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Lessons (un)Learned from the History of Pandemics

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LESSONS (UN)LEARNED FROM THE HISTORY OF PANDEMICS

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ABSTRACT

Since the beginning of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has dominated nearly every aspect of daily life. Particularly throughout the Global North, home to the most prosperous nations, the pandemic has produced a wave of anxiety. Given the average age of people living in the West, most have never experienced a great war or major upheaval like the pandemic. As a result, their perception of threat is at immeasurably high levels, and the West's pronounced anxiety and threat perception have infected other parts of the world thanks to mass media. Hence, all over the world, people perceive the pandemic with a high level of sensitivity. No doubt, the pandemic's life-threatening nature makes us all susceptible to COVID-19 and to pandemic diseases in general. This article hopes to shed light on the historical human experience of pandemics, which might help us understand better what is happening today and what we will encounter in the future. In this context, it presents the history of pandemics in the world and Turkey and helps us think through what lessons we have learned and those that have remained (un)learned.

REFERENCE: Yalçınkaya, Haldun, "Lessons (un)Learned from the History of Pandemics", *Global Academy Talks Series* (İstanbul: Global Academy and International Relations Council), No.1, November 2020, http://www.globacademy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/HYalcinkaya_theHistoryofPandemics_v.2.pdf

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Introduction[1]

In the last two months of 2019, the COVID-19 epidemic started in China, but quickly accelerated into a global pandemic. On 13 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a "pandemic", and we have been using this term frequently in our daily lives ever since.

I intend to make this article as reader-friendly as possible and should say at the outset that it is my curiosity, not necessarily my knowledge, which fuels my interest. We are, after all, currently living through the pandemic and do not fully understand its implications. I also realized that I was not alone in wanting to learn more. Thus, with a group of scholars from the International Relations Council of Turkey, we initiated this webinar program. The first outcome of this joint intellectual venture was an online panel entitled "The History of Pandemics and Lessons (un)Learned." This article draws on threads of our discussion during that panel.

I am not an expert in either pandemics or history, so I had two options for this study: I could pretend that I was an expert or admit that I am not and learn. I chose the latter and studied the history of pandemics.

At the beginning, I did not know where to start, so I started by asking questions about pandemics, such as "What has been the historical development of pandemics?" and "How did they end?" While I wondered about the answers to such questions, I consulted scholars working on the history of pandemics.

Prior to this research, I had read about epidemics as part of my own scholarly field of interest, war, and learned a great deal from Prof. Dr. Hikmet Ozdemir's book entitled "The Death from Epidemic Disease in 1914-1918" and another book about the Crimean War and the role of Florence Nightingale in creating a tradition of military medical science in Turkey.

In this context, I also consulted the work of historian Prof. Dr. Gültekin Yıldız, who introduced me to a recent study entitled "A Bibliography of Epidemic Disease History in Turkey."[2] Prof. Yıldız shared a draft bibliography with me, and my research evolved immediately. While reading these works, I discovered with great pleasure that there are plenty of studies on the history of pandemics.

If you ask me, "What are the conditions of being a great state?", as an academic working on war and security issues in the field of International Relations, I would respond that "Believe me, it's not about having more guns. It is about the quality and presence of human capital that will solve all sorts of crises when they arise." In my opinion, the accumulation of human capital in various areas is one of the primary determinates of a given state's greatness. Thus, it is incredibly pleasing to access a 100-page bibliography on the subject for the history of pandemics when we are in the midst of a novel one in 2020.

[1] I specially want to thank Prof. Dr. Gülten Dinç, Doç. Dr. Burcu Kurt, ve Prof. Dr. Adnan Ataç. Our online panel constituted the main inspiration for this article. To watch the panel please find the recording at Uluslararası İlişkiler Konseyi YouTube Channel, (URL https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pq0NebJ-m0o&list=PLoH4WgmfaykmsZJX7f61195OZfCWHWgbX)

[2] Just before I submit this article, above-mentioned bibliography study was published: Hamza Bilgü, Perihan Karademir, Ahmet Taşdemir, et.al. (yayına hazırlayanlar) Türkiye Salgın Hastalıklar Tarihi Bibliyografyası, Milli Savunma Üniversitesi Yayınları, İstanbul, 2020.

The academic literature on past pandemics is not the domain of historians and medical professionals alone. It may be surprising to find literature on pandemics written by economists, political scientists, sociologists, psychologists, engineers, and others. The most groundbreaking point of view on this issue is embodied in the phrase "medicine is a social science," expressed by Salomon Neumann and Rudolf Virchow. Investigating the typhoid epidemic in 1847, their statement encompasses the idea that epidemics can affect every aspect of life. It is worth mentioning that "health" is recognized as one of the most fundamental of human rights. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19, we are reminded of this fact almost every day.

Perhaps one of the most striking observations about the effects of pandemics on the historical process was how quarantining helped create political borders between countries, something that has been ignored in the Political Science literature. If students were to write on their exam papers that pandemics had helped empires to collapse, they may not receive a good grade, but considering the Plague's role in ending the Dark Middle Ages and feudalism in Europe, this is a seminal perspective. I want to recommend a book written by Murat Çulcu, entitled Speculative Marginal Theses in History. When you read it, you will understand that advances in dentistry or antibiotics, for example, can be as significant as a political leader or a war in advancing history. I reckon that the scope of what we learn in school about the past and of what we study today is perhaps vastly insufficient to meet the knowledge that we actually need.

One of the things that most struck me about the history of pandemics was the fact that COVID-19 is already the fifth-largest pandemic ever. Nearly 30 million people have lost their lives due to the ongoing HIV pandemic. In some countries, HIV has infected twenty-five percent of the population. I was terrified when I learned this, not because it could affect us, but because no one knows or cares. In my opinion, the lesson that must not be learned from history is the following: "Let the pandemic that does not touch me live for a thousand years!"

Understanding that the pandemic affects every moment of our lives, I set out to review the history of pandemics in Turkey and the world, emphasizing the relationship between war and epidemics. The views of experts on this subject, such as medical professionals and historians, have been full of insights, but let me preview my conclusion here at the very beginning: "every pandemic in history has ended, and no species was extinguished due to one." This was good news from a biological point of view. Now, let's look at the facts and lessons we can learn within the framework of the Social Sciences.

Pandemics in World History

As human beings transitioned from hunter gathering to agricultural-based societies, the number of people residing in settled communities naturally increased. To better survive the threats and pangs of nature, communities grew and organized and divided labor within them. Thus, the question of "how did people learn to manage nature through a better division of labor?" has become one of the preliminary inquiries of History and Anthropology. Throughout history, societies certainly increased in size, but also faced new side effects of this growth, the most significant of which was the

development of epidemic diseases. The bottom line is that as societies grew, so did the spread of disease.

Small settlements paved the way for greater civilizations, including the establishment of cities and city-states. Physical interactions among cultures also grew following the establishment of trade routes between these political entities. The increase in human interactions through trade, war, and pilgrimage thus facilitated the spread of pandemics.

Table: Major Pandemic Diseases in Human History.

Pandemic	Period	About the Disease	Numbers of Death
Antonine Plague	165-180	Likely smallpox or measles	5 million (one fourth of the population)
Japanese Smallpox	735-737	Variola Major Virus	1 million (one third of the population)
Justinianic Plague	541-542 (repeated until 750)	Yersinia Pestis Bacteria (Rats and phthirus)	30-50 million
Black Death	1347-1351	Yersinia Pestis Bacteria (Rats and phthirus)	200 million
World Smallpox	1520-1980	Variola Major Virus	56 million
Great London Plague	1665	Yersinia Pestis Bacteria (Rats and phthirus)	100 thousand
Italian Plague	1629-1631	Yersinia Pestis Bacteria (Rats and phthirus)	1 million
Cholera Pandemics (6 times)	1817-1923	Vibrio Kolera Bacteria	More than 1 million
Third Plague	1855-1960 (est.)	Yersinia Pestis Bacteria (Rats and phthirus)	12 million
Spanish Flu	1918-1919	H1N1 Virus (swine)	40-50 million
AIDS	1981 - cont.	HIV Virus (chimpanzees)	25-35 million

NOTE: Numbers of death are estimated numbers.

The oldest recorded pandemic reached Athens from North Africa during the Peloponnesian War, during which it is said that two-thirds of the population died. Although there are no records of the disease and precisely how it killed people, it is known that patients experienced symptoms of fever and bleeding in the mouth.

The Antonine Plague from 165-180 A.D. entered the Roman Empire because of war and killed twenty-five percent of the population, including the Roman Emperor Lucius Verus in 169. The disease was thus named after the emperor's family name, Antoninus. The pandemic is estimated to have killed around five million people globally.

The next pandemic was the Justinianic Plague, which claimed the lives of forty percent of the world's population. Constantinople was the epicenter of this pandemic, which arrived in the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire from Egypt from rats stowing away on grain ships. During the initial four-month outbreak, between 5,000 and 10,000 people died every day in the city. The pandemic continued to take lives until 750. Compared to the Black Death, the magnitude of this pandemic was colossal in sheer scale but also had major political and sociological consequences, accelerating the spread of Christianity, to name just one. Furthermore, Justinian's dream of unifying the Eastern and Western Roman Empires ended with the wholesale economic destruction wrought by the pandemic.

Perhaps the most famous pandemic in human history was the Black Death or Plague that broke out in the fourteenth century. Spread through trade and wars, the Plague originated in China and Central Asia and moved west with trade caravans. According to historical records, the Mongols spread the plague by throwing the disease-infected corpses with catapults during their siege of Crimea, a Genoese trade center, in 1347. This was known as history's first act of biological warfare. The pandemic caused 200 million deaths in the fourteenth century.

It was known as the Black Death because its wounds, caused by bleeding under the skin, turned black over time. The pandemic, moreover, did not fully disappear until the nineteenth century and was continually perceived as a curse that renewed itself. The Italian Plague Outbreak (1629-1631), the Great London Plague Outbreak (1665-1666), the Great Vienna Outbreak (1673), the Great Marseille Outbreak (1720-1722), and the Moscow Outbreak (1771) were all varieties of the Black Death.

The pandemic shaped world history in various ways. For one, medicine transformed into a positivist science and undermined religious medical practices. It was more tempting for people to blame each other than to think that mice had spread the disease. Thus, Jewish communities were massacred in some places because some Christians believed that Jews were poisoning the water with the

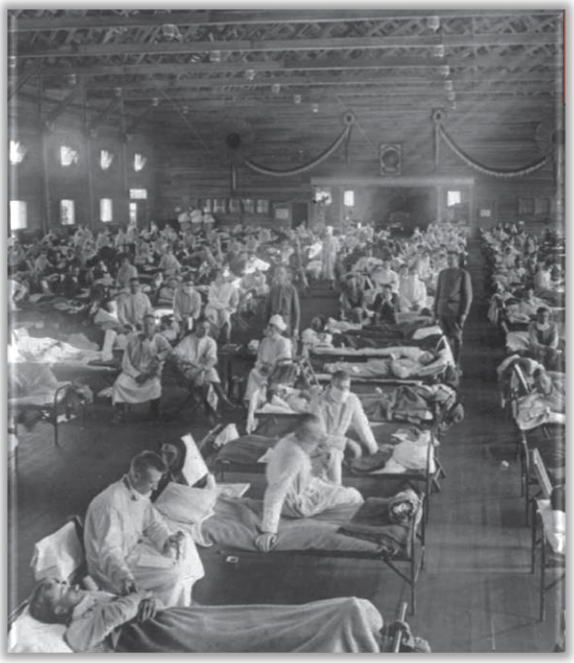
disease. The Black Death also caused Europe's population to decline by half and profoundly affected many aspects of life from the workforce to architecture and art. Some even argue that the Plague triggered the Age of Enlightenment.

Smallpox was the first disease that humans had been exposed to for a long time. The virus emerged in China, and was eventually eliminated. Approximately 56 million people died from smallpox before the vaccine was developed in 1796. In 1967, a worldwide campaign was launched to eradicate the disease, which had succeeded by 1980. Another disease that has been eradicated was the Rinderpest, in 2011. Meanwhile, the global fights against polio, Guinea worm disease (Dracunculiasis), tuberculosis (Yaws), and malaria continue, although it is expected that polio will soon be eradicated. In addition to the difficulty of eradicating such diseases, there are still active diseases despite the existence of vaccines to protect against them.

Cholera pandemics started in India in the nineteenth century and occurred six times prior to 1923. Since then, it has still been detected in some regions. Cholera is caused by the contamination of water and food resources with Vibrio Cholera bacteria. Cholera has often emerged after wars, periods of social unrest, pilgrimages, and similarly destabilizing social and political events. As a result of well-known scientists such as Robert Koch and Louis Pasteur, cholera treatment was developed in the nineteenth century. The disease has led governments to take measures to improve public hygiene.

Twelve million people lost their lives in China and India in 1855 due to the "Third Plague," the third largest plague pandemic after the Justinianic Plague and the Black Death. According to the World Health Organization, the Third Plague remained active until 1960, when 200 people were dying every year.

The Spanish Flu, caused by the H1N1 virus, is the most referenced pandemic of the twentieth century, having started at the end of the World War I. Despite its name, the virus did not originate in Spain. It is believed to have spread from the barracks of American soldiers on the Western front. At that time, Spain was not part of the war. In Spain, the press was free, and the Spanish government did not hide information regarding the number of people infected and killed by the pandemic. Thus, Spain became the primary resource for the rest of the world regarding the epidemic, and the world thanked the Spaniards (!) by naming the disease the Spanish Flu.



The Spanish Flu is estimated to have caused nearly 50 million deaths and was associated with the end of World War I. It had three waves: spring 1918, fall 1918, and winter 1919. The second wave was the deadliest. Did World War I cause the spread of the disease? Or did the

pandemic cause the end of the war? The debates over these questions have remained, but it is agreed by almost everyone that infections in battlefields caused more casualties than enemy weapons.

Lastly, AIDS has a special place in the history of pandemics. The HIV AIDS pandemic continues today and has cost more lives than COVID-19. HIV passed from chimpanzees to human beings and is transmitted between humans through the blood. The fight against AIDS has yet to be won in central and southern parts of Africa, but this pandemic demonstrates that fighting the disease and taking the necessary measures will lead to normalization.

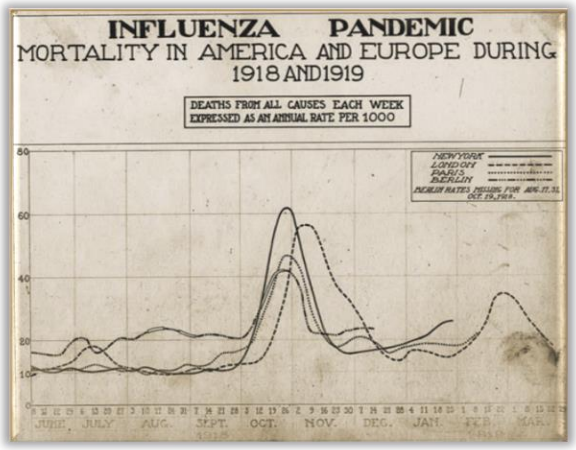
Pandemics in the History of Turkey

Throughout Anatolia's history, several waves of pandemic diseases such as plague, leprosy, smallpox, syphilis, and cholera were recorded. Until the eighteenth century, traditional, Eastern methods of treatments were used. After the eighteenth century, modern medical practices were introduced. By the nineteenth century, the developments in microbiology and immunology became influential in Turkey. Furthermore, quarantine practices began in the nineteenth century. By the twentieth century, doctors and medical scientists in Turkey followed and applied developments in Western medicine, such as the Typhus vaccine, antibiotics, and successful treatment methods to fight syphilis. During the Republican period, the introduction of public health programs made Turkish society more resistant to pandemics.

Social distance has always been one of the most effective methods to prevent pandemics, even long before the development of modern medicine. A saying attributed to Prophet Mohammed highlighted the importance of social distancing to avoid infection: "You must avoid lepers; keep at least a spear-long distance from the leper."

Waves of plague pandemics were experienced in the lands of the Ottoman Empire. For some reason, in Ottoman geography, the plague's fatality rate was relatively lower than in Europe. Despite the lower fatality rates, the plague pandemic slowed the population growth rate in the Ottoman Empire.

The measures taken against leprosy were mostly based on isolating lepers from society. In this context, isolated "leprosy houses" were established on the outskirts of the cities.



For many years, smallpox infections caused vast numbers of fatalities in the Ottoman Empire. As recorded by Lady Mary Montegue, wife of the British ambassador, a prototype of a smallpox vaccine was developed by Turkish doctors and spread to Europe at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The vaccine, however, originated in China. In 1796, Edward Jenner developed a modern smallpox vaccine. Three years after Jenner's book was published, Chief Physician Mustafa Behçet Efendi translated the text from Italian to Ottoman. This book

entitled "Risale-i Telkih-i Bakari" is considered proof of Turkish doctors' tenacity to fight against pandemics.

Syphilis was carried to Ottoman lands by soldiers in the nineteenth century, while cholera spread to Ottoman lands on its way from India to Europe. Pandemics were carried through the Anatolian geography through social and economic interactions, i.e. trade, pilgrimage, and war.

Essentially, the modernization of Turkey's fight against disease reflected the history of Turkey's Westernization. Having received the vaccine developed by Jenner in the eighteenth century, the Ottoman State took steps towards westernizing medicine in the nineteenth century, including using the quarantine method. Besides, Turkish physicians and doctors were trained in Western medical techniques. Thus, the advancement in European medical science played an essential social role in the fight against diseases and society's enlightenment. In this context, developments in microbiology and immunology were implemented in the Ottoman Empire.

In the twentieth century, the Balkan Wars spread cholera, and the First World War spread typhus to Anatolia. Interestingly, the Spanish Flu affected the country after World War I, when Istanbul was invaded during the post-war armistice period. The typhus pandemic hit the Erzurum province the worst, where the Ninth Corps was positioned, and wrecked particular devastation there due to war and cold weather. Successful physicians, such as Dr. Refik Saydam with the vaccine applications and hygiene measures to prevent lice, eradicated typhus.

The Republican period introduced Turkish people to preventative health measures. History textbooks may focus on the political and cultural developments of the time, but developments in the field of medicine and public health were equally important, as the early years of the Republic were exemplary in developing the public health care system through the activities of the Ministry of Health, led by Dr. Saydam. Until 1937, the ministry fought against malaria, syphilis, trachoma, and tuberculosis. Undoubtedly, the Institute of Hıfzısıhha was established and named after the legendary Dr. Saydam. Perhaps we had to experience the COVID-19 pandemic to realize the importance of the public health system established by the founders of the Republic. Public health policies also enabled the industrialization and modernization of the Republic. In fact, in the early 2000s, Swine Flu, Ebola or SARS outbreaks should have given us warning signals about the importance of preventative public health systems, but we chose to ignore these signs like many others.

Wars and Pandemics

With COVID-19, we have begun to investigate previous pandemics. The Spanish Flu has become a major discussion topic for understanding the relationship between wars and epidemics. Experts continue to ask: "Did Spanish Flu End the First World War?" The short answer to this question can be "No." For the long answer, we need to inquire about the relationship between war and epidemics.

The first use of viruses in war occurred in 1347. During the siege of Crimea, the Mongols threw the dead bodies of infected soldiers into the castle, which caused the spread of the Plague in Crimea. This was the first case of biological warfare. Another example of biological warfare was recorded during the colonization of the American continent following the New World's discovery. Indigenous

people were vulnerable to smallpox, as they had not previously encountered the virus. There was a direct relationship between the spread of smallpox among indigenous people and the colonizers' advance and ultimate domination. In wars, fighting parties are inclined to use all necessary means, including viruses and diseases, to win battles. From this perspective, the use of viruses or diseases in war is one of the moral problems of war.

War is a method for states to achieve their political goals by force. Ideally, the ultimate aim of wars should not be the destruction of the enemy. Unfortunately, as experienced in cases such as the Carthage War, when the Romans destroyed the city of Carthage, destruction and annihilation became inseparable from war.

There are three ways in which epidemics relate to war:

- The spread of epidemics among soldiers and armies in war.
- The spread of epidemics following soldiers and prisoners returning to their homes after war.
- Using epidemics as a weapon to prevail in war.

The third way was just explained above. An example of the second way is how the Spanish Flu spread to our country, especially in Istanbul, during its occupation by Allied forces from 1918-1920. Allied troops who were returning home to their countries from various fronts also brought the Spanish Flu to Ottoman lands. Ottoman troops' typhus infections during the First World War was another example.

The main enemy of Napoleon's army in Russia was cold, famine, and typhus. Most of the soldiers died because of heavy winter conditions, malnutrition, and the epidemic disease that spread among troops. Ottoman troops had a similar experience on the Eastern Front of World War I. Most Ottoman troops died because of typhus, cold, and malnutrition before the Sarıkamış Operation. During this period, Turkish physicians, especially Dr. Saydam, waged a great war against the typhus pandemic.

The fight against typhus in the Turkish army was particularly crucial for the history of pandemics in Turkey. Physicians developed vaccination methods, produced local vaccines, and applied them first to themselves and to the soldiers and the public. Besides the vaccines, they introduced the concept of personal hygiene as a preventive healthcare method. In this undertaking, physicians developed creative ways to combat disease. As the soldiers lived together and lacked logistical support, epidemics occurred regularly in barracks and military units.

Furthermore, in the nineteenth century, steam power in rail and sea transportation made it easier to mobilize armies. On the other hand, troop deployments helped transmit diseases from one point to another. Considering the budding war technologies of the twenty-first century, we rarely discuss situations like these that occurred in previous centuries. In this regard, long-range weapon systems, unmanned vehicles, and drones seem to have wholly transformed war. But there is still a risk of epidemics in regular armies, particularly in conflicts with non-state actors.

Today, HIV, which causes AIDS disease, has had a clear negative effect on African armies' fighting capacity. Studies show that in the early 2000s, the Sudanese army lost one-fourth of its combat capacity due to HIV. Today, the rate of HIV in central and southern African societies is still high, around 20 percent. High rates of HIV cases in a

community often negatively affect the capacity of their armed forces.

The above-mentioned stories of biological warfare illustrate that diseases have had dramatic effects on armies and wars. However, it is improbable to argue that epidemics shape the decision to wage (or end) a war, as they are highly political decisions by nature. In short, saying that the Spanish Flu ended the First World War would underestimate political aspirations and goals of leaders.

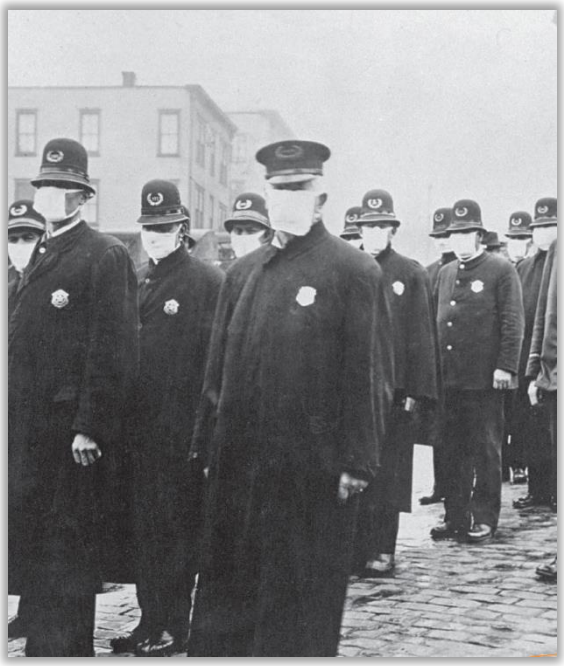
Lastly, it is striking that the terminology we use when we talk about pandemics is indeed the same as that used for war. Humanity's fight against epidemics is called "war"; healthcare institutions are called "fronts"; and doctors and other healthcare personal are identified as "warriors." We use the same terminology for both wars and pandemics because the only way we can defeat pandemics is a total war against them. However, this is not something that humanity should be proud of.

Lessons Learned & Unlearned

Both the Justinianic Plague and the Black Plague had colossal impacts on economic and political life. The Justinianic Plague triggered the spread of Christianity and weakened the Roman Empire. On the other hand, the Black Plague initiated processes that led to the Enlightenment and the end of feudalism.

As the people of the modern age, we have learned a lot from the history of pandemics. Primarily, we have learned that "quarantine practices", despite its high economic and social costs, prevent the spread of viruses. Undoubtedly, humanity has defeated most previous epidemics thanks to the measures developed by experts.

The second lesson we have learned is the importance of "social distancing," which was previously used to contain the spread of leprosy. For example, leprosy patients were provided with isolated-care homes and given food and drink while maintaining distance. Today, quarantining and social distancing are considered two of the most effective ways to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The historical experiences of pandemics show that close human interactions cause the spread of viruses from one place to another due to trade, pilgrimage, tourism, and war. Thus, minimizing human contact during pandemics has always helped us.



Another lesson we have learned from history is how using masks can significantly prevent infections. The use of masks, hand washing, and basic hygiene practices prevented further losses of life during the Spanish Flu. Since the mid-nineteenth century, hygiene has become the

core principle of medical practices. The use of protective masks and the application of hygiene principles certainly aid the fight against pandemics.

The Industrial Revolution improved people's social lives in the nineteenth century. Thanks to developments in science and technology, healthcare and public health gained importance and attention to public health and the introduction of basic hygiene principles in public places have become important lessons learned. The compulsory vaccination of students at school as well as ample ventilation and clean air are additional lessons learned. Combined, these lessons provide accumulated insights that human beings can harness to fight against diseases and epidemics.

Despite these positive learning experiences, many lessons remain unlearned. It is disturbing to know that among all epidemic diseases, only smallpox has been eradicated. Obviously, certain thresholds have been reached in the fight against polio, for example, but they are not enough. It is also striking that the HIV pandemic is still active in 2020. Thanks to advances in science and technology, HIV-AIDS is now treatable. Human beings have eradicated most epidemics, but, in the case of HIV, we have somehow learned to live with it.

It is too early to say how the COVID-19 pandemic will be recorded in the collective memory of humanity. As members of the information society, we may assume that some software could help solve the COVID-19 problem. Less than a year since COVID-19 started, we have special smartphone applications that warm about infection risks. This shows the potential of information technologies to support our fight against viruses.3

To sum up, in most past cases, finding a cure and producing vaccines were not enough to eradicate a virus. In this regard, human beings have the capacity to continue their lives despite viruses. However, it is important to note that most diseases have persisted due to global inequalities. To eliminate global inequalities in terms of equal access to healthcare services, national health ministries or organizations, hospitals, and communication and transportation agencies should work closely with the World Health Organization.

Large numbers of people living in the Global South still cannot provide for their basic needs and benefit from information technologies. Despite the horrors of pandemics, humanity has not learned yet how to work for the "global common benefit" and "collective good". I think the societies in the developed world deliberately think that they can set a cordon sanitaire around the rest of the world. Unfortunately, such selfish approaches do not work in pandemics; hence we have seen deepening global inequality. Moreover, the capitalist system that penetrated the health care sector simply reinforces this gap. The health care sector's profit motive only exacerbates people's feeling of anxiety, not of confidence or security, in regarding how humanity will handle future pandemics.

3 In Turkey "Hayat Eve Sığar (HES)" application was developed and started to use almost at the same time with other national infection detection applications. (accessed on October 10, 2020 URL https://hayatevesigar.saglik.gov.tr/)

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