



## Remembering COVID-19

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## Remembering COVID-19

a few days ago, i signed a petition calling for the establishment of archives for oral histories of the COVID-19 pandemic. The hope was that, with the establishment of these archives, as well as the constructions of memorials and the establishment of various social practices, society might “never forget” the pandemic. Although I signed the petition, I am not very sanguine about the long-term prospect of this endeavor, as all the evidence suggests that we will forget.

Each generation may be haunted by wars, economic depressions, pandemics, and the other traumas it lives through. These onslaughts may even be remembered by the next generation, albeit with fewer details and less emotional intensity. But, as scholars of collective memory have underscored, by the second generation, the traumas are often forgotten. Until recently, few of my contemporaries knew about the Spanish influenza pandemic of 1918. In studies asking people to enumerate the important events of the twentieth century, for instance, the Spanish flu does not make the list. Yet this pandemic killed between 50 and 100 million people, more than the First and Second World Wars combined. The same vague memory can be found regarding polio, even though a whole generation avoided swimming in pools and lakes during the summer to elude the virus. And while younger gay men may know about the AIDS epidemic, the crisis that led to the conference on which the first edition of this volume is based (see Book II, beginning on page 299 of this issue), they do not fully appreciate the fear that overwhelmed their elders as friends died and an entire generation wondered whether sex would ever be safe again.

It is not that these forgotten events are inconsequential. The Spanish flu's preference for younger people decreased the life expectancy of an entire generation. The AIDS epidemic accelerated the push for gay rights. The 1906 earthquake led to substantial changes in the design of San Francisco. People may live with the consequences—both positive and negative—but that does not mean that they remember the cause.

Of course, not all is forgotten. Every society has collective memories. The bubonic plague still haunts us. But forgetting may be more common than one realizes in the midst of a crisis. It takes a huge societal effort to ensure that a memory persists across generations. The Holocaust is remembered in large part because of myriad commemorative practices, multiple memorials, numerous museums, and a plethora of movies, books, and works of art. One reason the AIDS epidemic may be quickly slipping from the collective memory of the gay community is that the great repository of memory—the family—does not play a significant role when it comes to the transmission of gay history.

It remains a mystery why memories of health crises seem so poorly preserved. One reason may be that health crises usually do not respect national boundaries, and it is often nations, not international organizations, that foster intergenerational remembering. Alternatively, suffering and death inflicted by an unseen virus may be deemed meaningless, whereas suffering and death in war may be seen as meaningful sacrifices for a larger cause.

This tendency to forget health crises is unfortunate. Society would have been better prepared for COVID-19 if it vividly remembered the Spanish flu. A better understanding of the intergenerational memories we have of these crises is needed.