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The Spanish Influenza Pandemic of 1918–1919

Perspectives from the Iberian Peninsula and the Americas

Edited by María-Isabel Porras-Gallo
and Ryan A. Davis

University of Rochester Press

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Introduction

Emerging Perspectives of the Spanish Influenza Pandemic of 1918–19

María-Isabel Porras-Gallo
and Ryan A. Davis

Over the past decade the Spanish influenza pandemic of 1918–19 has commanded an increasing amount of attention from professionals and laypersons alike. In 1997 pathologist Jeffery Taubenberger and his team published the first partial genetic sequencing of the virus's RNA, bringing science one step closer to unlocking the mysteries of a disease that in 1918 dealt the first major blow to what Eugenia Tognotti has called the "scientific triumphalism" of the germ theory of disease.[1] The year 1918 was an era marked by the recent and astounding discoveries of the causative agents of diseases like cholera (1884), anthrax (1877), and tuberculosis (1882), and it was widely believed that laboratory trials would finally result in the isolation of the pathogenic agent of influenza. Moreover, a likely candidate already existed. On the heels of the nineteenth century's last large-scale flu epidemic in 1892, Richard Pfeiffer proposed that influenza was caused by *Haemophilus influenzae,* the bacillus later named after him. But his hypothesis was not universally accepted, and during the 1918–19 pandemic, the definitive case for Pfeiffer's bacillus failed to materialize, as laboratory studies produced no conclusive evidence that it was the microorganism responsible for causing the flu.[2] Not until 1933 were Patrick Laidlaw and his team able successfully to isolate a flu virus from humans.

Despite the importance of Laidlaw's discovery, it was merely the first step in addressing the many peculiarities of the Spanish flu. Although the pathogen responsible for causing influenza had been identified, numerous

Chapter Three

Ricardo Jorge and the Construction of a Medico-Sanitary Public Discourse

Portugal and International Scientific Networks

MARIA DE FÁTIMA NUNES

Despite the impact of the *peste pneumónica*—the Portuguese term for the Spanish flu—on Portuguese society, the memory of the pandemic in Portuguese historiography and in public opinion circles has been sparse, with the exception of family oral history and specific social contexts that have kept the tragedy alive (e.g., the death of the painter Amadeu de Sousa Cardoso or the death of the young Francisco Marto, one of the witnesses of the religious occurrence of 1917 known as the "Fátima miracle").[1] Only recently have scholars begun to offer a more systematic picture of the pandemic experience in Portugal. Paulo Girão and João José Cúcio Frada compare the extension and consequences of the pandemic in the Algarve region (in southern Portugal) and Leiria (in western Portugal), respectively, with the pandemic experience on the international scene.[2] Sobral and colleagues of the Institute of Social Sciences at Lisbon University (ICS) have recently published a collection of interdisciplinary essays on the history of the peste pneumónica that deal with such matters as development, demographic consequences, medical discourses, images, attitudes, and representations of the pandemic event.[3] In adducing a broad sample of primary materials—including national and local newspapers, municipal archives, the medical press, and creative literature—not only does this recent scholarship elucidate our understanding of the Spanish flu in Portugal, but much of it invariably points to the central role of Ricardo Jorge, the country's preeminent public health official at the time in his capacity as *director geral da sáude* (director general of health).[4]

Born in Oporto in 1858, Jorge studied medicine there, ultimately receiving his degree from the Escola Médico Cirúrgica (School of Medicine and Surgery), which, unlike the traditional Medical Faculty of Coimbra, was famous for its modern scientific training.[5] After presenting his graduate dissertation on neurology, Jorge became professor at the Escola Médico Cirúrgica of Oporto in 1880 and went to Strasburg and Paris—where he attended Jean-Martin Charcot's lectures—for further medical training. While abroad, his professional contact with Louis Pasteur proved a turning point in his scientific pursuits. In 1884 he began a lecture series titled Higiene Social Aplicada à Nação Portuguesa (Social Hygiene Applied to the Portuguese Nation), thus launching a professional phase in which his primary focus was hygiene.[6] In 1895 Jorge became professor of Higiene e Medicina Legal (Hygiene and Forensic Medicine) at the Escola Médico Cirúrgica of Oporto. Four years later, in 1899, he played an important role as hygienist during the bubonic plague that frightened the city and the entire Iberian Peninsula.[7]

At the turn of the century, Jorge helped found the Instituto Central de Higiene (Central Institute for Hygiene), a state department inspired by the German models with the aim of promoting the development of hygiene and public health in a scientific way. The institute would later be reorganized after the proclamation of the Portuguese Republic in 1910.[8] Jorge also belonged to Petrus Nonius—a Portuguese group for the history of science affiliated with Archeion, an international network for the history of science.[9] In 1934 he formed part of the organizing committee for the Third International Congress of the History of Science, which took place in the three largest cities of Portugal: Oporto, Coimbra, and Lisbon.[10] His many publications evince a wide-ranging interest in a number of fields, including public hygiene, history of medicine, and literary criticism.[11] Alongside his brilliant career in systematizing public health in Portugal, he maintained a program of intensive scientific activity that won him national and international recognition as an epidemiologist and a hygienist.[12] His national stature is reflected in his position as a member of the Faculty of Medicine at Lisbon University, a post from which he retired in 1929. Jorge also represented the Portuguese public health institutions at foreign missions during later decades of the monarchy (1899–1910), the First Republic (1912–26), and the dictatorship of the New State (Estado Novo) (1926–39).[13]

Before the influenza pandemic struck in 1918, Jorge had already acquired significant epidemiological experience in the 1894 cholera epidemic in Lisbon and the 1899 bubonic plague epidemic in Oporto.[14] In addition, he had edited (in French) a study of the impact of malaria in continental Portugal. By 1918 Jorge occupied the position of director of the Conselho Superior de Higiene (High Council for Hygiene), renamed the Direcção Geral de Saúde Pública (Directorate General of Public Health).

continued to reflect the impact and the application of the measures, recommendations, and official positions issued by the Conselho Superior de Higiene, which were recorded in Jorge's text of June 18, 1918. (As prophylactic measures, Jorge had recommended prohibiting fairs and processions and reducing attendance to mass and liturgy events.) It was not until September that news of the first victims of the peste pneumónica began to appear, as mentioned previously. With autumn temperatures dropping, the newspaper reported the spread of the epidemic from south to north and from Spain to the Atlantic coast, seeing as these were the two main entry points of the epidemic into Portugal.[39]

The measures put forward by Jorge in his official note of September 25, 1918, were published repeatedly during the months of October and November in official statements and informative articles. The goal was to contain public opinion in order to avoid generalized social panic and to educate the population—collectively and individually—in certain sanitary habits and routines, including isolating oneself and avoiding social contact or public gatherings.[40] Although these measures were justifiable for medical and sanitary reasons, they also proved useful as tools for political power. As noted in the introduction to this volume and in chapter 4, the context of 1918 Portugal was one of great political, social, and economic agitation, as witnessed not only by the presidential dictatorship of Sidónio Pais but also by Portugal's participation in World War I, notably with the defeat in April 1918 of the Corpo Expedicionário Português in the fields of La Lys. Portuguese authorities thus had little interest in provoking popular unrest in these circumstances, and the public health measures they advocated served these ends. Jorge's reputation as a man of science with the knowledge and tools to help authorities in this regard may explain why he was able to survive under such different political regimes. But despite official efforts to calm the general population, the distribution of ration coupons as well as the rise in the price of food was followed by various cases of social unrest in Aveiro, Coimbra, Évora, and Lisbon. The general sentiment was that Sidonismo, the military phase of the First Republic, had run its course and it was time for political change.[41]

As in other areas of the world, the month of October saw the most amount of news coverage of the peste pneumónica. *O Século*, for example, published numerous front-page stories, official statements by the Direcção Geral de Saúde Pública (Directorate General of Public Health), and information about prophylactic measures.[42] Certain businesses such as the Perfumaria da Moda (a perfumery) and the Farmácia Estácio (a pharmacy) saw the flu as a means to advertise their cosmetic and pharmaceutical products. In general, newspapers sought to avoid panic, reassuring their readers with phrases such as "the epidemic is dying down" and "authorities are successfully combating the epidemic and providing assistance to those affected by it" and with news titles such as "Combating the Epidemic: Providing Assistance to Those Affected by the Epidemic" or "Sanitary Measures Have Proven Successful."[43] Similarly, some reports linked the official control of the situation to naming the flu *pneumónica* influenza.[44] A number of different stories about the geographic spread of the disease provide an update of the situation in the various locations hit by the epidemic. On November 6 the front page of *O Século* reads, "the aftermath; the epidemics; numbers keep going down; assisting those affected by the epidemic; assistance and necessary actions; measures taken."[45]

By mid-November increased news coverage of the end of World War I and the arrival of the Portuguese Expeditionary Corps at the Cais das Colunas in Lisbon signaled a shift in public attention away from the epidemic. Although newspapers continued to report on topics such as the assistance provided to flu victims by the Red Cross, the White Cross, and the Portuguese State, the epidemic had faded from the front page.[46] The attempted assassination of the president of the republic, Sidónio Pais, on December 5, 1918, and his death ten days later, marked the symbolic end of news coverage of the epidemic. Nevertheless, in the aftermath of the flu epidemic and World War I, Jorge would continue to play an important role in Portuguese public health affairs, representing the country's public health institutions at many international institutions as a spokesperson on matters concerning theoretical and practical know-how on epidemics and plagues.[47] Despite the political import of his work, especially given the positions he held, his status as *primarily* a scientist may have insulated him from the intense criticism faced by the political regimes under which he served.

Ricardo Jorge's Alter Ego

Under the pseudonym of Dr. Mirandela, Jorge published a series of articles that addressed certain measures taken by Spain in response to the epidemic, including the closing of its border with Portugal.[48] These articles provide important insights into his thinking on public health at the time of the epidemic. Essentially, Jorge criticized Spain's public health policy for its ignorance of "proper scientific sanitary prophylactic measures towards the epidemic."[49] According to Dr. Mirandela, this constituted evidence that Spain was considerably outdated in what regarded the international norms in public health.[50] These were acute criticisms covering both public health issues as well as the political context of the Iberian Peninsula, especially in light of the war; issues Jorge would later make reference to in an international forum as part of the Sanitary Committee of the League of Nations (Commission Sanitaire des Pays Alliés) in 1919.[51]

In an article titled "Diplomatic Problems: Spain Has Closed Its Borders after Creating the 'Sanitary Passport,'" Dr. Mirandela criticized "Spain's Wall of China," in other words, the establishment of a *cordon sanitaire* along the Spanish-Portuguese border to impede the circulation of people between the neighboring states. His rhetoric is sharp and blunt:

> The wall that Spain built around Portugal, thus imposing a sanitary blockade, not only prevents the Portuguese from crossing the immediate border into Spain but also from getting to the Pyrenees. . . . These are ridiculous and vexatious sanitation policies that treat the Portuguese like infected and leprous animals. . . . Even if we concede that our neighbors are entitled to defend themselves from us on a controversial whim, will their defense mean complete isolation, without a door or an escape hatch? Where has one seen such actions since the Middle Ages? What times are these in which we live? In 1844 when Portugal sought to protect itself from the eradication of cholera from Spain, it resorted to the system of the *cordon sanitaire*, anachronistic even then. . . . It seems Spain's only goal is to cut us off from France, where cholera is allegedly spreading. Who knows what concerns—other than those related to public health—are involved in this sanitary comedy, where hygiene is but a mask with holes and a game of dominos.[52]

By preventing the Portuguese from getting to the Pyrenees, Spain effectively and symbolically cut its neighbors off from the border to a cultivated, civilized Europe, mentor for the ideal of progress in public health institutions in general. One consequence of Spain's efforts was that it negatively impacted Portugal's participation in Spain's first National Medical Conference, making it difficult for Portuguese scientists and public health experts to attend and engage their counterparts in scientific dialogue.

Given that border closings were "ridiculous and vexatious health practices" from a scientific and epidemiological perspective, Jorge concluded that Spain's actions were motivated more by political and ideological reasons than by a concern for prophylaxis. In 1917 the First Constitutional Republic of Portugal was interrupted by the military dictatorship of Sidónio Pais (1872–1918), an avid Germanophile. His political leanings complicated the state of Portuguese international relations, since the country had begun World War I on the side of the Allies. Spain, perhaps in an effort to maintain its precarious neutrality during the war, and fearing a sort of political contagion from Portugal, opted to close its border with its neighbor. After the war Jorge was selected to represent Portugal on the Sanitary Committee of the League of Nations. It was in this capacity that in March 1919 he accused German scientists and hygienists of encouraging Spain to adopt its isolationist policy vis-à-vis Portugal and thereby using the peste pneumónica as a political weapon at the end of the war: "Exploiting the panic of the flu, the pro-Germanic Spanish press successfully took the most pompous measures against those arriving from Allied countries, this, of course, by doing violence to the opinions and advice of Spanish hygienists and, despite their [the hygienists'] protests, rendering them justice. One has reached the extreme point of maintaining the Portuguese border closed and of prohibiting all transit by way of a *cordon sanitaire*, which thus isolates us from overland contact with Europe."[53]

Ricardo Jorge and the Aftermath of the Peste Pneumónica

After the outbreak of the peste pneumónica, Jorge's diplomatic service at the League of Nations as a representative of the Portuguese state enhanced his professional and scientific career.[54] In this capacity, and at the request of the Allied Council, he prepared a report, *La Grippe*, for the council's international convention. In addition to reviewing information about past flu and other epidemics, the brief thirty-five-page report presented a new idea: "a specific vaccine is the only prophylactic hope to prevent a contagion of this type."[55] In this, Jorge was in agreement with his counterparts elsewhere, such as Manuel Martín Salazar, Spain's director general of health at the time.[56]

After World War I and the influenza pandemic, Western states began to invest more heavily in the domains of health and public hygiene, adopting measures to stimulate social well-being, which was increasingly considered the most effective measure against epidemics. Although Jorge's epidemiological experience began as early as the Oporto outbreak of plague, it was the peste pneumónica that gave him greater international visibility as well as a specific forum for expressing his views on matters of public health: the Division of Health of the League of Nations. After the New State period of 1926, Jorge worked to legitimate the new political power and promote the idea of security in national and international public circles. Moreover, his publications and articles, written over the decades of the twenties and thirties, right up to the moment of his passing away (July 29, 1939), together with the extremely rich documentation that can be found at the Espólio da Biblioteca Nacional de Portugal (Ricardo Jorge Archive, Archives of Portuguese Culture, National Library of Portugal), evidence the scope of both his geographic travels through Europe, the United States, and Latin America and, by extension, his professional stature.[57] Through his professional labors, he consistently connected Portuguese public health to the broader network of health and public hygiene as it was then developing in the West.

As the vast bibliography written about him attests, Ricardo Jorge led a life filled with public and scientific activities until the day he died. Although his biographers have largely overlooked his involvement in the peste pneumónica, the epidemic provided him with an opportunity not only to

engage in scientific observation and experimentation but also to consider the role the state should play in the twentieth century in terms of legislation and public health institutions, an idea that was dominant at the time in Europe. The epidemic experience was also crucial to his growing international prestige as a hygienist. In addition to authoring a report on the epidemic to the Commission Sanitaire des Pays Alliés in March 1919, he also accepted a position in the Health Division of the League of Nations.[58] Although he lived through three radically different political regimes—the monarchy, the First Republic and the New State—he never ceased working to establish an international network of contacts.

Indeed, as a scientific authority who also occupied positions of political authority, Ricardo Jorge became a key figure in mediating between cutting-edge science and the political efforts to apply that science to the improvement of Portuguese society. In many ways he stands at a historical threshold. Prior to the epidemic, health care was hardly an integrated, statewide program (see chapter 9). In such a setting, individuals such as Louis Pasteur, Robert Koch, and, at least in Portugal, Ricardo Jorge, loomed large on the social landscape as somewhat heroic figures. Paul de Kruif immortalized the heroic persona of some of them in his international bestseller, *Microbe Hunters*, published only a few years after the influenza pandemic. After the pandemic, however, it was national and international institutions as much as individual scientists that would grow in prominence; for if the Spanish flu pandemic had revealed anything, it was the inadequacies of public health systems throughout the world. What the case of Ricardo Jorge allows us to see is the crucial role those towering figures of science—and the scientific networks they established—played in the slow but steady transition to what we call today the modern welfare state.

Notes

1. On the thirteenth day of the month for six consecutive months beginning in May 1917, the Virgin Mary allegedly appeared to Francisco Marto; his sister, Jacinta Marto; and their cousin, Lúcia dos Santos, in Fátima, Portugal. The apparitions garnered notoriety because of certain prophetic and eschatological elements, including intimations of a coming world war. More details on the "Fátima miracle" can be found in chapter 4 of this volume.

2. Paulo Girão, *A pneumónica no Algarve* (Lisbon: Caleidoscópio, 2003); João José Cúcio Frada, *A gripe pneumónica em Portugal continental 1918: Estudo socioeconómico e epidemiológico com particular análise do concelho de Leiria* (Lisbon: Sete Caminhos, 2005).

3. José Manuel Sobral, Maria Luísa Lima, Paula Castro, and Paulo Silveira e Sousa, *A Epidemia esquecida olhares comparados sobre a pneumónica 1918–1919* (Lisbon: ICS, 2009). Chapter 4 of this volume also expands our knowledge of the epidemic experience in Portugal.

4. In the absence of a health minister, the director general of health was the maximum authority on all public health matters. The situation was the same in Portugal's Iberian neighbor, Spain.

5. After the proclamation of the republic in 1910 it was renamed Faculdade de Medicina da Universidade de Lisboa (Faculty of Medicine of the University of Lisbon).

6. Augusto Silva Travassos, "A higiene, um grande epidemiologista: Ricardo Jorge," *Jornal da Sociedade das Ciências Médicas* 111, no. 4 (1947); Fernando da Silva Correia, *A vida, a obra, o estilo, as lições e o prestígio de Ricardo Jorge* (Lisbon: Instituto Superior de Higiene Dr. Ricardo Jorge, 1960), 3, 189.

7. In Spain the bubonic plague epidemic stimulated the creation of the Instituto de Sueroterapia, Vacunación y Bacteriología de Alfonso XIII, later renamed Instituto Nacional de Higiene (National Institute of Hygiene) that same year. María-Isabel Porras-Gallo, "Antecedentes y creación del Instituto de Sueroterapia, Vacunación y Bacteriología de Alfonso XIII," *Dynamis* 18 (1998): 81–105.

8. Sobral, Lima, Castro, and Sousa, *Epidemia esquecida olhares*, 70.

9. Augusto Fitas, Marcial Rodrigues, and Maria de Fátima Nunes, *Filosofia e história da ciência em Portugal no século XX* (Lisbon: Casal de Cambra, Caleidoscópio, 2008).

10. Ricardo Jorge, "La médicine et les médecins dans l'expansion mondial des portugais," in *Conférence faite le 2 octobre 1934 à l'Université de Coimbra, III Congrès International d'Histoire des Sciences* (Lisbon: Tipografia Seara Nova, 1935), 1–15.

11. Some of Jorge's literary articles deal with the work of Camilo Castelo Branco (1825–90), his close friend and the most famous literary writer of Romanticism in Portugal.

12. José Manuel Sobral, Maria Luísa Lima, Paula Castro and Paulo Silveira e Sousa, *Epidemia esquecida olhares*, 70.

13. On the chronology of Jorge's scientific endeavors in both national and international contexts, see Correia, *Vida*, 13–16. For more details, see chapter 4 of this volume.

14. Ricardo Jorge, *A peste bubónica no Porto, 1899: Seu descobrimento, primeiros trabalhos pelo medico municipal R. J.* (Porto: Repartição de Saúde e Hygiene da Câmara do Porto, 1899); F. Jorge Alves, "Ricardo Jorge e a saúde pública em Portugal: Um apóstolo sanitário," *Arquivos de Medicina* 22, no. 2–3 (2008): 85–90.

15. Correia, *Vida*.

16. Ricardo Jorge, *A influenza e a febre dos papatazes: Julho e Agosto de 1918* (Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional, 1918); Jorge, *A influenza, nova incursão peninsular: Relatório apresentado ao Conselho Superior de Higiene na sessão de 18 de Junho de 1918* (Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional, 1918); Jorge, *La grippe, préliminaire présenté à la Commission Sanitaire des Pays Alliés dans la session de Mars 1919* (Lisbon: Imprimerie Nationale, 1919).

17. An interesting book on this topic is Iris Borowy, *Coming to Terms with World Health: The League of Nations Organization, 1921–1946* (Frankfurt: Lang, 2009).

18. Jorge, *Grippe*, Frada, *Gripe pneumónica*. Jorge's initial characterization of the disease first appeared in a French-language publication in Lisbon: "Deux vagues épidémiques d'influenza ont passé sur le Portugal. La première s'est fait sentir des premiers jours de juin à la mi-juillet 1918. . . . Elle a été baptisée en raison de sa provenance immédiate, du nom de grippe espagnole. La seconde a sévi de la mi-août à la fin de novembre; épidémie secondaire, estivalo-automnale, de transmission plus lente,