

The Influenza Pandemic in Japan, 1918 1920 : The First World War between Humankind and a Virus

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図書名	The Influenza Pandemic in Japan, 1918 1920 : The First World War between Humankind and a Virus
その他の言語のタイトル	日本を襲ったスペイン・インフルエンザ
シリーズ	Nichibunken monograph series ; 18
URL	http://id.nii.ac.jp/1368/00006047/

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The twenty-first century began in turmoil. On top of the strife and civil wars raging in the Middle East, the SARS virus attacked around the world, and earthquakes and other natural disasters caused catastrophic loss of human life and property in various regions. The scale of nature's destructive power makes a mock of even the awful violence that human beings wreak against each other.

Watching on TV screens as people and homes were swept away at the time of the 2011 Northeast Japan tsunami, I felt keenly that we must not be lax in taking preventative measures against worst-case scenarios of all kinds. The recent Ebola virus epidemic in Africa is further evidence of this need. Against such unpredictable natural phenomena as earthquakes or new-type viruses, of course, human beings really have little way to defend themselves. Once we have seen how destructive natural forces unfold, however, we need to learn as best we can how to limit the damage when similar phenomena occur. The byword nowadays is "disaster mitigation," and indeed, that is all we can hope to do.

There is history that centers around human beings and history that does not involve humankind, and sometimes the two very seriously intersect or parallel each other. Those intersections powerfully remind us that we must be mindful that human beings are just one of many forms of life inseparable from nature and the environment. The story of infectious disease marks the direct intersections of the chronicles of humanity and microorganisms, often with dramatic impact on the course of human history.

Informed by this awareness of the ways the history of humankind and of the natural world as a whole cross paths, this book seeks to document in detail the influenza pandemic of 1918–1920, recounting the conditions of its spread and the harm it wreaked, centering mainly on Japan. The death toll from the pandemic throughout the world was between 20 and 45 million people, and, as I calculate it, nearly 500,000 for the home islands of Japan alone.¹ When we think that the population of the world at that time was less than two billion, and that of Japan was 55 million, that toll represented between 0.8 and 1 per mil of the population. Were an epidemic with the same level of mortality to occur today, the toll could be between 60 million and 120 million in the world and around 1.2 million in Japan. We can imagine the extent of the casualties that one country alone would suffer.

¹ This was at a time when Japan held overseas colonies; "home islands" refers to Japan's original sovereign territory.

By way of reference, consider the total number of people who died in World War I, which was fought around the same time: approximately ten million. The influenza took several times that many lives. It was to be the worst blow to humanity in the twentieth century, and—as far as there are recorded figures—the worst in the history of humankind. In Japan in 1918 and 1920, the annual number of people who died, including deaths from the influenza pandemic, was 1.5 million for the home islands, the largest number of deaths ever recorded in peacetime. Although it is forecast that with the advance of the aging society an even greater number of deaths will be seen from 2021 onward,² the annual number of deaths for those two years is the largest in Japanese history, excluding the time around the end of World War II, when it is unknown how many died.

Despite such figures, I have been surprised to find that in Japan not one book has been published that was devoted to the 1918–1920 pandemic and journal studies of the subject, too, are surprisingly few and far between. Among influenza-related titles in the field of medicine, most do deal with the pandemic, but many of these are only a few pages in length. I can understand why specialists in the rapidly advancing fields of microbiology and virology might not want to invest time and energy on research on the 1918–1920 influenza, because only insufficient and indirect evidence of the event is available. That being the case, a chronicle of the epidemic may be a task more suited to the historian.

In 2004, I discussed the 1918–1920 influenza epidemic in a work co-authored with Kojima Miyoko on what we called “Taishō demography”³—population trends in the Taishō (1912–1926) era. That book turned out to be practically the only study of the influenza published in Japanese⁴ so I was encouraged to continue my research on the subject, culminating in my book *Nihon o osotta Supein infuruenza* [The Spanish Influenza in Japan], upon which this English edition is based.

The influenza epidemic has been forgotten not only in Japan but elsewhere in the world. A few works are available on the subject in English. The most impressive is by Alfred W. Crosby, a study republished in 1989 under the title *America's Forgotten Pandemic: The Influenza of 1918*.⁵ The impact of the new edition was considerable, leading to efforts to exhume bodies of victims and identify the genetic material of the influenza virus and revival of international research on the subject that continues today, even to the holding of international conferences. Until then, even in the United States, the pandemic had been “forgotten,” as Crosby’s book title suggests.

2 Based on figures in *Jinkō no dōkō* 2005, p. 42, Table 3-2.

3 See Hayami and Kojima 2004.

4 Pointed out to me by specialist in the history of science Honma Eio.

5 This work was a reprint by Cambridge University Press of the 1976 Greenwood Press (Westport and London) publication, *Epidemic and Peace, 1918*. The CUP publication brought the subject back into public awareness, opening the way for further international research. My work is greatly indebted to Crosby’s seminal work.

Another significant work is Gina Kolata's *Flu: The Story of the Great Influenza Pandemic of 1918 and the Search for the Virus That Caused It* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999). This work records the efforts of the researchers seeking to identify the influenza virus. Kolata's prologue discusses how "forgotten" the influenza epidemic had become, saying it was "one of history's great conundrums, obliterated from the consciousness of historians, who traditionally ignore science and technology but not, for the most part, plagues" (p. x).

A further resource is an episode in the U.S. public television series, "The American Experience," put out by PBS Home Video entitled *Influenza 1918*. Its DVD appeared in 1998 and the text published as Lynette Iezzoni, *Influenza 1918* (New York: TV Books, 1999). In addition, there are two volumes resulting from interviews with survivors of the influenza in the United States and Canada,⁶ and, signaling the upsurge of international and scholarly interest on the theme in recent years, two volumes compiling papers presented at a recent conference.⁷ Then in 2004 and 2005, two books successively appeared dealing with the pandemic, John M. Barry's *The Great Influenza: The Epic Story of the Deadliest Plague in History* (New York: Penguin Viking, 2004) and Carol R. Byerly's *Fever of War: The Influenza Epidemic in the U.S. Army during World War I* (originally her Ph.D. dissertation,⁸ New York University Press, 2005). Particularly Byerly's is a fine full-fledged study drawing on letters, diaries, and other primary sources.

By contrast, Japanese who say they know about the "Spanish influenza" are mostly elderly. Young people know virtually nothing about it. The standard high school textbooks do not even mention the epidemic, and it is not taken up in any of the numerous series on the history of Japan or the history of modern Japan. In cases when a very detailed chronology of events has been included, the pandemic may merit a single line.

In 2004, when we published the work on Taishō demography, the only studies on the 1918–1919 influenza in Japan I could locate were one article in Japanese, by a geography graduate,⁹ and two articles in English by New Zealand scholars Edwina Palmer and Geoffrey Rice.¹⁰ Later, I learned of two other studies by the New Zealand authors on responses to influenza—one published in a medical journal introducing the work at the time of the pandemic of a Japanese physician in Tochigi prefecture and the other a comparison of government responses between Japan and New Zealand.¹¹ When I wrote the Japanese edi-

6 Collier 1996.

7 Van Hartesveldt 1993 and Phillips and Killingray 2003.

8 Later published with Janice Bailie, *A Cruel Wind: Pandemic Flu in America 1918–1920* (Murfreesboro, TN: Timberlane Books, 2008).

9 Sugiura 1977.

10 Rice and Palmer 1993 and Palmer and Rice 1992a. (We were indebted to Saito Osamu, Hitotsubashi University, for advising us about these publications.)

11 Palmer and Rice 1992b and Rice, "Japan and New Zealand in the 1918 Influenza Pandemic: Comparative Perspectives on Official Responses and Crisis Management," in Phillips and Killingray 2003, pp. 73–85.

tion of this book, it appeared that there were no other books or articles on the subject of the Spanish influenza that took a huge toll in Japan (other than some literary works). Why is it that the Spanish influenza pandemic was forgotten in Japan? This remains something of a mystery despite the fact that the number of deaths from the disease was among the highest of any incident in history and a wealth of statistics and documentary materials is available.

The sources used for this book are mainly the following:

For quantitative data

Pertinent years of *Nihon Teikoku jinkō dōtai tōkei* (Vital Statistics of Population in Imperial Japan; abbreviated as NTJDT in this book).

On static population

Kokusei chōsa hōkoku (Report of the National Census) of 1 October 1920.

On mortality statistics

Pertinent years of *Nihon Teikoku shiin tōkei* (Statistics on Causes of Death in the Japanese Empire) and local government statistics as needed.

Among secondary resources are survey reports such as the Naimushō Eisei Kyoku (Sanitary Affairs Bureau of the Home Ministry), ed. *Ryūkōsei kanbō* (Influenza) and Kanagawa-ken Keisatsu-bu (Kanagawa Prefecture Police Department), ed. *Taishō 7–8 nen, Taishō 8–9 nen ryūkōsei kanbō ryūkō-shi* (Record of Influenza in 1918–1919 and 1919–1920).

For descriptive resources, newspaper reports for the respective prefectures and cities on the main islands of Japan, Japanese-language newspapers published in the colonies, some reports in English newspapers, diaries, and medical records of doctors (see below).

Ninety years having already passed since the pandemic, interviews and firsthand accounts were not feasible sources of information. Local newspaper reports came as close to personal accounts as could be obtained at the time. Microfilm of these newspapers for the period of the influenza pandemic is kept at a number of libraries and other institutions in the Tokyo metropolitan area (National Diet Library of Japan, University of Tokyo Meiji Shinbun-Zasshi Bunko [Archive of Newspapers of the Meiji Period in the University of Tokyo], Kansai University Library, Keio University Library, Kokugakuin University Library, Waseda University Library and Institute of Political Economy, and particularly the Shinbun Library [Yokohama]). There were other sources that were not on microfilm or that I learned were available but I decided that further gathering of data would have to await another opportunity, and I relied on the newspapers mainly for their descriptive accounts.

At the time of the epidemic, it must be said, Japan was an “empire,” with territories on Sakhalin Island (southern part), Korea, Kwantung province (leased territory) at the Liandong Peninsula, and Taiwan. Desiring to study the epidemics in these areas on the same basis as for Japan itself, I used newspapers as descriptive accounts and if statistical

data was available I used both to describe the situation of the epidemic and what countermeasures had been taken. The usable documents, however, were those compiled by the Japanese government and the newspapers were those published for Japanese readers in those areas, so their content was necessarily limited. The descriptions themselves were even sketchier than for the main islands. Further study, hopefully in collaboration with local researchers, will pursue the circumstances of the influenza epidemic in each area using more local accounts.

Newspaper articles are not always completely reliable sources of information, but after organizing the numerous articles available, I found a great deal of information about the spread of the disease and some surprising coincidences. Articles from at least one newspaper for each prefecture were obtained for roughly 70 percent of the prefectures (including Tokyo and Osaka). Including articles published in the colonies, the total reference base amassed consisted of 6,101 articles from 30 papers. The Japanese edition printed photos of 135 of these articles as illustrations in the text. In this English edition, the article illustrations are not included but key passages of the articles are translated in the main text or footnotes.

I obtained access to documents at the National Defense Ministry War History Office, the Mitsui Archive, the Shipbuilding Section of Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, the Museum of Sumo, Keio University Library, and the Japan Academy. I also perused the records of the Japanese Army Hospital recently discovered and now kept at the International Medical Center of Japan.

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I would like to express my gratitude to all those who made it possible for me to gain access to the valuable resources mentioned above. I am deeply grateful above all to Kojima Miyoko, my co-author for the *Taishō demogurafi* book published in 2004, who devoted a tremendous amount of time to collecting the articles from newspapers through their microfilm editions and organizing them for our research culminating in that initial study. She also read my drafts for the *Nihon o osotta Supein infuruenza* book, offering me many valuable insights and ideas. Without her efforts, my continued work culminating in this book would not have been possible; indeed I think of her as the co-author of this book despite her preference not to be so named.

For the Japanese edition of the book, I benefited from the hard work of Takahashi Miyuki, who devoted great labor and time to creating the graphs and charts, a task that continued over a long span of time. Yoshioka Hiroshi and Meguro Kanae also helped gather and organize the articles from Japanese newspapers and Kawai Reiko compiled statistics for the overseas territories. Numasaki Noriko and Unosawa Masako inputted data and created the tables. The English edition, too, very much builds on the results of their able collaboration.

The reference librarians at Keio University Library worked hard to collect information about where sources on the 1918–1920 influenza could be found in and outside Japan and to assemble what they could, as there is a wealth of research available on this subject in English.

I am grateful to the International Research Center for Japanese Studies for this opportunity to publish my work in English translation. Lynne E. Riggs and Takechi Manabu of the Center for Intercultural Communication provided the high-quality as well as readable translation, and I am indebted to them for helping to make the adjustments needed in the transition to international scholarly style. I also thank Patricia Fister for her support in the editorial process, and to Shiraishi Eri for her cooperation in the business and editorial aspects of its publication.

This is the first book to appear in English about the 1918–1920 influenza pandemic in Japan. It doubtless contains errors and insufficiencies, but it is a beginning and I hope that it will prompt further study and amplification of the material it has presented, stimulating deepened research on the 1918–1920 influenza and its era.