The Spanish Flu of 1918 and the Ottoman Empire
by Önder Ergönül

The influenza pandemic 1918-19 was one of the most dramatic outbreaks in history. This period marked the end of the Ottoman Empire and the start of the emancipation war. Mustafa Kemal caught the disease just before his departure from Istanbul to ignite the National Independence War in Samsun in 1919. The painter Fikret Mualla lost his mother to the Spanish flu when he was a teenager and he felt responsible for his mother contracting the disease because he caught it from school. In one of his poems, Nazım Hikmet described Spanish flu as one of the elements adding to the atmosphere in Istanbul in 1914-18, among numerous threats to the nation such as typhus, the railway car trade, mobilization for war, and the German dominance in the country. The “Spanish disease” was first detected in Spain, then rapidly transmitted to France and then to Germany and caused the highest fatalities in Switzerland (Dr. Akil Muhtar, *Journal of the Medical School of Istanbul* no 7, 1918). The disease was first detected in July of 1918 in Istanbul. According to the records of the municipality of Istanbul, the number of deaths from influenza was 6,000 in 1918; however Dr. Hüsamettin Şerif estimated that more than 13,000 fatalities could be attributed to influenza in Istanbul in 1918. Balkan countries like Greece, Albania, and Bulgaria were all affected.

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