

**Charles University  
First Medical Faculty**

Study programme: History of Medicine

**Summary of dissertation**



The Spanish Flu Pandemic 1918/19  
with particular reference to the Bohemian Lands and Central European relations

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## Summary

Towards the end of the First World War, in 1918 and 1919, humanity faced a previously unparalleled flu pandemic; within a few months, more people had been killed than in all the battles of the 1914–18 war put together. The precise number of victims is unknown but is today generally reckoned at between 20 and 50 million. The whole world was affected by the Spanish flu, with the exception of a few remote islands, and Europe, already bled to death by industrialised warfare, was particularly hard hit. In summer 1918, the pandemic reached Bohemia in an early, relatively benign wave. A few weeks later, thousands were struck down in Prague in a second and far more deadly phase of the illness. In October 1918, as the First Czechoslovakian Republic arose from the ashes of the multiethnic Austrian state, and the masses celebrated in the cities, thousands of feverish patients were coughing behind drawn curtains, and facing an uncertain fate.

In the USA, the flu pandemic – the greatest health disaster of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – has been the subject of many detailed scientific papers and monographs, yet there has been very little research on it in many European, Asian and African countries. To date, there has been no account giving an overview of the course of the Spanish flu in the Czech Republic.

This dissertation begins with a discussion of the biomedical and virological basis of the Spanish flu that is essential for understanding its history and epidemiology, followed by an introduction to the symptomatology and clinical history of flu, with particular emphasis on the 1918/19 pandemic. There is a focus on previously neglected therapeutic instruments for treating influenza, which have been reconstructed following particularly close study of a series of contemporary specialist texts; they principally include symptomatic therapy for fever and pain, alongside general non-medical treatments, cardiac therapy aimed at maintaining circulation, serum therapy, experiments with anti-bacterial substances such as salvarsan, urotropin, colloidal silver or eucupin, as well as non-mainstream methods such as blood letting and homeopathy, through to surgical interventions, which in the case of empyema following pneumonia, for example, saved thousands of lives.

The chronologically-structured, anecdotal chapter *On the History of the Influenza Pandemic 1918/19* uses analysis of predominantly Czech and Austrian sources to reconstruct the course of the Spanish flu, with particular emphasis on Bohemia. This prompts discussion of hypothetical origins and phenomena such as widespread hunger and scarcity of coal. It introduces a series of Bohemian flu victims among the prominent fatalities of the pandemic, such as the painters Jan Autengruber and Bohumil Kubišta.

A separate section discusses the consequences of the pandemic for the population, the measures taken by the authorities, the effects on everyday life, school closures, the lack of doctors and medication, the catastrophic conditions in hospitals and cemeteries and finally the widespread rumours of plague which even resulted in the Prague-based expert Anton Ghon being sent by the Ministry for Public Health on an investigative journey to the Swiss border.

Finally, statistical and demographic numerical data, and records from throughout the Czech Republic are analysed in an attempt to quantify the victims of the flu and its complications. A cautious estimate using various methods puts the number of victims considerably higher than currently circulating figures, at 46,000 to 77,000.

Key words: flu – influenza – Spanish flu – pandemic – 1918/1919 – Prague – Bohemia– *Haemophilus influenzae* – Pfeiffer's bacillus – First World War – pneumonia – Franz Kafka – Anton Ghon