

Should Germans be worried about the coronavirus? The answers may lie in the past.

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Image: Victims being burned during the Black Plague. Photo: Wikimedia Commons



Epidemics and pandemics have plagued German territory - and the rest of the world - for thousands of years. Here's how they stack up to the coronavirus, writes history teacher Michael Stuchbery.

Outbreaks of coronavirus have many across Europe concerned. Yet long before modern-day Germany existed, both localized epidemics and global pandemics have left their trace on the land, society and culture.

We look at their legacies, and how this current threat to public health stacks up.

Decline and fall

One of the first significant outbreaks of disease in what is today Germany can be studied and traced is the Antonine Plague of 165 - 180 CE.

While we cannot be sure, this was thought to be a severe strain of smallpox brought back to the provinces Germania Major and Inferior, via returning legions.

Four hundred years later, the Justinian Plague - this time thought to be a variant of the Bubonic Plague - would kill between 25 and 50 million across mainland Europe.

With large cities wiped out and efforts to slow the disease held back by warfare, this was perhaps the final death knell for what we know as the Western Roman Empire, and the dawn of what some call the 'Dark Ages'.

The Great Pestilence

Far more well-known than these pandemics is the Black Death. Originating in the Near East around 1348, three distinct strains of the Bubonic Plague, or *Yersinia Pestis* bacteria, killed up to a half of the population of Europe - hundreds of millions strong at the time.

Central to the spread of this epidemic was the nature of the medieval world. Trade routes, pilgrimage destinations, and busy cities were natural homes for the fleas that carried the bacteria.

The rats that lived in these areas provided a source of food and vectors through which infected fleas could spread very long distances in a short period of time.

In Germany, the plague raged through many cities, while the residents struggled to understand the causes. Some considered the plague God's wrath, while others blamed the Jewish populations - often forced to live in their own ghettos - for poisoning water supplies.

The plague burned out around 1350. However, its legacy is visible across Germany to this day. In the late 14th century and early 15th century, the 'Totentanz', or 'dance of death' would become a popular motif in art and literature.

The Spanish Flu

Perhaps the most recent pandemic that many are aware of is the 'Spanish Flu' of the early twentieth century.

Rather than beginning in Spain, as the name would suggest, it is thought this severe strain of influenza began in the unhygienic conditions of the Western Front of World War I.

Brought to America by returning troops in 1918, the virus returned to mainland Europe in a more dangerous form.



Patients being treated for the Spanish flu in the US state of Kansas. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

From the records that were kept, it appears that just over 420,000 Germans died from this influenza pandemic.

While significantly lower than the other plagues, a mutation of the virus made young, healthy people - those least likely to die - particularly vulnerable. Their immune systems that were weakened by what is now known as a 'cytokine storm', effectively turning the body's own defenses against themselves.

While the Spanish Flu of 1918 was far more virulent and devastating than prior outbreaks, its deadliness may have spelled its own demise. The disease 'burned itself out' within two years, helped along by better hygiene controls and government intervention in public health.

Reason to worry?

While the coronavirus does concern many, we shouldn't think that it will have the same devastating effects as the epidemics and pandemics mentioned.

Understanding of the mechanisms by which viruses and bacteria spread is now highly advanced, and models of disease spread allow scientists and policymakers to target their resources effectively.

Medical science and modern healthcare systems, such as Germany's, also have the potential to isolate and treat those who have come into contact with the virus in ways our ancestors could only dream of.

It's simply not possible for a contagion to have the astonishing spread and lethal effect of, say the Bubonic Plague of 1348.

Both the government and independent medical professionals both advise that regular washing of hands, covering the mouth when sneezing and self-isolating in case of infection can limit the spread of the virus.

Keeping this in mind, while it is rational to be worried, we should not fear that we have anything on the scale of historic pandemics facing Germany.