Crisis and Compliance: Historians' Changing Interpretations of Public Behaviour in Past Pandemics Versus the COVID-19 Era

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Submitted: 16/12/2025 Accepted : 28/12/2025

Abstract

Historians have long examined how communities respond to epidemic threats, yet interpretations of public behaviour have shifted considerably over time. Earlier scholarship on episodes such as the 1918 influenza pandemic, the Bombay plague of 1896, and mid-twentieth-century outbreaks often depicted populations as largely passive, resistant, or constrained by coercive state interventions. These narratives tended to emphasise either panic or non-compliance, presenting behaviour in broad and uniform terms. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, has prompted a significant reassessment of these assumptions. With the availability of extensive digital behavioural data, real-time policy documentation, and interdisciplinary analytical methods, researchers have been able to observe public action with unprecedented granularity. This review synthesises emerging historiographical trends that reinterpret past pandemics through the lens of insights gained during COVID-19. Scholars now highlight how compliance and resistance were frequently negotiated, shaped by trust in authorities, access to information, local social structures, and varying experiences of risk. The role of misinformation, state communication strategies, economic vulnerability, and community-led initiatives—central to COVID-19 analyses—has encouraged historians to recognise similar dynamics in earlier outbreaks. Consequently, public behaviour is increasingly understood not as a fixed or predictable reaction, but as a complex set of adaptive responses influenced by cultural expectations, political contexts, and shifting power relations. This review argues that the COVID-19 era has fundamentally reframed the historiography of epidemics, encouraging more nuanced and evidence-rich interpretations of how societies navigate the tensions between crisis, authority, and collective responsibility.

Keywords: Public behaviour; Pandemic historiography; Compliance and resistance; COVID-19; Epidemic governance; Information ecosystems; Trust and authority.

1. Introduction

Pandemics have long served as revealing windows into the social, political, and cultural dynamics of human communities. Historians have been particularly attentive to the behavioural dimensions of epidemics because

moments of crisis often expose underlying tensions between authority and autonomy, trust and doubt, and collective obligation and personal survival. In earlier historiography, interpretations of public behaviour during pandemics were largely shaped by the availability—and limitations—of surviving sources. Most studies drew heavily on administrative archives, public health records, and official inquiries, which portrayed populations through the lens of state observation rather than lived experience. As a result, interpretations frequently depicted communities as unruly, resistant, or alternately passive in the face of disease-control measures. Such portrayals could be seen in studies of the 1918 influenza pandemic, where behaviour was often framed in terms of panic, fatalism, or unquestioned compliance [1], and in accounts of the colonial plague in India, where resistance was emphasised as a reaction to coercive public health policies [2].

Before COVID-19, methodological constraints limited the granularity with which historians could reconstruct everyday behaviours. Archival traces rarely captured informal negotiations, subtle acts of cooperation, or the micro-dynamics of community adaptation. Oral histories, where available, offered richer texture but were unevenly distributed across regions and periods. Consequently, public behaviour was often interpreted through broad-stroke generalisations, producing narratives that foregrounded state interventions more prominently than public agency [3]. This emphasis created a historiographical landscape that tended to view epidemic behaviour as a dichotomy—compliance or resistance—rather than a spectrum shaped by context, trust, communication, and material conditions.

The COVID-19 pandemic altered this terrain dramatically. Unlike previous pandemics, COVID-19 generated an immense digital archive in real time: mobility data, social media posts, online news ecosystems, policy dashboards, and community-generated content. These sources provided unprecedented insight into behavioural patterns at both micro and macro scales. Scholars could observe how people interpreted risk, negotiated restrictions, responded to state messaging, formed virtual communities, and adapted daily routines under lockdown conditions [4]. The accessibility of large-scale behavioural datasets also facilitated interdisciplinary collaborations, allowing historians to draw on tools from digital humanities, computational social science, epidemiology, and data analytics. Such approaches helped reveal the multiplicity and fluidity of behavioural responses in ways that traditional archives rarely permitted [5].

This methodological expansion has prompted scholars to revisit earlier pandemics with fresh analytical frameworks. Insights from COVID-19—particularly around trust in government, the influence of misinformation, socioeconomic vulnerability, and the role of communication networks—have encouraged historians to reinterpret past public behaviours not as static reactions but as negotiated processes shaped by context and agency. For example, new readings of the 1918 influenza

suggest that compliance with masking and quarantine varied widely based on political culture, local governance styles, and the credibility of institutions—factors that had been underexplored in previous narratives [6]. Similarly, reconsiderations of colonial outbreaks now emphasise how communities blended compliance with subtle negotiation, rather than outright rebellion, challenging earlier dichotomous interpretations [7].

This review paper explores these historiographical shifts by addressing four key questions:

1. How did earlier scholarship interpret public behaviour in pandemics?

2. What methodological and analytical tools did COVID-19 introduce into historical research?

3. In what ways have these tools reshaped interpretations of past pandemics?

4. What future directions does this evolving historiographical field suggest?

By synthesising emerging scholarship across epidemiological history, digital humanities, and behavioural studies, this paper argues that COVID-19 has catalysed a historiographical reorientation. Public behaviour is no longer viewed as a monolithic response to state authority but as a dynamic interplay of trust, negotiation, information, and social conditions. The shift signifies more than an expansion of available data; it marks a transformation in how historians conceptualise human behaviour under crisis and how they interpret the workings of society when confronted with disease. This new lens promises a more nuanced, pluralistic, and socially grounded understanding of past pandemics, reshaping future research trajectories in the history of public health.

2. Methodology

This review employs a qualitative, comparative approach to examine how interpretations of public behaviour during pandemics have evolved, particularly in light of the analytical shifts introduced by COVID-19. The methodology integrates three strands of scholarship: (1) classic historiography of major epidemics such as the 1918 influenza, colonial plague in India, cholera, SARS, and HIV/AIDS; (2) interdisciplinary pandemic-behaviour research drawing from anthropology, sociology, and public health; and (3) recent COVID-19 scholarship incorporating digital behavioural data, risk-communication studies, and governance analyses.

The corpus of reviewed literature was selected on the basis of scholarly relevance, disciplinary diversity, and methodological depth. Foundational historical monographs and district-level microhistories were included to reflect earlier interpretive frameworks grounded in archival and administrative sources [9], [10]. These works were used to identify dominant historiographical patterns—particularly portrayals of compliance, resistance, and state–society relations during epidemics. To contrast these approaches, the review incorporates contemporary behavioural

analyses from public health and social science, which foreground factors such as trust, misinformation, mobility, and institutional credibility [11].

COVID-19 scholarship forms the third component of the dataset. This literature was chosen for its methodological innovations, including the use of digital trace data, social-media analytics, real-time mobility datasets, and computational modelling tools that offer granular insights into public behaviour [12], [13]. Digital humanities perspectives were also reviewed to understand how historians are adopting new tools and frameworks for interpreting behaviour in historical pandemics [14].

The analytical process involved thematic coding of the selected works to identify continuities and discontinuities across historiographical traditions. Particular attention was given to shifts in research methods, evidentiary bases, conceptual vocabulary, and interpretive logics. Rather than evaluating the epidemiological accuracy of past or present scholarship, the review focuses on how methodological expansion—especially the incorporation of digital behavioural evidence—has reshaped historical narratives.

By situating classic epidemic histories alongside modern interdisciplinary and digital-era analyses, this methodology allows for a structured comparison of interpretive evolution. It highlights how COVID-19 has functioned as both an evidentiary and conceptual turning point, prompting historians to reconsider earlier assumptions about public behaviour in times of crisis.

3. Classical Interpretations of Public Behaviour

3.1 The 1918 Influenza Pandemic

Early historiography of the 1918 influenza pandemic was shaped by the limited evidentiary base available to scholars. Administrative reports, mortality statistics, and newspaper accounts formed the bulk of the archive, producing interpretations that framed public behaviour in broad and often reductive categories. Communities were described as oscillating between fear, fatalism, and improvised coping strategies, with little attention paid to internal variation across class, gender, or locality. Scholars highlighted behaviours such as reliance on home remedies, compliance with mask mandates, and voluntary community care, yet these were interpreted as spontaneous reactions rather than socially negotiated choices [15]. The analytical focus rested heavily on institutional shortcomings, particularly failures of communication, medical preparedness, and urban governance. As a result, the public appeared more as a passive recipient of events than an active agent shaping the trajectory of the crisis [16].

3.2 Colonial Plague and Cholera Campaigns in India

In the context of colonial South Asia, interpretations of public behaviour during epidemics such as the Bombay plague of 1896–98 and recurrent cholera outbreaks were deeply influenced by the political dynamics of empire.

Historians long relied on official correspondence, medical reports, and sanitary inspection records—sources that foregrounded state perspectives. Consequently, public behaviour was often depicted through the lens of distrust, evasion, and direct resistance to coercive sanitary regimes [17]. Forced hospitalisation, intrusive inspections, and militarised quarantines produced widespread flight from cities, concealment of illness, and intermittent confrontations between residents and authorities. Compliance, when recorded, was commonly interpreted as a product of compulsion rather than consent. While these studies illuminated the authoritarian nature of colonial governance, they offered limited insight into the everyday negotiations, adaptive strategies, and internal diversity of responses among ordinary people [18].

3.3 Other 20th-Century Epidemics

Historiography on later epidemics—SARS (2003), H1N1 (2009), and HIV/AIDS—introduced more sociocultural dimensions but was still constrained by restricted behavioural data. Scholars examined fear, stigma, moral judgement, and media influence as central determinants of public response [19]. However, public behaviour was frequently treated as a collective or national phenomenon, reducing the complexity of individual and community-level decisions. With limited access to real-time behavioural evidence, researchers relied on surveys, policy reports, and media archives, which captured perceptions but not necessarily lived practices. These interpretations, while richer in sociological framing, generally lacked the granularity that would later become possible through digital-era methodologies [20].

4. The COVID-19 Turning Point

The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally reshaped the historiography of public behaviour during health crises, introducing new evidentiary resources and analytical frameworks that significantly expand earlier interpretive possibilities.

4.1 Availability of Rich Behavioural Data

Unlike previous epidemics, COVID-19 generated an extensive digital archive that documented behavioural change at multiple scales. Mobility datasets from smartphones, large-scale behavioural surveys, social media records, and policy trackers offered granular and temporally precise insights into masking patterns, distancing practices, voluntary isolation, and civic mobilisation [21]. This volume of data allowed researchers to measure behavioural fluctuations in relation to risk perception, institutional messaging, and local socioeconomic conditions. Such evidentiary depth stands in stark contrast to the sparse administrative sources that shaped earlier pandemic histories, enabling historians to reconstruct behaviour with far greater nuance.

4.2 Interdisciplinary Analytical Approaches

COVID-19 also accelerated methodological convergence across disciplines. Historians increasingly incorporated behavioural science, anthropology, political theory, and digital ethnography into their interpretive toolkits. These interdisciplinary engagements facilitated

conceptual expansions from binary categories such as “compliance” or “resistance” toward frameworks emphasising risk negotiation, biopolitics, moral economies, and reciprocal relationships between citizens and the state [22]. Collaborative approaches with data scientists further opened new avenues for analysing large-scale digital traces and policy responses [23].

4.3 Reconsideration of Public Trust and Legitimacy

The pandemic foregrounded the centrality of trust—trust in governments, scientific institutions, and communication systems. The proliferation of misinformation, fragmented media ecosystems, and uneven risk communication compelled historians to re-examine earlier pandemics with heightened sensitivity to the informational and psychological dimensions of crisis behaviour [24]. Scholars now recognise that public responses are deeply entangled with credibility, legitimacy, and collective memory, prompting reinterpretations of past epidemics through these lenses [25].

5. Comparative Historiographical Shifts

Recent scholarship has revealed that the interpretation of public behaviour during pandemics has undergone significant transformation, particularly in the wake of COVID-19. Traditionally, historical accounts emphasised resistance as the dominant behavioural frame—examples included evasion of sanitary inspections, hostility toward colonial medical officers, or routine violations of quarantine rules. Contemporary research, however, positions such actions within a landscape of negotiated compliance. Scholars argue that individuals balanced health directives with economic precarity, familial obligations, and moral expectations of the state, signalling a shift from binary categorisations toward models of relational behaviour [26], [27].

A second major shift concerns the centrality of information ecosystems. The COVID-19 crisis demonstrated how digital media, algorithmic curation, and fragmented communication environments shape public understanding of risk. This awareness has led historians to reinterpret the role of rumours, vernacular newspapers, and religious communication networks in earlier epidemics as legitimate information infrastructures rather than signs of irrationality [28]. Consequently, behavioural responses once dismissed as superstition or defiance are now studied as adaptive strategies within historically situated knowledge systems.

Third, pandemic historiography now foregrounds the intersection of fear, stigma, and social identity. Insights from COVID-19 research on caste- and class-bound vulnerabilities, gendered caregiving burdens, and occupational exposure have encouraged historians to revisit colonial epidemics with a sharper analytical lens [29]. Fear is no longer treated solely as a destabilising force but also as a catalyst for cooperative behaviour, local self-management, and community resilience.

State–citizen relations have also been reframed. Lockdowns, welfare schemes, and surveillance infrastructures during COVID-19 inspired renewed study of colonial governance through concepts such as administrative trust, state legitimacy, and humanitarian authority. This has complicated earlier portrayals of colonial interventions as merely coercive, highlighting moments of negotiated authority and pragmatic collaboration [30].

Finally, scholars now explicitly grapple with the contrast between archival scarcity in historical pandemics and data saturation in the COVID-19 era. While earlier crises require careful interpretation of fragmentary records, present-day data abundance demands critical reflection on algorithmic biases and the representativeness of digital traces. This methodological awareness has introduced greater humility and reflexivity into pandemic historiography, fostering interpretations that acknowledge the uneven visibility of behavioural evidence across time.

6. Emerging Themes in Recent Historiography

Recent historiographical work on pandemics reflects a widening analytical horizon, emphasising behavioural complexity and diverse narrative frameworks. A key theme is the understanding of behaviour not as a linear or uniform response, but as a spectrum shaped by intersecting social, cultural, economic, and political forces. Scholars increasingly highlight how individuals and communities acted within the constraints of livelihood, social identity, and governance structures, challenging simplistic binaries of compliance or resistance [31].

Another significant shift is the growing value placed on micro-histories and localised narratives. District-level accounts, oral testimonies, and community archives provide textured insights that national or global histories often overlook. These granular perspectives reveal how local power relations, caste hierarchies, and informal economies influenced epidemic experiences, thereby expanding the methodological toolkit of pandemic historiography [32].

Community-led responses have also emerged as central to contemporary scholarship. Informal care networks—ranging from neighbourhood support circles to religious institutions—demonstrated resilience and organisational capacity, particularly during COVID-19. Historians now revisit earlier epidemics to identify similar patterns of grassroots mobilisation, which were previously marginalised in official records [33].

Furthermore, an increased focus on Global South perspectives has rebalanced pandemic narratives that were long shaped by Euro-American experiences. Studies from South Asia, Africa, and Latin America foreground colonial power imbalances, indigenous knowledge systems, and region-specific survival strategies, offering a corrective to earlier Eurocentric frameworks [34].

Finally, recent historiography recognises the dynamic interplay between information ecosystems, public trust, and state authority.

Analyses now integrate digital misinformation, mediated communication, and perceptions of legitimacy into interpretations of behavioural shifts, reinforcing the idea that epidemics are simultaneously biomedical and socio-political events [35].

7. Research Gaps and Future Directions

Despite the expanding sophistication of pandemic historiography, several research gaps persist that warrant systematic scholarly attention. One of the most significant absences is the lack of district-level and municipal-level microhistories for earlier pandemics. While national narratives offer broad patterns, they often obscure the heterogeneity of local experiences shaped by caste, class, gender, environment, and administrative capacity. Recent works suggest that fine-grained local histories can reveal behavioural nuances, yet such studies remain limited in scope and geographic distribution [36].

A second gap concerns the reconstruction of behavioural patterns in epidemics where archival materials are sparse. Many pre-modern and colonial-era outbreaks left minimal bureaucratic records, requiring historians to rely on alternative sources such as oral narratives, folk traditions, religious texts, household documents, and visual culture. Methodological innovation in this domain is still emerging, and more interdisciplinary work is needed to systematise these approaches while maintaining historical rigour [37].

Comparative regional studies also remain underdeveloped. Differences in behaviour between urban and rural communities, dominant and marginalised social groups, or regions with distinct governance structures have not been sufficiently explored. COVID-19 research shows the value of comparative frameworks, yet similar analyses for earlier pandemics are still rare [38].

Another important direction is deeper integration of digital-trace data—mobility logs, search queries, and social-media trends—with ethnographic and qualitative methods. Such hybrid approaches can illuminate the motivations, pressures, and emotional worlds underlying behavioural patterns [39].

Finally, scholars must critically engage with digital surveillance and data ethics. The abundance of behavioural data from COVID-19 raises questions about privacy, algorithmic bias, and interpretive responsibility. Understanding how these issues shape historical analysis will be essential for developing ethically grounded historiographical practices [40].

8. Conclusion

The evolution of pandemic historiography in the wake of COVID-19 has opened new pathways for understanding how societies navigate crisis. Earlier interpretations, often shaped by limited archives and state-centric perspectives, tended to frame behaviour in narrow terms—either reactive, resistant, or compliant. The unprecedented volume of digital evidence generated during COVID-19, combined with insights from anthropology,

behavioural science, and data studies, has encouraged historians to move beyond these simplified narratives.

Public behaviour is now increasingly seen as a product of negotiation, shaped by the interplay of social identity, economic realities, cultural expectations, and perceptions of state authority. The significance of information flows—whether through digital platforms, community networks, or historical channels of communication—has become central to these interpretations. This shift not only reshapes how past epidemics are understood but also reframes the role of communities as active agents rather than passive subjects of public health policy.

As historians integrate new tools and perspectives, the field continues to gain analytical depth and methodological diversity. The study of public behaviour has emerged as a vibrant area of inquiry, capable of illuminating how trust, legitimacy, and everyday decision-making evolve under the pressure of crisis. This renewed historiographical landscape promises richer, more human-centred interpretations of pandemics across time.

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