Historical Pandemics

Epidemics and pandemics, like wars and the rise and fall of empires, play a significant role in shaping history. Probably the most well known pandemic in history was the Bubonic Plague, which we now know was spread by fleas living on rats. This disease affects the lymph glands, which become large and swollen (a condition called "buboes"). Its first major outbreak was in 541 and 542 AD, when it was known as the Plague of Justinian. It continued to resurface intermittently in Eastern Europe for the next two hundred years and killed tens of millions of people. A second massive outbreak between 1347 and 1350, known as the Black Death, killed over 20 million people in Europe. It returned to Europe several more times up until the 18th century.

Another notable pandemic was the Spanish Flu, which killed between 50 million and 100 million people between 1918 and 1920 and made another 500 million or so sick. It got its name because people believed Spain was the hardest hit with the disease. But this was not true; Spain was just the only country accurately reporting on it. Many others did not, because of wartime censorship restrictions on newspaper reporting during WWI.

Europeans brought another pandemic, Smallpox, to North America when they "discovered" it in the 1400s. It killed approximately 90% of the Native American population living there at the time. Smallpox, which causes a severe, blistering rash that usually leaves scars, has been eradicated.

In the 1800s and 1900s, there were seven cholera pandemics. Cholera, a bacterial infection of the small intestine, still kills over 100,000 people each year. Typhus, measles, tuberculosis, yellow fever, malaria, and HIV have also all caused pandemics.