

BOOK REVIEW

The Pandemic Century: A History of Global Contagion from the Spanish Flu to COVID-19

By Mark Honigsbaum
2020; Pp. 357; Penguin Random House UK; ISBN 9780753558287

COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation on 11 March 2020. By the end of September 2020, more than one million people had died of the disease. Mark Honigsbaum has written a timely account of infectious disease outbreaks over the last 100 years including the current Covid-19 pandemic.

The first half of the 20th century witnessed outbreaks of Spanish influenza, plague and psittacosis. The 1918 Spanish influenza pandemic killed at least 50 million people. Legionnaires disease and AIDS appeared in the second half of the 20th century. The 21st century saw the emergence of SARS, Ebola, Zika and COVID-19.

Honigsbaum weaves a gripping narrative on the epidemiology of pandemics. Environmental degradation, crowded and unsanitary communities, trafficking and consumption of wildlife were some of the factors

predisposing to the disease outbreaks. Compared to the early 20th century, the ease of global air travel in the 21st century led to the rapid and widespread transmission of disease. Fearful of economic losses and public anxiety, the disease outbreaks were initially denied by local authorities. It was not only patients dying from the disease - health personnel as well became infected and succumbed to the disease.

Honigsbaum ends the book with a grim reminder that pandemics are unpredictable and will reappear. With the ongoing COVID-19 outbreak, this book is a must-read for anyone interested in the history of pandemics.

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