

As the 1918 Flu Emerged, Cover-Up and Denial Helped It Spread

Nations fighting in World War I were reluctant to report their flu outbreaks.

“Spanish flu” has been used to describe the flu pandemic of 1918 and 1919 and the name suggests the outbreak started in Spain. But the term is actually a misnomer and points to a key fact: nations involved in World War I didn’t accurately report their flu outbreaks.

Spain remained neutral throughout World War I and its press freely reported its flu cases, including when the Spanish king Alfonso XIII contracted it in the spring of 1918. This led to the misperception that the flu had originated or was at its worst in Spain.

“Basically, it gets called the ‘Spanish flu’ because the Spanish media did their job,” says Lora Vogt, curator of education at the National WWI Museum and Memorial in Kansas City, Missouri. In Great Britain and the United States—which has a long history of blaming other countries for disease—the outbreak was also known as the “Spanish grip” or “Spanish Lady.”

Historians aren’t actually sure where the 1918 flu strain began, but the first recorded cases were at a U.S. Army camp in Kansas in March 1918. By the end of 1919, it had infected up to a third of the world’s population and killed some 50 million people. It was the worst flu pandemic in recorded history, and it was likely exacerbated by a combination of censorship, skepticism and denial among warring nations.