

Iwona Janicka, *Sina śmierć z Azji: epidemie cholery w północno-zachodnich guberniach Cesarstwa Rosyjskiego w XIX wieku* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, 2021), pp. 847.

The 19-th century cholera in Europe caused a lot of worries and fear for the doctors of that time, as well as society at large. The very word “cholera” in the Polish language has even become a synonym for swearing. In Lithuanian mythology, cholera was quite often personified, depicted as a rich woman riding a chariot and sowing death. People personified diseases because in this way the deadly epidemic became a tangible enemy to be defeated. However, the causes of this disease were unknown to science for almost a century, making scientists and doctors wander in a maze of different hypotheses. In historical documents, the disease is recorded in the reports of doctors and sanitary officials.

This disease, perhaps more than any other, stimulated the search for new epidemiological methods and new strategies to fight it. Due to its long unknown etiology, the search for successful preventive methods for cholera also took time. The reports of scientists, doctors, epidemiologists, and civil officials of that time formed a considerable archive of historical material, in which an inexperienced researcher or non-professional can easily get lost. It is especially difficult in such a case to trace which part of the public discourse is influenced by the declarations of doctors and politicians of the time, who wanted to draw a better-coloured picture of the disease, and which part reflects the actual situation experienced by the public. In this case, it is also difficult to trace the chains of cause and effect.

Clear research directions established in Iwona Janicka’s work allow the author to find answers to the most important research questions, such as: what is cholera; how was its origin perceived during the researched period; what actually causes it; how was this disease fought in Europe and North-Eastern Russian governorates; which anti-cholera means were successful, which were not, and what were the reasons for that. The author presents the answers consistently in separate chapters. Each chapter begins with a research question, which is then explored, and at the end, summaries and intermediate conclusions are presented.

The first part of the book is devoted to an analysis of the general context and the comparison of global and local processes, as well as a definition of the challenges of researching that day’s medicine and society. In the first chapter, the author defines the main biological characteristics, symptoms, etiology, and treatment features of cholera as a disease. In the same chapter, perhaps

the most important question arises – what did the doctors of that time presume to be the origin of cholera as a disease? This is exactly what Iwona Janicka describes. Finally, the general trends of the European and World medical science of that time are presented. In this type of work, the general global context is especially important so that the reader can imagine the further aspects of local history and the further tasks of the work. However, the author also presents important conclusions about the influence of the disease on the global development of medicine, such as:

[...] The Proponents of the miasma theory encouraged universal sanitary reforms. Followers of the contagion theory became bacteriologists. [...] Both theories -- miasma and contagion – contributed to the creation of the synthesis. Until then, the focus was set on one possible way of spreading diseases, later it was realized that they can spread in any way, there can be more than one reason for pandemics. Instead of fighting the consequences, medicine and society finally turned to the causes. [...] Cholera was the first disease that prompted the organization of international conferences. It was also the first disease that led to the adoption of universal uniform hygiene norms. [...] A disease that affected all the society: the poor and the aristocracy.

After discussing the book's object and the subject's general context, the researcher moves on to analyse various factors influencing the spread of the disease. The author starts with an analysis of natural and cultural factors: climate, soil, hydrography, population hygiene, and nutrition. All the mentioned factors were important in revealing favourable or unfavourable conditions for the spread of the disease. For example, in the “motherland” of cholera, India, one of the most important factors favouring the spread of the disease was high population density, poor hygiene, a high probability of floods, and flat terrain. In the governorates of tsarist Russia studied by the author, the natural and cultural conditions were quite similar compared to the rest of Europe. The climate ranged from mid-latitude to rather cold. The level of hygienic culture was also quite similar to that of other European countries of that time. However, the disease statistics showed that the percentage of cases and cholera-related mortality rates were significantly higher in some cities compared with others.

The third chapter is devoted to the analysis of global cholera pandemics. The first pandemic in 1817–1823 embraced a fairly limited area. However, the subsequent pandemic of 1826–1837 came back with more momentum. The third (1841–1861) and the fourth (1863–1875) pandemics, at least in Europe, were not as severe, which perhaps testifies to the lessons learned. Finally in 1884, after discovering the causative agents of cholera and perfecting strategies to fight the disease in 1881–1896, cholera eventually left Europe. Accordingly, at least four out of five pandemics in 19th century Russia had a greater or lesser impact in the provinces.

After comparing the statistical data, Janicka critically evaluates the conclusions of some other researchers about the 19th-century middle and late cholera

pandemics in Lithuania and other provinces of Tsarist Russia. She finds that some illnesses may have been mistakenly attributed to cholera cases. Such professional observations once again confirm the completeness of the author's database and the consistency of the research methodology.

Part II of the book is devoted to the prevention of cholera pandemics and strategies to combat them, specifically in the provinces of Tsarist Russia. This later research reveals solutions to cholera-related problems as a response to the challenges mentioned in the previous section. The author begins with the general political situation of Tsarist Russia. The "Achilles" heel" of this backward country was a highly centralized and therefore slow and inert bureaucracy, including the health care institutions. Health matters were divided between several similar institutions, which made consistent actions difficult; functions were duplicated and some actions contradicted each other. Where urgent action was needed, the local government had to constantly ask the central government institutions for permission, in that way valuable time was wasted.

Finally, the constant delay in responding to new outbreaks of cholera and the financial responsibilities imposed on the local residents sometimes reached the point of absurdity. Realizing that the epidemic would simply pass by itself and that the visiting doctor would not do anything good with "empty hands," but would still need to be paid generously, the peasants simply avoided reporting the outbreak of the disease so that "instead of one trouble, they would not incur two at once."

Without knowing the true origin of the disease, as elsewhere in Europe, many creative but ineffective methods of fighting cholera were offered to the population in Russia. It was suggested that people avoid fatty, heavy, extremely saturated, not very fresh foods, along with other supposedly dangerous items. However, at the same time, it was recommended to smoke tobacco, clean the air with smoke, vaporize vinegar and apply other "air cleaning methods" known from the time of plague epidemics. Disinfection was a partially logical measure, but air disinfection could not be effective, since the disease was spread by water. Finally, alcoholic beverages were recommended as a medicine or preventive measure. Unfortunately, it was not uncommon for residents to forget moderation while "treating themselves" and in that way, it only weakened their immunity.

Trade restrictions during outbreaks could be called one of the more effective methods of cholera prevention. However, at first, not all trade was restricted, but rather an attempt was made to restrict the trade in belongings of those who had died of cholera. But these actions were not successful, because the seller did not know the origin of the items sold.

Today, it may appear to be a unique discovery of the Covid pandemic to avoid going to the store for shopping and receiving goods in a modern way – from a courier. However, historian Iwona Janicka could immediately argue this statement. A similar strategy was already used during the 19th century's cholera pandemics.

The sanitary commissioner visited the houses of townspeople or villagers and collected lists of necessary goods. Later, according to these lists, the goods were purposefully delivered to the residents.

Finally, the research reveals that some quite effective anti-cholera means were applied. Sanitary cordons or quarantine could have significantly reduced cholera spread and cholera-related mortality. Nevertheless, these, as well as other man-made efforts, were doomed to finish with failure because of the same human factors we still experience – irresistible greed for money in low and high-ranking officials, and general corruption or neglect, with which the state was full.

In summary, Janicka's monograph significantly expands our understanding of the great pandemics in general and enriches the relatively scanty historiography of Eastern European, Polish and Lithuanian medical history with an important study of one of the 19th-century's greatest medical problems – the cholera pandemics.

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