plan to address what life was like for the average citizen and what measures they took to prevent getting sick while going about their lives. I want

\textsuperscript{12} Nancy K. Bristow. \textit{American Pandemic: The Lost Worlds of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic}. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 156.

\textsuperscript{13} Aberth, \textit{Plagues in World}, 114.
to know what changed because of the flu, and what customs and behaviors did people stop or start because of the ever present fear of contagion. The answer to this question will be different and contrast several cities throughout the southern area of the United States.

In order to answer this question I intend to use the secondary sources of notable authors such as Crosby, Byerly, Bristow and Barry, among numerous others, and many primary sources. I intend to use sources that discuss specific areas, to help me understand what was different or similar about each region. Oral histories, such as the interviews of J.C. Boyarski, recorded in 1979, and Gurtis Robinson in 2007, will help me piece together the different aspects of life with the flu. Film clips such as the one from the Prelinger Archives of people wearing masks while attending a parade in 1918 will give me clues as to what measures people were willing to go to not to get sick. I intend to search archives, such as The Library of Congress Database: Chronicling America, HathiTrust.org, Archive.org, UNC Health Sciences’ North Carolina History of Health Digital Collection, The Charlotte Mecklenburg Library, and the Special Collections of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Articles that discuss the flu epidemic in various cities throughout the nation can be found in the Influenza Epidemic Encyclopedia at influenzaarchive.org. I will also explore newspapers from southern states, such as the Charlotte Observer, Charlotte News, Columbia State, The Atlanta Independent, The Adair County News, Richmond Times-Dispatch, Athens Daily Herald, Le Meschacébé, El Paso Herald, The French Broad Hustler, Athens Banner, The Watchman and The Southron, The Abbeville Press and Banner and the Gaston Gazette for articles about the influenza epidemic and the measures taken by different towns to stop the spread of flu, such as the Gastonia, North Carolina theater that closed in an attempt to stop the spread of the flu. I have found many articles about what people were doing to avoid getting sick and the “cures” that some people believed in.
The same article that discusses "Uncle Sam’s" advice on the flu appears in newspapers all over the nation, which infers that everyone was worried about the pandemic sweeping the United States regardless of geographical location. In addition to newspapers, I am going to investigate the laws passed in different areas, such as those passed in some cities about spitting or smoking in public. I will also attempt to access political archives, such as any papers in archives from mayors or other notable figures, municipal and census records that will show how many people died of the disease, student newsletters from southern colleges such as Queen’s University, and journal articles from the period, especially those focusing on the flu in the United States. I will use personal recollections from survivors and friends and family of those who died from the influenza, located in the Pandemic Influenza Storybook website, as well as primary documents such as photographs, telegrams, posters and other items from 1918-1919 located in the United States Department of Health and Human Services Database at flu.gov.

My hope is to add to the growing body of knowledge about the Spanish Flu by focusing on an aspect other than the impact of influenza on the war; the impact it had on the people living through it, the measures they took to avoid the flu, and how the loss of so many changed the behavior of those left behind, specifically in the southern United States.
The Great Influenza Epidemic of 1918: A Bibliography

Primary Sources


**Secondary Sources**


