

Review Article

# Historical Investigation of to what Extent the Spanish Influenza Pandemic a Central Cause in Finalizing the Specific Terms of the Treaty of Versailles at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference

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## 1. IDENTIFICATION AND EVALUATION OF SOURCE

This investigation explored the question: To what extent was the Spanish influenza pandemic a central cause in finalizing the specific terms of the Treaty of Versailles at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference? The primary method of investigation was the analysis and interpretation of President Woodrow Wilson's actions and stances before and during the Paris Conference. The first source evaluated was John M. Barry's book *The Great Influenza: The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History* because it is a historical accounts that delves into the Spanish influenza and its impact on the world, the events of the Paris Peace Conference, and the Treaty of Versailles. The second source examined, Brian Morton's *Woodrow Wilson: USA in the Makers of the Modern World* takes a philosophical route and examined Woodrow Wilson's background as an individual and statesman, providing insight on his character—specifically, the events that shaped his life and his policies and decision-making as a politician. Together, the sources offered contrasting perspectives of events regarding the Paris Peace conference.<sup>[1]</sup>

The first source was published in 2004 by John M. Barry, a historian, and was a comprehensive historical examination of the 1918 to 1919 Spanish flu pandemic. The origin of this source was valuable because Barry was an historian who had extensively researched into the Spanish flu and had written about the flu in various academic publications, indicating his understanding in the topic. Furthermore, the date of the publication of this source, 2004, strengthens its value, as it was one of the most recent comprehensive historiographical studies of the influenza pandemic. However, the origin was limited as Barry also advocated for vaccinations and safety during the COVID-19 pandemic, mentioning his stance in several of his articles. Consequently, this pro-vaccine stance towards managing viruses indicated bias favoring the negative impact and destructiveness of the Spanish influenza as it aligned with Barry's larger political views of pandemics.

The purpose of Barry's book was to emphasize the dangers of the Spanish influenza and explore the dynamics and players involved in decisions made during the pandemic. The value of this purpose was that in the process of

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exploring the Spanish influenza and players involved during the influenza, Barry thoroughly addressed Woodrow Wilson's affliction with the Spanish flu, which other sources lacked. The limitation of the purpose was that it extensively covered the Spanish influenza, its origins, impacts and scope as an historical event, while other historical events and figures that were mentioned were not examined in-depth.<sup>[2]</sup>

The second source evaluated in-depth was written in 2008 by Brian Morton and was part of series of books featuring great world historical figures. The value of the origin is that because Morton was a university professor for American studies in Britain and Scandinavia, he was able to deploy a nuanced understanding of the United States and its relations with other major World War I (WWI) allied nations in his analysis. The limitation of the origin was that Morton offered narrow insights into historical events, leading to the source being broad and philosophic in its attempts to delineate the figure of Wilson on the national or world stage. Morton portrayed a sense of Woodrow Wilson and Wilson's beliefs, conditioning, and influences, but lacks insight into actual historical events and the players that Wilson was involved with.

The purpose of this source was to give the reader background insight into Woodrow Wilson as a figure of importance on the world stage. It depicted Wilson in a complex but positive light. The value of the purpose was its insight into Wilson's mind and how the Spanish Influenza impacted not only the physical condition, but also the mental condition of Wilson. The limitation of the purpose was the overall positive tone towards Wilson, which could result in excluding many of Wilson's negative aspects.

## 2. INVESTIGATION

The H1N1 virus, otherwise known as the Spanish flu, led to a severe pandemic from 1918 to 1919. About a third of the world's population was infected with the virus, resulting in over 50 million deaths.<sup>[1]</sup> Many experts associate the flu, with symptoms like nausea, aches, diarrhea, respiratory symptoms, and bouts of pneumonia. Few associate it with mental symptoms. However, the Spanish flu was documented to have caused serious mental mitigations in patients such as depression, confusion, and mental exhaustion.<sup>[1,3]</sup> While the Spanish flu was taking hold, World War I was coming to an end. The Treaty of Versailles was a peace treaty which was supposed to settle the terms of the November 11, 1918, Armistice, formally ending WWI hostilities between the Central Powers and the Allied Powers. The terms of the treaty were negotiated at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference by the Big Four: Lloyd George of Britain, Vittorio Emanuele Orlando of Italy, Georges Clemenceau of France, and Woodrow Wilson of the United States. Wilson approached the Paris Peace Conference with the intention of implementing his Fourteen Points, which were a statement of principles, but was rejected by both Britain and France, leading to Wilson compromising with other nations on many of the terms in the treaty. When analyzing why the Fourteen Points were rejected and what terms were finalized in the Treaty of Versailles, a great number of causes have been considered. The impact of the Spanish flu on Woodrow Wilson may have affected his mental state and physical health when at the conference and, in turn, be a great factor in how the terms in the Treaty of Versailles were finalized.

The Spanish influenza greatly impacted Woodrow Wilson as he collapsed during the Paris Peace Conference on April 3rd, 1919, and had to drop out of negotiations. Woodrow Wilson arrived in Europe, claimed as the most popular political figure in the world and was regarded as a striking public leader and skilled negotiator at the onset

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of the Paris Conference.<sup>[1]</sup> In the early months of the conference Wilson passionately introduced his Fourteen Points in which he addressed causes of the world war and advocated for 14 other keeping-world-peace ideals. After his collapse, White House doctor Cary T. Grayson noted in a letter to a friend that the diagnosis arrived at a particularly untimely moment and Wilson was suddenly taken ill with the influenza at a time when the whole of civilization seemed to be in the balance.<sup>[4]</sup> Many close to him commented on Wilson's changed behavior and a loss of resiliency, including his secretary Gilbert Close, Herbert Hoover, and a Secret Service agent Colonel Starling.<sup>[1]</sup> The change in mental faculties and vigor post April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1919, has been documented by many.<sup>[1,5]</sup> The deterioration of Wilson's mental capabilities could have led to a decrease in his persistence of getting his Fourteen Points passed, leading to different terms in the treaty.

Even after falling ill, Wilson insisted on rejoining the negotiations but was too sick to go out.<sup>[1]</sup> Clemenceau and George joined him in his bedroom and negotiations proceeded. However, discussions did not go well, and Wilson threatened to leave the conference if Clemenceau did not agree to his demands.<sup>[1]</sup> He learned that France, England, and Italy were more interested in regaining what they had lost to Germany at Germany's expense. Several days later, Wilson abandoned everything he had laid out previously and conceded to Clemenceau's demands that Germany take full responsibility for the war and pay heavy reparations.<sup>[1,6]</sup> Initially, Wilson wanted a solution that incorporated his Fourteen Points into the treaty. His compromised mental state due to his illness was cited most often as the reason for this capitulation to French (and British) demands which he was previously vehemently against.<sup>[1,6]</sup> The Spanish flu had deteriorated Wilson's health and, consequently, reduced his ability to properly negotiate for the United States. After the terms were finalized, the United States continued to deny the ratification of the treaty which could have been a result of Wilson being unhappy with how the terms were finalized and because of those in the United States who felt the negotiations that were made did not address everyone in the Nation. If the Spanish flu had not reduced the capability of Wilson at the time, a well-developed treaty that the United States would past have been made.

Still, there were some controversies as of Wilson's illness and if it was really the Spanish flu. Some historians suggest that his illness was due to a generic virus or a minor stroke; others suggest that his symptoms and course of the disease for Wilson are more in line with the Spanish flu, and still others suggest other reasons--fatigue or previous health issues resurfacing. What was poignant here was that those who were close with Wilson were sick with the Spanish flu. Many Parisians at the time of the conference were sick with the disease.<sup>[1]</sup> In addition, several delegates and members of the US peace delegation got sick including Wilson's daughter, wife, his aide, the White House Usher, and the White House physician who were all ill with the influenza in March 1919.<sup>[1]</sup> Ironically, Wilson had never directly addressed the Spanish Influenza, despite the impact it had across the globe, and he continued to demonstrate his fitness, determination, and desire to get to a settlement incorporating his agenda. Furthermore, Wilson's illness was downplayed in official media channels at the time. Reporters were told his illness was due to overwork and Paris' weather.<sup>[7]</sup> On April 5, the Associated Press reported that Wilson did not have influenza and downplayed the illness that Wilson and the world was facing.<sup>[1]</sup> Wilson continued to undermine the dangers of the Spanish flu in his speeches at home and abroad, choosing to focus on his domestic and foreign policy agendas even though so many, particularly soldiers and military personnel, had become afflicted with and had died

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of the virus.<sup>[8]</sup> The significance of Wilson's departure is far-reaching. The impacts of the final terms of the Treaty of Versailles were felt all over the globe, specifically in colonized and marginalized regions in Asia, Eastern Europe, and Africa and the harsh measures against Germany which incited resentment for years to come and which, some argue, enabled the rise of Hitler and the Third Reich, instigating world war II (WWII).<sup>[6]</sup>

Overall, the 1918 to 1919 Spanish influenza pandemic did significantly impact the final terms of the Treaty of Versailles at the Paris Peace Conference as the illness not only prohibited Wilson from properly negotiating at the conference, but also influenced how other vital members in the conference continued without him. Wilson's deteriorating mental health and radical departure from his previous stance in his Fourteen Points and his ultimate decisions at the conference which changed the course of the treaty and had irrevocable impacts on Europe afterwards and restructuring of the world post WWI.

### 3. REFLECTION

This review has brought to our knowledge the impact the Spanish flu had on the Treaty of Versailles, and how Woodrow Wilson dealt with the Spanish flu. The various sources used in the investigation had contrasting opinions on whether Wilson even had the Spanish flu or not. Historians, such as John M. Barry and Arthur S. Link, contend that Wilson was heavily impacted by the flu and led to his subsequent collapse at the Paris Peace Conference, while other historians, such as David Steigerwald,<sup>[9]</sup> held that other lifelong illnesses instead of the Spanish flu had an effect on Wilson when determining the terms for the Treaty of Versailles. With a variety of conflicting information about the subject, this review had challenges with firm conclusions to draw. Evaluating why and how historians reached different conclusions led to the understanding that their backgrounds and expertise influenced the conclusions they made which helped this review become more effective at comparing and contrasting sources.<sup>[10,11]</sup>

This review has brought to our notice that all historians must compare and contrast sources when investigating a topic as they have to develop their own beliefs through the sources they evaluated. For example, Arthur S. Link may have been challenged with conflicting perspectives when comparing his sources, but he clearly relied heavily on Woodrow Wilson's physicians' notes. Dr. Grayson's notes, a primary source, to formulate his opinion. Historians are able to determine the value they hold for the sources they use.

This review was able to conclude that the influenza contributed to the outcome of the Treaty of Versailles as it was shown that Woodrow Wilson did not uphold his intended goals with the treaty.

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