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**Modern Mistrust of Medicine: The Re-Emergence of Folk Remedies in the  
1918 Pandemic**

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## MODERN MISTRUST OF MEDICINE:

### THE RE-EMERGENCE OF FOLK REMEDIES IN THE 1918 PANDEMIC

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the history of remedies that arose to cure and prevent the ‘Spanish’ Flu of 1918-1919, focusing on alternative medicines and folk remedies. It connects ancient Jewish traditions, medieval scientific practices, communal wisdom, and superstitious signs as all ways people combated their fear of the mysterious disease that killed over 50 million people and baffled scientists. This paper examines what about the ‘Spanish’ Flu allowed alternative methods of dealing with plague to flourish at the beginning of the twentieth century. Through revealing ancient reactions to plague at the formation of modernity, we can also better understand continued mistrust of medicine within the 2020 pandemic.

It was the beginning of the modern age. Technological weapons ravaged the Western Front, killing in unmatched waves. Allopathic medicine had become mainstream and germ theory had advanced. By the opening of the twentieth century, scientists predicted the Great War would be the first truly modern war in which the killing power of man and machine would rise above the fatality of disease. By November 1918, the war was winding down, with over nine million soldiers killed, including over one hundred thousand US troops. Simultaneously, in New York City on November 4, a *shvartze khasene*—an ancient Jewish ritual nicknamed a ‘black wedding’—was revived in Mount Hebron Cemetery.<sup>2</sup> Over two thousand people gathered to watch a rabbi forcibly marry two strangers in the graveyard. The bride and groom would have been chosen among the most marginalized, such as beggars or orphans. In Philadelphia, Winnipeg, Manitoba, and several parts of Eastern Europe similar ceremonies took place, despite the tradition being dormant for decades, and in some cases, heavily protested against as a, “pagan and even blasphemous practice.”<sup>3</sup> It was not the new war that frightened the thousands of people in Mount Hebron

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<sup>2</sup> Steve Bell, “When a Cemetery Wedding Was Used to End the Spanish Flu,” *The New York Times*, June 13, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/13/nyregion/spanish-flu-coronavirus-black-wedding.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Laura Spinney, *Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How It Changed the World* (New York, 2017), 131.

Cemetery, though. The ritual was revived to combat something old that was rising up, a plague that would take millions of more lives than the Great War, a disease that modern medicine was helpless against—the flu.

This disease, known as the ‘Spanish’ flu, emerged in spring of 1918, rose up for a second deadly wave in fall of 1918, coinciding with Armistice Day, and returned for a third wave in early spring of 1919. The disease was unimaginably violent and quick, with over fifty million dead worldwide and tales circulating of people going to work in the morning and by night, they were dead. Science was helpless in the face of such devastating death and had no cure for victims of the ‘Spanish’ Flu other than good nursing and bed rest, which many marginalized communities did not have access to. The scale, violence, and novelty of the 1918 ‘Spanish’ influenza in the face of modern medicine’s failure instigated a widespread resurgence of folk cures and mobilization of ancient knowledge—demonstrating people’s connection to the past amidst the creation of modernity.

The ‘Spanish’ flu was unmatched in its rapidity and fatality, but people in the early twentieth century were not strangers to disease. There had been violent epidemics in recent memory—such as the 1906-1907 ‘Typhoid Mary’ epidemic in New York or the ‘Russian Flu’ pandemic in 1889-1890. In comparison to smallpox, which leaves lasting scars, or polio, which can leave people handicapped for life, influenza was not a feared disease. Flu was often thought of as the common cold and with no lasting physical defect; it was not, “a disease lodged in folk memory as a subject of terror.”<sup>4</sup> Physicians at the beginning of the twentieth century, therefore, “underestimated the dangers of influenza and trained [their] sights on eradicating other epidemic diseases,” leaving the flu free to flourish.<sup>5</sup>

By the early 1700s, Anthonie van Leeuwenhoek had established microbiology as a field of study and by the late 1800s Robert Koch had founded the field of bacteriology, establishing criteria for linking microorganisms to known diseases such as tuberculosis and cholera. Scientists were confident in their identification of germs as causing disease and, “by 1918, [conventional medicine] was indisputably mainstream.”<sup>6</sup> However, viruses, which cause influenza, are almost

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<sup>4</sup> Alfred Crosby, *America’s Forgotten Pandemic: The Influenza of 1918*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge and New York, 2003), 321.

<sup>5</sup> Guy Beiner, ed., *Pandemic Re-Awakenings: The Forgotten and Unforgotten “Spanish” Flu of 1918-1919* (Oxford, 2022), 355.

<sup>6</sup> Spinney, *Pale Rider*, 121.

twenty times smaller than bacteria and cannot be seen under a standard optical microscope. The influenza virus was not even isolated until 1931 by American virologist Richard Shope, and it was not until 1933 that scientists realized influenza spread through airborne droplets. Although doctors in 1918 frantically searched for a cause of the flu, it was invisible to their eyes.

With the medical community unsure of the cause or spread of the flu, in just over a year the disease ravaged the entire world, infecting one-third of the global population.<sup>7</sup> Many doctors recall feeling not only despair in the face of global suffering, but also burning shame at the uselessness of science. A red herring came in the form of Pfeiffer's bacillus, a bacterium often found in the human throat. Doctors in 1918 commonly found it present in many victims of the flu—but not all. Despite the variability of Pfeiffer's bacillus' presence, it was widely believed to be the cause of the Flu. Researchers across the world set upon defeating the bacterium, while the influenza virus continued to flourish. Public health officials encouraged pain relief, often in the form of aspirin, isolation, bed rest, ventilation, and protection from chills, but did not have any effective cures for the disease itself, only for the flu's symptoms. Although physicians tried to reassure the public they had control of the disease, "and described their abilities in opposition to the superstitions of the past... such claims rang hollow for some during the crisis."<sup>8</sup>

Within medicine, some ancient practices were revived to combat this mysterious disease. The unique violence of the 'Spanish' flu was incomprehensible to many who believed they were living in the modern era but found that this pandemic could not be understood in modern terms. In newspapers, literature, and personal recollections, people constantly referred to the disease as a plague from the Middle Ages, harkening back to the Black Death. Personal testimonies from Australian elderly people in the 1990s revealed they "were still prone to 'misremembering' the 1919 epidemic as bubonic plague."<sup>9</sup> The 'Spanish' flu was clearly distinct from the epidemics in recent memory and dismantled all construction of the twentieth century as one immune to the troubles of the past.

The disease could not be situated in modern terms, and instead revived memories of plagues from ancient times. It is then fascinating that there was a small revival of bloodletting after

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<sup>7</sup> Jeffery K Taubenberger and David M Morens, "1918 Influenza: The Mother of All Pandemics," *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 12, no. 1 (2006): 15.

<sup>8</sup> Nancy K. Bristow, *American Pandemic: The Lost Worlds of the 1918 Influenza Epidemic* (Oxford and New York, 2012), 232.

<sup>9</sup> Beiner, *Pandemic Re-Awakenings: The Forgotten and Unforgotten "Spanish" Flu of 1918-1919*, 10.

observation, “that some patients seemed to take a turn for the better following a gushing nosebleed, menstruation, [or] even—traumatically—miscarriage.”<sup>10</sup> Bloodletting was a common practice in the Middle Ages, but had died out with the rise of allopathic medicine. The ancient method did not aid victims of the ‘Spanish’ flu any more than other false vaccines or disinfectants, but the practice brought comfort to the suffering and the placebo effect these treatments had on patients and their loved ones cannot be understated.

With no concrete cure for influenza, care from nurses was recognized as the greatest chance of survival, as good bed rest and attention to needs were the only treatment sure to aid the suffering. However, many communities across the world did not have access to the sparse and overwhelmed medical personnel, and instead relied on past methods of dealing with plague: “the ministrations of family members and neighbours, patent medicines, potions, herbs, local collective ‘wisdom’ and religious beliefs that offered prophylactics, and prayers.”<sup>11</sup> With medical professionals not always available and no known cure, people were forced to search for solace elsewhere.

Family and community members commonly were the only nurses to victims of the flu and they, with no other options, fell back on folk and communal cures. A personal testimony in 1972 from Mr. Reinbach, a resident of South Africa, states: “I remember one reasonable man... telling me if you don’t want the flu chew garlick [sic.] and wear some around your neck. Being young I turned his suggestion down but... he went right through that horrible period without any ill effects.”<sup>12</sup> This recollection demonstrates the continued belief in the strength of folk remedies such as garlic, compared to the “influenza mixture” given by doctors to their patients. Globally, food supplements such as garlic, onions, ginger, lemons, and other herbs were recognized by alternative practitioners and community members as protections against the flu.

Another personal testimony collected by Geoffrey Rice from New Zealand recalls: “There were no doctors, chemists, or antibodies, just a bottle of brandy and lots of aspirins, and the use of our own judgment.”<sup>13</sup> Aspirin was a trusted medicine for fighting fevers, and therefore “became a

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<sup>10</sup> Spinney, *Pale Rider*, 123.

<sup>11</sup> David Killingray, “Pandemic Death, Response and Memory in Non-European Societies,” in *Pandemic Re-Awakenings: The Forgotten and Unforgotten “Spanish” Flu of 1918-1919*, ed. Guy Beiner (Oxford University Press, 2022), 64.

<sup>12</sup> Howard Phillips, *In a Time of Plague: Memories of the “Spanish” Flu Epidemic of 1918 in South Africa* (Cape Town, 2018), 74.

<sup>13</sup> Geoffrey Rice, *That Terrible Time: Eye-Witness Accounts of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic in New Zealand* (Christchurch, New Zealand, 2018), 60.

central drug in the battle against Spanish flu.”<sup>14</sup> Globally, common people and doctors also relied on alcoholic drinks as an aid for flu. Although in modern times alcohol would be considered a folk remedy, it was prescribed by doctors and common people alike to battle the flu. In December 1918, “whiskey... was available on prescription in the UK,” and in the United States there are multiple reports of confiscated whiskey, from prohibition efforts, being donated to hospitals to fight ‘Spanish’ flu.<sup>15</sup>

Publicly, as well as interpersonally, alternative cures to the Flu were popularized. While folk remedies previously were administered as mostly communal wisdom, during the ‘Spanish’ flu there was an abundance of unauthorized cures being advertised in newspapers and shops, particularly in the United States. With the failure of medical professionals to provide solace, there was a strong demand for alternative medicines. One advertisement from J. W. Gardocky in 1918 proclaimed: “Eat More Onions: One of the Best Preventatives for Influenza.”<sup>16</sup> There was likewise an abundant promotion of disinfectants for the throat and chrome ventilation machines that provided clean air. While in the United States, “commercial companies peddled a host of questionable remedies,” many still, “preferred to fall back on...folk cures and treatments, a good number of which involved the consumption of alcohol.”<sup>17</sup> As mentioned previously, alcohol was prescribed both medically and communally, as well as both a preventative and therapeutic cure. The belief in the healing power of alcohol was encouraged by liquor dealers—especially as the prohibition movement gained traction.

As folk remedies gained popularity in this twentieth-century plague, superstitious signs and ancient explanations of the flu grew to fill the void of medical understanding of influenza. Previous plagues were, “considered acts of God... but with the advent of germ theory, scientists realized that they could, in principle, prevent them.”<sup>18</sup> Despite advances in science, the ‘Spanish’ flu demonstrated the limits of modernity and the persistence of ancient responses to disease. Richard Collier’s book *The Plague of the Spanish Lady*, which compiles multiple personal testimonies collected fifty years after the pandemic, exposes multiple recollections of superstitious events preceding the pandemic—such as statues crying, roses dying, and swarms of owls.<sup>19</sup> As

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<sup>14</sup> Harald Salfellner, *The Spanish Flu: A Story of the 1918 Pandemic* (Prague: Vitalis Verlag, 2018), 78.

<sup>15</sup> “Hospitals Given Supply Of Whiskey,” *Seattle Daily Times*, November 1, 1918.

<sup>16</sup> Salfellner, *The Spanish Flu*, 27.

<sup>17</sup> Beiner, *Pandemic Re-Awakenings: The Forgotten and Unforgotten “Spanish” Flu of 1918-1919*, 13.

<sup>18</sup> Spinney, *Pale Rider*, 292.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Collier, *The Plague of the Spanish Lady: The Influenza Pandemic of 1918-1919* (New York, 1974), 30.

Laura Spinney aptly notes in *Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How it Changed the World*: “Fear makes people vigilant.”<sup>20</sup> Not only was the origin of ‘Spanish’ flu unknown, but many doubted if the disease even was a flu, or something more sinister. Science was not providing answers for the mysterious disease sweeping the world, and that fear revealed itself through superstitious events.

With so much unexplained, it is not surprising that people filled in the gaps with supernatural explanations, or even modern folk stories. The ‘Spanish’ flu was often referenced as a plague out of the Middle Ages, but it could also be situated in a highly modern context: biowarfare. In newspapers across the United States, and even referenced in Katherine Anne Porter’s 1939 semi-autobiographical novella *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, people speculated that the flu was a weapon sent by Germans to attack the American population. There was a similar theory in Europe that the flu, “was caused by noxious vapours rising from the cadavers left behind on the killing fields,” which harkens back to the miasma theory from the Black Death.<sup>21</sup> The popularity of these theories connecting the flu to the evil of the war demonstrates ancient fears during a modern plague.

Superstitious fears further manifested in popular representations of the disease. The cover of *Pandemics Re-Awakenings: The Forgotten and Unforgotten ‘Spanish’ Flu of 1918-1919*, edited by Guy Beiner, features a German illustration of plague as a monstrous Spanish lady, with a hidden face and animal feet. Two of the most popular portrayals of the flu in political cartoons and other representations were as a monstrous woman or as a skeleton bringing death. This is a sharp contrast from the pandemic just over a century after ‘Spanish’ flu, COVID-19, where the most common representation of the disease is a red spiky ball—an actual image of the virus. The mysteriousness surrounding the influenza in 1918 allowed for supernatural depictions of the plague to flourish and for the construction of a popular folk legend.

Just as there was a resurgence in folk remedies and ancient ways of looking at plagues in 1918 and 1919, there was an increase in interest concerning the ‘Spanish’ flu during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. In both cases, people believed themselves to be in modern eras where science triumphed over plague. When unconquerable diseases spread, people had to orient themselves in past understandings to make sense of their current pandemic. During the COVID-

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<sup>20</sup> Spinney, *Pale Rider*, 75.

<sup>21</sup> Spinney, *Pale Rider*, 75.

19 pandemic, folk remedies had not reemerged as strongly as they did in 1918, but there has been similar mistrust of medicine that can be seen through reluctance to get the COVID-19 vaccine, alternative “miracle” drugs, and even President Donald Trump suggesting in a White House briefing on April 23, 2020 that scientists look into injecting disinfectant or “the heat and the light” as a potential cure for Covid-19.<sup>22</sup> This continued mistrust is striking because, unlike in 1918, scientists in 2020 did produce an effective preventative medicine, yet people in the age of COVID-19 still experienced a draw towards alternative cures, as in 1918. Pandemics continually force both the public and private to reorient themselves through past knowledge of pandemics and questioning of medical authority.

The twentieth century is considered the opening of the modern age, yet the global havoc caused by the ‘Spanish’ Flu in 1918 demonstrates that, both personally and publicly, people were not satisfied with modernity’s answers. The popularity of folk cures and superstitions can certainly be traced to the failure of medicine, as communal knowledge surged to replace science’s lack of answers. However, ancient reactions to the disease further reveal people’s persistent connections to the past. Despite recent epidemics, the ‘Spanish’ flu was viewed as unique, both through its violence and science’s powerlessness, and therefore had to be oriented through memories of folk traditions regarding plague.

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<sup>22</sup> Katie Rogers et al., “Trump’s Suggestion That Disinfectants Could Be Used to Treat Coronavirus Prompts Aggressive Pushback,” April 24, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/24/us/politics/trump-inject-disinfectant-bleach-coronavirus.html>.



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