

HOW PANDEMICS HAVE CHANGED THE WORLD

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Health & Sanitation and related issues

Past pandemics: Clerks at work at an office in New York during the Spanish Flu of 1918. NYTNATIONAL ARCHIVES

Pandemics have had great influence in shaping human society and politics throughout history. From the Justinian Plague of sixth century to the Spanish flu of last century, pandemics have triggered the collapse of empires, weakened pre-eminent institutions, created social upheavals and brought down wars. Here's a look at some of the deadliest pandemics and how they influenced the course of human history.

Justinian Plague

One of the deadliest pandemics in recorded history broke out in the sixth century in Egypt and spread fast to Constantinople, which was the capital of the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire. The plague was named after the then Byzantine Emperor Justinian. The outbreak, which spread from Constantinople to both the West and East, had killed up to 25 to 100 million people. The plague hit Constantinople when the Byzantine Empire was at the pinnacle of its power under Justinian's reign. The Empire had conquered much of the historically Roman Mediterranean coast, including Italy, Rome and North Africa.

The plague would come back in different waves, finally disappearing in AD 750, after weakening the empire substantially. As the Byzantine Army failed to recruit new soldiers and ensure military supplies to battlegrounds in the wake of the spread of the illness, their provinces came under attack. By the time plague disappeared, the Empire had lost territories in Europe to the Germanic-speaking Franks and Egypt and Syria to the Arabs.

Black Death

The Black Death, or pestilence, that hit Europe and Asia in the 14th century was the deadliest pandemic recorded in human history. It killed some 75 to 200 million people. The plague arrived in Europe in 1347, where up to 50% of the population died of the disease.

In the words of Stanford historian Walter Scheidel, pandemics are one of the "four horsemen" that have flattened inequality. The other three are wars, revolutions and state failures. In his book, *The Great Leveller*, Mr. Scheidel writes how the Black Death led to improved wages for serfs and agricultural labourers. "Land became more abundant relative to labour [after the death of millions of working people]. Landowners stood to lose, and workers could hope to gain," he writes. In parts of Europe, wages tripled as labour demand rose.

The most significant impact of the Black Death was perhaps the weakening of the Catholic Church. The Church was as helpless as any other institutions as the plague spread like wildfire across the continent, which shook the people's faith in Church and the clergy. While Church would continue to remain as a powerful institution, it would never regain the power and influence it had enjoyed before the outbreak of the plague. The Protestant Reformation in the 16th century would further weaken the Church.

Spanish Flu

Spanish Flu, which broke out during the last phase of First World War, was the deadliest

pandemic of the last century that killed up to 50 million people.

One of the major impacts of the outbreak was on the result of the war. Though the flu hit both sides, the Germans and Austrians were affected so badly that the outbreak derailed their offensives. German General Erich Ludendorff in his memoir, *My War Memories, 1914-18*, wrote that the flu was one of the reasons for Germany's defeat. Germany launched its Spring Offensive on the western front in March 1918. By June and July, the disease had weakened the German units. The Armistice was signed on November 11, 1918 that ended the War. But the flu continues to ravage parts of the world for many more months.

COVID-19

It's too early to say how COVID-19 would change the world. But the outbreak has seen countries, both democratic and dictatorial, imposing drastic restrictions on people's movements. The western world lies exposed to the attack of the virus. Unemployment rate in the U.S. has shot up to the levels not seen since the end of Second World War. Governments across the world, including the U.S. administration, are beefing up spending to stimulate an economy that shows signs of depression. Radical changes, good or bad, are already unfolding.

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