

Editorial

Isabelle-Christine Panreck/Mike Schmeitzner

In spring, 2020, at the latest, the global spread of the Corona virus was no longer an abstract fear but a reality which was felt all over the world. The experience of an epidemic went beyond the sphere of experience of most citizens in the Federal Republic thus far. On the other hand, epidemics and pandemics have been accompanying the history of mankind – what is different is the course in each respective case and the measures to curb them.¹ When looking for historical examples, the feature pages not seldom referred to the so called Spanish flu which also caused many deaths. The more recent Hong Kong flu of the 1960s, on the other hand, remained in the shadow.²

How fruitful, however, is the comparison of Spanish flu and Corona pandemic from the scientific point of view? A comparative way of proceeding seems to be insightful most of all if approaches of the historical and political sciences are liaised from an interdisciplinary perspective. This is the task set for the here presented special issue, without any intention to blur the boundaries between the disciplines. Rather, political- and historical-scientific analyses are supposed to view at the respective pandemics, for the purpose of generating theses from this comparison.³ Although the researchers combine the jointly asked questions about state measures to curb the spread of the infection and the social reactions to these measures, such as in the form of demonstrations as well as democracy-hostile constructions of enemy concepts and the spread of conspiracy narratives, the foci of the historical and political-scientific studies are different. If the former deal most of all with the health crisis, with the fragility of the facts (the ‘unknown virus’) and the media interpretation of the pandemic,⁴ the political-scientific analyses have a particular view at the protests.

-
- 1 See Jörg Vögele/Stefanie Knöll/Thorsten Noack (Eds.), *Epidemien und Pandemien in historischer Perspektive*, Wiesbaden 2016; Eckard Michels, *Die „Spanische Grippe“ 1918/19. Verlauf, Folgen und Deutungen in Deutschland im Kontext des Ersten Weltkriegs*. In: *VfZ*, 58 (2010) 1, p. 1–33; Harald Salfellner, *Die Spanische Grippe. Eine Geschichte der Pandemie von 1918*, Prag 2018; Wilfried Witte, *Tollkirschen und Quarantäne. Die Geschichte der Spanischen Grippe*, Berlin 2020.
 - 2 DWDS Word frequency timeline for “Spanish flu/Hong Kong flu”, provided by Digitales Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache (<https://bit.ly/3XHoa3J>; 17.11.2022).
 - 3 An interdisciplinary study was published in 2021: Isabelle-Christine Panreck/Mike Schmeitzner/Thomas Lindenberger/Claudia Böttcher/Jochen Tiepmar, *Die „Spanische Grippe“ und Covid-19 in Sachsen – ein intertemporaler Vergleich*. In: Sven Reichardt (Ed.), *Die Misstrauensgemeinschaft der „Querdenker“*. Die Corona-Proteste aus kultur- und sozialwissenschaftlicher Perspektive, Frankfurt a. M. 2021, p. 91–122.
 - 4 See e. g. Stefan Müller, *Die Spanische Grippe. Wahrnehmung und Deutung einer Jahrhundertpandemie im Spiegel der sozialdemokratischen Presse*, Beiträge aus dem Archiv der Sozialen Demokratie, Heft 12, Bonn 2020.

Doing so, both perspectives do not stick to the case study of Germany or Saxony but additionally take the border regions of today's Poland and the Czech Republic into consideration.

The diachronic comparison of Spanish flu and Corona pandemic looks for common grounds and differences. Precisely the chronological distance of the two case examples makes it inevitable to consider political and social contexts. As a matter of fact, the slightly more than 100 years between the two pandemics make a significant difference: if, at the level of the political system, the Federal Republic in the year 2020 is a stable parliamentary democracy, the time around 1918 was characterised by a frantic series of radical social and political changes – significant are primarily the several years of mass dying at the front, the war-induced malnourishment and impoverishment of society, the end of World War I, the system change from the constitutional monarchy under leadership of the OHL (Supreme Army Command) to the short-lived parliamentary monarchy under Max von Baden and further to the establishment of a parliamentary democracy in the form of the Weimar Republic. For a comparison: the two governments of CDU/CSU and SPD as well as of SPD, Green Party and FDP have been governing the Federal Republic since the beginning of the pandemic, without votes of no confidence (“Misstrauensvotum”) or confidence (“Vertrauensfrage”), and the change of government happened peacefully in the course of regular elections in September, 2021. Both coalitions are in close exchange with the federal states – not always without conflict, but always achieving agreements. Thus, the thesis according to which the Spanish flu must be understood as an element of a multiple (system) crisis, whereas the Corona pandemic, at least in 2020 and 2021, was almost exclusively in the focus of the public, is no exaggeration. Only with the Russian attack on Ukraine in February, 2022, it seemed as if the pandemic attracted less attention.⁵

Emphasizing this difference does not rule out common grounds, which can be identified most of all in the realm of attempts by the authorities to curb the epidemic. The closing down of schools in 2020, for example, has a historical predecessor by the closing down of educational institutions during the second lethal, wave of the flu in the autumn of 1918. The situation is similar concerning the temporary closing down of theatres and cinemas, which also happened in the autumn of 1918, to locally different extent. With even more reservations, such a common ground can be identified by the closing down of restaurants, which in 1918 happened only in single cases, however. The measures during the Corona pandemic were clearly more far-reaching: during the Spanish flu there was no closing down in the retail sector, just like there was no obligation to wear face

5 This is no contradiction to Adam Tooze's “polycrisis” thesis – Tooze emphasizes the significance of the pandemic for several interconnected systems. Adam Tooze, *Chartbook #165: Polycrisis – thinking on the tightrope* (<https://adamtooze.substack.com/p/chartbook-165-polycrisis-thinking>; 30.11.2022).

masks. The latter measure was common in the USA and in parts of West Europe, but not in the three Central European regions under analysis. Concerning reactions to measures by the authorities, there is even less evidence for common grounds, which is also due to the rigidity and effectiveness of these measures. In 1918 (low level) protest can be identified there where sanctions by the authorities were most rigid; there is hardly any information in the sources about conspiracy narratives at this time.

The following contributions analyse the Spanish flu and the Corona pandemic, in the context of which the historical-scientific essays focus on Saxony, Upper Silesia and Prague. The political-scientific analyses take up the spatial design of the historical contributions in the form of three regional studies on Germany with a focus on Saxony, on Poland and the Czech Republic. The focus of the historical texts is on the health crisis and on the measures taken by the authorities to curb the pandemic, against the background of the multiple crisis, whereas the political-scientific studies have a particular view at the protests and their environments as they are mentioned for the three case examples.

All three historical contributions view at the health crisis connected to the Spanish flu. They state that this influenza was no notifiable disease and that accordingly it is not possible to decide about any preventive measures. In all regions the then unknown pathogen triggered untrue rumours (“pneumonic plague”) and fears. In all three regions under analysis the second lethal, wave of October/November, 1918, resulted in thousands of casualties, in tendency rather younger women being more hit, whereas during the Corona pandemic it was rather older people who were hit. Also then, the overburdening of hospitals was a crucial problem. Furthermore, there is one consistent finding in view of the measures taken to curb the pandemic: as neither the Reich nor the federal states issued any binding guidelines (only recommendations) (other than during the pandemic from 2020 on), each municipality had to act on its own, which resulted in a patchwork of locally different measures. This explains also why most of all in more rigidly acting municipalities (such as Dresden) there was at least low-level protest by the owners of closed down theatres. Conspiracy narratives, on the other hand, can be stated punctually for Saxony (*Mike Schmeitzner, Hans-Martin Behrisch*), in the case of Plauen with a racist connotation,⁶ whereas in the case of Upper Silesia (*Matthäus Wehowski*) national sensitivities in the context of the closing down of schools (which was differently handled) flared up between Poles and Germans. In the case of Prague (*Filip Bláha, Josefine Lucke*) there occurred anti-Jewish and anti-German resentments. After all, all three contributions agree that the pandemic of 1918 was eclipsed by the consequences of the war, by the

6 This case qualifies, at least to a certain degree, Michel’s, *Die „Spanische Grippe“ 1918/19*, p. 13, apodictic verdict according to which “conspiracy theories about the disease as an evil which was purposefully caused by the enemy [...] cannot be proven for Germany”.

mass impoverishment, and by the political transformation (including the formation of a national state in Bohemia and the status of Upper Silesia which was disputed between two rivalling national states⁷). However, fact is also that the second lethal wave of the pandemic of 1918 – other than the pandemic from 2020 on – lasted only over a short period of time (October/November, 1918).

In contrast to the sporadic protests of the year 1918, since spring, 2020, the pandemic was accompanied by demonstrations, gatherings, and rallies in the digital space as well as in the streets and on squares. The three political-scientific contributions analyse the protests from different methodical points of view, the case study on Saxony (*Stefan Brieger, Maik Herold, Cyrill Otteni and Isabelle-Christine Panreck*) contrasting democracy-undermining (conspiracy) narratives spread by the protest entrepreneurs to Corona-related attitudes among the people, while taking qualitative and quantitative data into consideration. Striking in this context is, among others, the attempt by the analysed actors to meet populist resentments among the people. The anti-vaccination movement and its crucial role for the organisation of protests in the course of the Corona pandemic is broadly discussed by the case study on Poland (*Piotr Kocyba*). As becomes obvious from the results of a survey among protesters in Warsaw in October, 2021, the protest milieu is united by deep distrust towards established institutions as well as by an inclination to Corona-related conspiracy narratives. Also the contribution on the Czech Republic (*Miroslav Mareš*) views at the anti-vaccination movement and at thus related conspiracy narratives, in the context of which the anti-Semitic direction of these narratives is as striking as the attempt by different protest actors to re-interpret local events as providing “evidence” for globally spread conspiracy stories. All contributions share the following result: the Corona pandemic became a place for spreading conspiracy narratives which, due to an absolute and crude understanding of what truth is as well as the thus conveyed concepts of enemies, contradict an open, multiple and democratic society.

The here presented special issue rather emphasizes the limitations of a historical-empirical and political-scientific comparison: the contemporary contexts differ enormously, and the measures taken by the authorities are much different from each other, notwithstanding any parallels. Also concerning protest behaviour, there prevail the differences between the Spanish flu and the Corona pandemic. Nevertheless, precisely in view of the fragile nature of facts (a virus in 1918, fake news both then and today) and of the way in which society dealt with the two pandemics, the comparison is in any case insightful. This does not only – but most of all – hold for the extent and effectfulness of the measures taken by the authorities, for the media response and for the thus following reactions by parts of society/societies.

7 At last, in 1921, East Upper Silesia became part of the Polish national state which was also founded in the late autumn of 1921.

The pandemic and the measures that accompanied it did not remain without consequences for the scientific community and thus also for the work on the present issue. The temporary closure of archives and the lack of personal contact were certainly a downside. However, the unfamiliar situation also had positive aspects: it pushed forward digitalisation efforts in the fields of cooperation and information processing. Empirical studies in political science and history in particular are based on huge amounts of data which are as numerous as they are different. To make such data available for scientific projects in the long run and in a transparent way, the HAIT Digilab was established at the Hannah Arendt Institute. It supports digitalisation processes as well as a sustainable management of research data for studies in the political and historical sciences by providing, among others, a digital platform which allows for interdisciplinary cooperation according to the demands of the Digital Humanities. For example, by way of the HAIT Digilab researchers are provided with tools for implementing the digital components of their respective projects. Furthermore, by way of this platform third-party users are provided with (data) resources, and project results are made visible in the sense of the transfer of knowledge. Accordingly, the maxims of a persistent citeability of the resources (RESTFul) as well as of open access to data (Open Access) during the establishment of each respective digital project infrastructure are of high value. In this context, the HAIT Digilab understands itself as a laboratory which is meant to allow for breaking experimental grounds and for an unrestricted search for innovations.

Without the funding of the Free State of Saxony, the project “From viruses to viral conspiracy theories” and the new digital strategy would not have been feasible. We would especially like to thank the Saxon State Ministry for Science, Culture and Tourism for the project funding in the period 2020 to 2022, which also includes the final conference “Viruses, Crises and Protests. 1918/2022” on 8/9 June 2022 in Dresden, the results of which form the basis of this issue.

