

The Spanish Flu along the Swedish-Norwegian Border

Anders Gustavsson

Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway

Email: anders.gustavsson@ikos.uio.no

How to cite this paper: Gustavsson, A. (2025). The Spanish Flu along the Swedish-Norwegian Border. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 13, 474-485.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2025.134028>

Received: March 28, 2025

Accepted: April 26, 2025

Published: April 29, 2025

Copyright © 2025 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

I have studied the importance of border passages along the Norwegian-Swedish border. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this border was mostly closed for passage for almost two years. In the present study, I investigate how the circumstances were during the Spanish flu at the end of the first world war. What kind of border restrictions occurred? Or did such restrictions not exist and if so why? That no governmental prohibitions against crossing the nation border were imposed during the Spanish flu, can be interpreted in the light of different factors. First, the passage of individuals across this border was very limited compared with the 2020s. No commuting for work from Sweden to Norway existed in the 1910s as in the 2020s. Nor were trading from Sweden across the border to Norway present in the 1910s as was the situation in the 2000s. Tourism from Norway to Strömstad hardly existed before the 1930s. There was no bridge across Idefjorden keeping Sweden and Norway apart, just a small ferry at Svinesund. Thus, passages by people were very few. On both sides of the nation border, the spreading of the Spanish flu happened within the own country and not across the border. The Norwegian and Swedish government authorities did not have to be particularly worried about the import of infection from the neighboring country.

Keywords

Spanish Flu, Nation Border, Border Restrictions, Contagious Disease

1. Introduction

In previous investigations of phenomena along the Norwegian-Swedish border, the importance of border passages from a historical perspective has been studied (Gustavsson, 2024). During the Covid-19 pandemic, this border was mostly closed for passage by individuals for almost two years. This caused troublesome conse-

quences both for Norwegians and Swedes during the pandemic (Gustavsson, 2022).

This work investigates corresponding circumstances during an earlier pandemic, the Spanish flu, at the end of the first world war. What kind of border restrictions did they have then? Or did such restrictions not exist and if so why? A historical comparison could turn out to be fruitful.

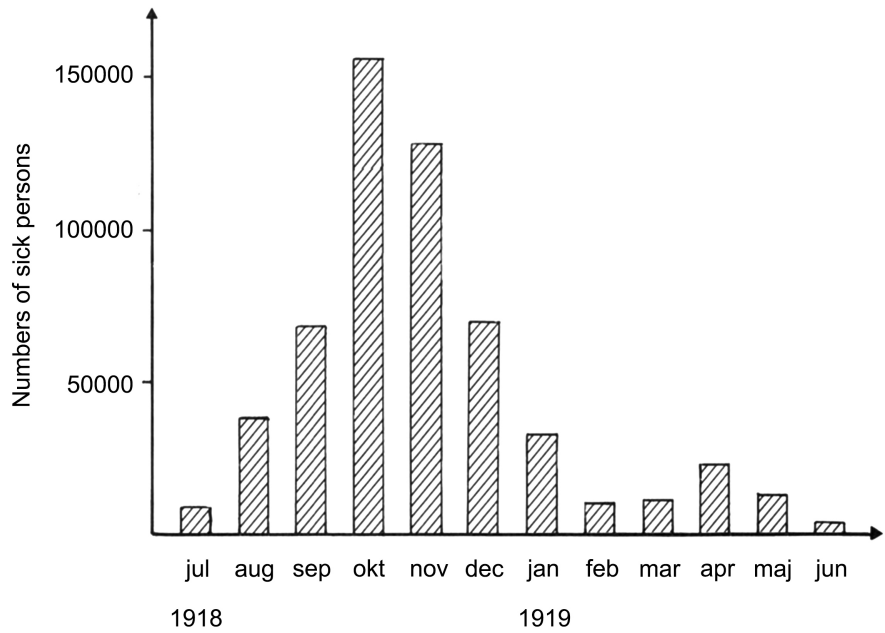
2. Historical Background

This disease is said to have been brought from America to Europe via American soldiers that participated in the final phase of the first world war in the spring of 1918. The disease then hit the European armies in a devastating way. That the disease got its name after Spain was because that country was neutral during the first world war. There was a free press being able to write about the raging of the disease while the world war was still ongoing. This was something that was not possible in the European countries involved in the war.

The Spanish flu was a flu virus causing a high mortality rate. The symptoms were high fever, head- and muscle aches, chills, terrible tiredness and dark spots on the cheeks causing the patients rapidly get dark faced (Ludvigsson, 2018). One complication was often pneumonia.

In Sweden around 40,000 individuals died from this disease. One of them was the youngest son of king Gustav V, named Erik (Åman, 1990: p. 32). In Norway the number of deaths were around 15,000 (Mamelund, 1998). There was no effective treatment available for the disease, and this was pointed out by the National Swedish Board of Health. Popular protective measures were camphor drops that could be purchased at the pharmacists, juniper berry drinks, tar, garlic, smoking with juniper plants and alcohol. These were proven remedies that had been used earlier against contagious diseases. Some medical doctors, both in Norway and Sweden, were prescribing the use of alcohol, while other medical doctors were critical. This was reported on in several newspapers. The city doctor Sven Wolde in Uddevalla recommended cognac and hot milk and a dose of quinine, since these were old proven remedies (Hansson et al., 1978). Also other doctors recommended cognac. A Norwegian doctor, on the other hand, stated in November 1918 that he had treated 297 cases without prescribing one drop of alcohol. Of these patients only three had died (Rogaland 23/11 1918). Also in other newspaper articles Norwegian doctors deprecated the use of alcohol against the Spanish flu. Doing so was a sign of superstition and ignorance (Indre Smaalenenes Avis 3 March 1919).

The Spanish flu struck in three strong waves both in Norway and Sweden. The first wave was in July 1918 and was the mildest and most short-lived. The next one was in the fall of 1918 coming to its peaking in October with over 150,000 cases in Sweden. November followed as clearly shown in **Figure 1**. The third wave hit at the end of 1918 and lasted until March 1919. This one was not as serious as the wave in the fall but reminded more of the first one in July 1918 (Åman, 1990: p. 59; Borza 2001; Västerbro, 2018) (**Figure 2**).



Källa: SOS. Allmän hälso-och sjukvård år 1918 resp. 1919 (tab.8)

Figure 1. Numbers of flu sickness in Sweden from July 1918 until June 1919 according to reports from the National Swedish Board of Health. From Åman 1990.

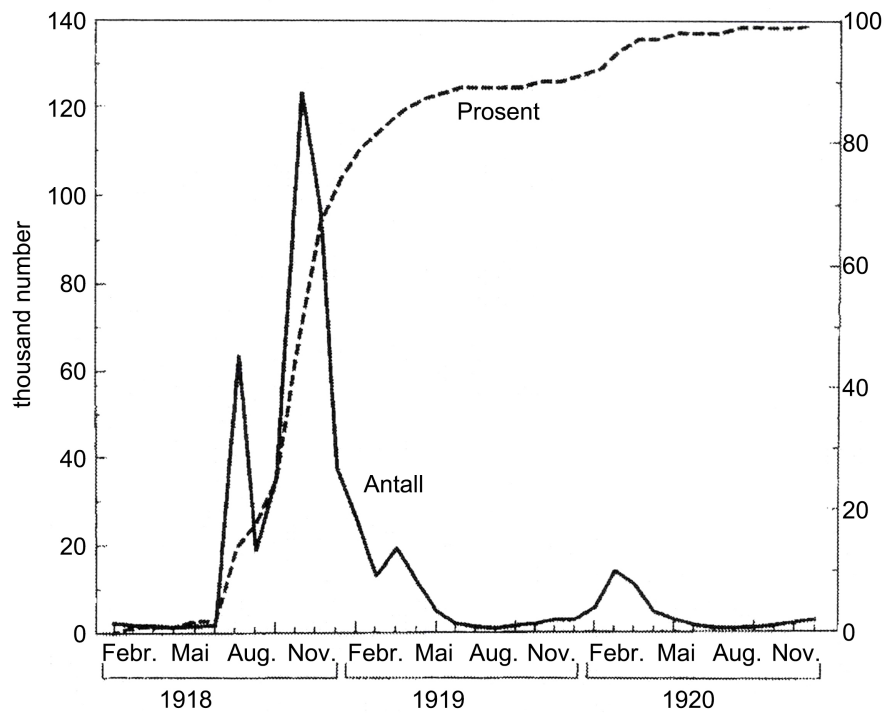


Figure 2. Number of reported flu cases in Norway from February 1918 to November 1920.

Both in Norway and Sweden the municipalities were the ones that made the decisions about the closing down of schools, restaurants, cinemas etc. (Åman, 1990: 159ff; Västerbro, 2018). Therefore, there was no nationwide decision as was

the case with the covid19 pandemic. On the other hand, the Swedish government drafted 117,000 conscripts for a comprehensive exercise in September 1918. More than a third, or around 45,000, of those got sick and 820 died (Åman, 1990: p. 109). The disease took a severe course at Swedish regiments and was able to spread from there further out in the country (Åman, 1990: p. 85).

3. Impact on Local Communities

The spread of the disease and the consequences thereof in the Norwegian-Swedish border areas at Svinesund can be followed in the newspapers almost day by day when the contagion hit. Information in Norwegian newspapers, and on the Swedish side of the border, in Strömstads Tidning are my primary source material (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Map of the southern parts of the Norwegian-Swedish nation border. Designed by Torill Sand, Oslo 1999.

A graph (Figure 4) presented by Lars Joelsson 2020 shows the number of deaths from the Spanish flu in the Swedish border municipalities Strömstad and Tanum from October 1918 to March 1919, i.e. during the second and third wave (Joelsson, 2020). There were no mortalities during the first wave, but during the two following waves 146 individuals died in the Strömstad municipality and 66 in the Tanum municipality.

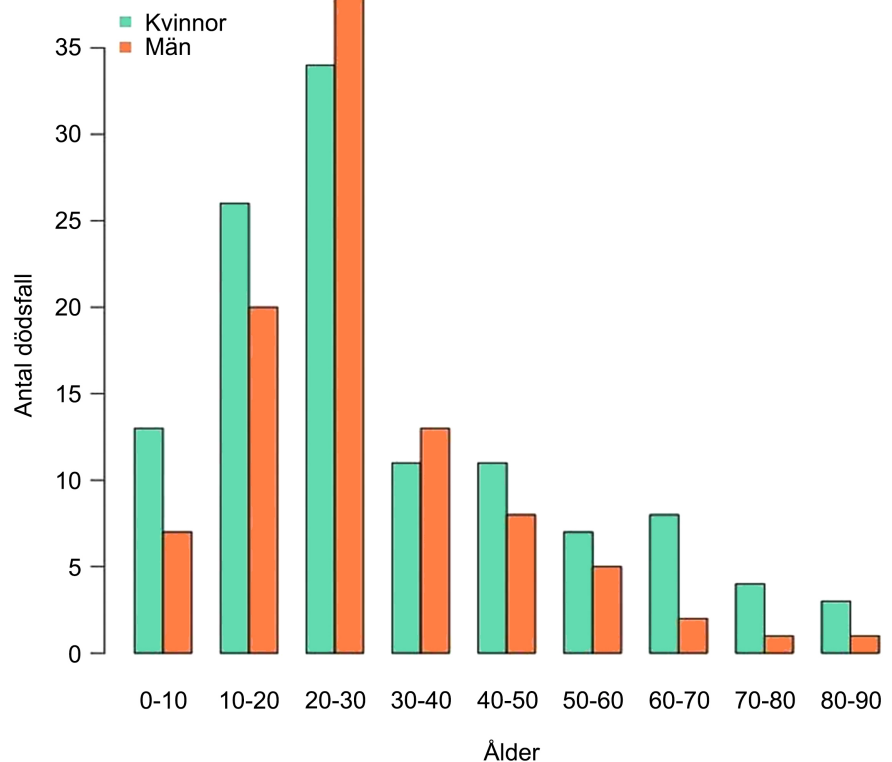


Figure 4. Number of deaths from the Spanish flu in the Strömstad and Tanum municipalities from October 1918 to March 1919. The left green bar indicates women and the right orange bar men. The vertical column indicates number of deaths. The horizontal level indicates age. From Joelsson 2020.

The graph shows that the mortality in the two municipalities was clearly highest among those in their 20 - 30's that had fallen ill, and then those in their 10 - 20's followed. The lowest number of deaths was found among those 80 - 90 years of age (Joelsson, 2020). This ties in well with the age distribution in Sweden and Norway nationwide. The average age of those dead from the Spanish flu in Sweden was 28 years (Åman, 1990; Mamelund, 1998; Ludvigsson, 2018; Västerbro, 2018). Middle aged and elderly individuals may have become immune from being infected earlier, in particular during the severe flu epidemic in 1890. At that time roughly 60% of the Swedish population was infected (Åman, 1990; Ludvigsson, 2018). That the Spanish flu affected primarily young individuals the hardest differs clearly from that with the COVID-19 pandemic that primarily affected the elderly.

4. The Waves of the Pandemic in the Border Region

The different waves in this particular border area will now be followed. The very first newspaper article reporting on the Spanish flu in Sweden is from July 5th 1918 (Åman, 1990). In Norway, the newspaper Nordlands Avis reported already on July 3rd that 15 - 20,000 individuals were infected. The first wave hit primarily Oslo hard. The newspaper Aftenposten stated on July 3rd that the infection had reached the town Drammen two Norwegian miles from Oslo, but that it had not yet become an epidemic there. On July 7th, the newspaper Varden reported that half of all workers at the Skien machine shop in Vestfold were hit by the disease. According to Aftenposten on July 9th, the disease had also spread to Østfold where the northern municipalities Askim and Eidsberg were worst hit. The newspaper Dagbladet informed on July 13th that the pharmacies in Oslo were crowded with people wanting to purchase camphor drops, camphor mixtures and acetylsalicylic acid for protection against the Spanish flu. Post offices were to close down the next day. The printing staff at the Dagbladet were also affected. Therefore, the newspaper edition appeared in a shorter version that day. On July 31st, the newspaper Akershus stated that the Spanish flu was hitting hard in the Lilleström area in the vicinity of Oslo. Shops had been forced to close down. There were also many individuals at the farmhouses being sick interfering with the harvesting of hay.

The first time the Spanish flu was mentioned in the Strömstads Tidning was on July 9th 1918 when it was reported that the infection had spread to Helsingfors in Finland but also to the Swedish town Arvika. On July 13th five cases were reported in Strömstad. On July 18th, some ten or so young visiting bathers were reported sick with flu-like symptoms. To prevent further infection to spread, a party for children was cancelled as well as an evening event for visiting bathers from places outside staying in Strömstad as a separate group of individuals. The locals were not yet affected. On July 20th 30,000 people were reported being sick in Oslo leading to the death of 24 individuals. There was, however, no mention of the infection being close to the Swedish border on the Norwegian side. On July 23rd, the spread of the flu was already in remission in Strömstad. The Strömstads Tidning articulated a wish that the disease should no longer have a disrupting effect on the entertainment activities for the visiting bathers. On August 1st, it was communicated that the disease was still spreading in Stockholm. On August 15th, there were no longer any cases in Strömstad. Since no new cases had occurred in a long time, the newspaper counted on the schools being able to start the fall semester in due time.

The second wave was first mentioned in Strömstads Tidning on September 26th, as the infection had started to spread out from Uddevalla due to the fact that the Bohuslän regiment sent all their soldiers home when the nationwide Swedish rehearsal exercise was discontinued in the end of September. This contributed to the spread of the infection. 7 or 8 of those that were sent back home fell ill when coming back to the Strömstad area. Strömstads Tidning expressed concerns that this could lead to a circulation that may result in an epidemic in the area. The

newspaper Bohuslänningen stated that the Bohuslän regiment became an epidemic hot-spot (Hansson et al., 1978). Strömstads Tidning was wondering why the Swedish Department of Defense did not cancel this rehearsal exercise from the outset. “Then many lives could have been saved”. On September 28th, we learned that the disease had expanded to a disquieting level. It was still in low numbers in Strömstad and in the hospital there were now four cases.

Norwegian newspapers also reported on the gradual development of the second wave. The nation-wide newspaper Morgenbladet stated on October 5th, that the disease was raging everywhere.

On October 10th, the first case of death in the Strömstad area was reported, as a 25-year-old man died. At that point there were no entertainment activities in the city, as all public events were prohibited. On October 15th we learn that teaching in schools was cancelled for two weeks up until October 28th.

On October 17th, an epidemic was reported in the Bohuslän stonecutters communities with focus on the coastal communities in mid-Bohuslän. By contrast, there were no sick cases in the border regions to Norway. This was referring to the parishes Näsinge, Lommeland and Hogdal where many stonemasonries were located, but to where the infection had not spread from the south.

On July 19th, Morgenposten stated that the Norwegian National Public Health Authority (Sundhedskommissionen) called for vigilance primarily in Oslo but did not recommend any further comprehensive close downs of important governmental functions. The newspaper Øvre Smaalenene, covering northern parts of Østfold, mentioned one death in Larvik on October 21st and one in Spydeberg but no larger outbreak¹.

The newspaper Glommendalens Sosialdemokrat stated on November 5th that 800 individuals were sick in Glommadalen and 20 individuals had died. This happened far from the Norwegian-Swedish border.

On November 14th Strömstads Tidning stated that the population of fishermen in Bohuslän had been infected on the Danish islands Anholt och Læsø and then brought the disease back home to Sweden. On November 26th it was reported that the Danish town Skagen was hard hit by the Spanish flu causing 28 deaths. The Bohuslän regiment in Uddevalla had 60 cases of illness and a death toll of 25. This had caused the city’s all schools to close down for three weeks.

The Norwegian newspaper Morgenbladet reported on November 19th that the Spanish flu was in remission in the cities but was spreading in the countryside in Norway.

On December 14th, Strömstads Tidning reported that it looked like the Spanish flu was in remission in the area. This statement was supported by the city doctor’s report. There were 41 cases from 1 - 16 of October, 13 cases from October 16th to 31st, 6 cases from the 1 - 16 of November, and 6 cases from November 16th to December 1st and only 1 case in Strömstad from 1 - 15 of December.

In the beginning of January the third wave started and the disease flared up in

¹Smaalenene was an older name for Østfold.

the Strömstad area, particularly in the countryside parish Skee and on the islands outside Strömstad, according to reports in the *Norrvikens Tidningar* that was published in 1919. Whole families were sick. Many deaths had occurred. Some cases were in Strömstad and i.a. three of the police officers were sick. As a total during the month of January, there were 9 sick cases in Strömstad, in the Strömstad rural area there were 150 cases, and in Tanum 37 cases. On January 3rd, it was reported that the disease had reached the border parish Lommelund, but only mild variants were experienced there.

The spread of the infection increased on the Norwegian side. The newspaper *Fredrikshalds Avis* reported on January 5th that a severe disease with death cases was ongoing in Askim, the northernmost part of Østfold. In many homes almost everyone was sick. *Fredrikshalds Avis* stated on January 9th that the medical doctor Tandberg had reported some cases in Fredrikshald but no deaths so far. On the other hand the disease was more widespread in Notodden in the Oslo area where also several deaths had happened. The foreign minister Ihlen was also sick at this time. On January 9th some cases, but no deaths, had been ascertained in Fredrikshald, an older name for Halden. This is close to the Swedish border, The disease was ravaging more around Oslo and on the Norwegian southern coast.

Indre Smaalenenes Avis reported on January 15th that the Spanish flu had resurfaced again, being as about as severe as earlier in the fall, in inner Østfold following the Christmas Celebrations: “In the southern districts around Fredrikstad and further down towards the border the disease is raging violently and causes many deaths. Thus, the disease was really close to the Strömstad area without any restrictions regarding border passages being mentioned or called for.

On January 14th, *Fredrikshalds Avis* reported that the disease was in remission in Bohuslän according to information from the district doctor. But in the archipelago outside Strömstad and north of the city “the disease is raging equally bad”. However, there was no indication about the disease spreading across the border nor any fear expressed for such a spread.

In February 1919 the disease was widespread both on the Norwegian Hvaleröarna close to the Swedish border and in Aremark further into Østfold. The chimney sweeper in the area informed, in a letter published in *Fredrikshalds Avis* on February 15th, that he had not been able to do the sweeping because of the disease. The homes were full of sick people. In Aremark schools and dairies were closed down.

On March 18th, the disease had, according to *Strömstads Tidning*, in particular hit a home for delinquent boys on Vrångsholmen in the Tanum municipality (https://www.vrangsholmen.se/?page_id=247). All staff and 25 of the 31 students fell ill. Nurses had arrived from Gothenburg and kitchen staff from Strömstad, but “the disease is fortunately not striking in severe forms”.

Also in April 1919, it was said that the Spanish flu was found in Strömstad and the environments but not to a larger extent.

A similar situation was found on the Norwegian side of the border. Life was

able to go back to normal. Associations could convene again. Indre Smaalenenes Avis reported on March 7th, that the Mysen youth team had convened at a meeting after such meetings had been inactive since the fall of 1918. “The Spanish flu this fall had many teams experience an involuntary time of rest... One of the teams hit hard by this is the Mysen youth team”. The Skiptvet abstinense-team had a meeting on March 9th, where letters that had been received about the Spanish flu were cited.

5. Conclusion

That no governmental prohibitions or other restrictions against crossing the nation border were imposed, can be interpreted in the light of different factors. First the passage of individuals across this border was very limited compared with the 2020s. No commuting for work from Sweden to Norway existed in the 1910s (Danielsson & Gustavsson 1999) in contrast to the 2020s.

Nor was trading from Sweden across the border to Norway present at the end of the 1910s as was the situation in the 2020s. Tourism from Norway to Strömstad hardly existed before the 1930s unlike the strong Norwegian tourism to Bohuslän from the 1990s (Gustavsson, 2013). There was no bridge across Idefjorden keeping Sweden and Norway apart, just a small ferry at Svinesund. The first bridge was inaugurated in 1946. Horse-drawn carriages were used as transportation, but hardly any single car, at the end of 1910s (Danielsson & Gustavsson 1999). Thus, passages by people were in other words very few. There was no economic impact observed on local communities during the Spanish flu in contrast to what happened during the COVID-19 pandemic.

There was also a border by sea between southern Norway and Sweden. Here it should be mentioned that fishing boats having their home harbors in the middle parts of Bohuslän did not do any fishing along the southern Norwegian coast during the first world war. Fishing in that area started to a larger extent first in the 1920s and was at its peak in the 1930s (Rogan, 2023). Thus there was no pending threat for the spread of infection via fishing activities at the time for the outbreak of the Spanish flu. On the other hand, fishermen from the northern parts of Bohuslän in the Strömstad and Tanum municipalities were fishing at northern Jylland places like Læsø and Anholt in Denmark. Many individuals were infected by the Spanish flu and brought the disease back home to Bohuslän (Strömstads Tidning 14 November 1918) without any central border restrictions being instated between Denmark and Sweden. There sure could have been a reason to do that because of this spreading of the infection.

On both sides of the nation border, the spreading of the Spanish flu happened within the own country and not across the border. The Norwegian and Swedish government authorities did not have to be particularly worried about import of infection from the neighboring country. Nor did they have the ability to influence border restrictions or prohibitions, because it was the task of the municipalities themselves in both countries to decide on limitations when the Spanish flu was

raging². The Norwegian and Swedish border municipalities did not worry about the spreading of infection through border contacts, and they were therefore not so rigorous as was the Norwegian government during the COVID-19 pandemic. Norwegians after visiting places abroad then had to be quarantined when coming back home. The Swedish government was more liberal concerning border contacts and ordered no quarantines. There were no long-term effects of the border restrictions in the border regions after the Spanish flu. After the COVID-19 pandemic from February 2022, test results from the public health agency were not reported anymore. The border contacts soon resembled the situation before the pandemic.

In Norway, the Oslo-area was the hardest hit by this disease and there was some spreading from there (Borza, 2001). In Bohuslän, the center for the disease was Uddevalla due to the Bohuslän regiment (Hansson et al., 1978).



Figure 5. Svinesund 1915. There was no bridge across Idefjorden keeping Sweden and Norway apart, just a small ferry. Horse-drawn carriages were used as transportation.

The contrast is evident between the border situation during the Spanish flu 1918-1919 and how things were handled during the covid19 pandemic in the 2020s when federal regulations determined over border passages. This significant difference should be considered in the context of the totally different situation around the national border, being demonstrated in the present study³ (Figure 5).

²There was, on the other hand, a prohibition from the government to bringing alcohol into Norway from 1916-1927 (Gustavsson, 2019).

³A comparison with the covid19 pandemic can also be done with the cholera outbreak in the 19 century. Cholera came to Norway in 1832 but to Sweden first in 1834. Already in 1832 Sweden created a place for quarantine, Blötebogen on the island Öddö outside Strömstad, for those travelling from Norway (Gustavsson, 2021: p. 89). After doing their quarantine time, the travellers were allowed to enter Sweden. Thus, the Norwegian-Swedish border was not closed for crossings in the way it was during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- Borza, T. (2001). Spanskesyken i Norge 1918-1919. *Tidsskrift for den norske legeförening*.
- Danielsson, R., & Anders, G. (1999). *Gränsmöten: Kulturhistorisk antologi för Bohuslän, Dalsland och Østfold*. Strömstad.
- Gustavsson, A. (2013). *Resident Populace and Summer Holiday Visitors. Cultural Contacts between Harmony and Conflict in Nordic Coastal Regions*. Oslo.
- Gustavsson, A. (2019). *Historical Changes in Alcohol Contacts across the Swedish-Norwegian Border*. Oslo.
- Gustavsson, A. (2021). Koleraepidemier i Sverige under 1800-talet ur folkligt perspektiv. In: A. Gustavsson, Ed., *Pandemier - dåtid och nutid för framtid*. Strömstad.
- Gustavsson, A. (2022). *Covid 19 Pandemins Konsekvenser Utmed den Norsk-Svenska riksgrensens södra del*. Strömstad.
- Gustavsson, A. (2024). Migration between Norway and Sweden over the Last 150 Years. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 12, 265-296. <https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2024.125018>
- Hansson, W., Eric, J., & Sven, L. (1978). *100 år med Bohusläningen*. Uddevalla.
- Joelsson, L. (2020). För 100 år sedan härjade också en pandemi. *Strömstad Tidning 24 March*.
- Ludvigsson, J. (2018). Spanska sjukan-värsta farsoten sedan Digerdöden. *Läkartidningen*.
- Mamelund, S. (1998). Diffusjon av influensa i Norge under spanskesyken 1918-19. *Norsk Epidemiologi*, 8, 45-58. <https://doi.org/10.5324/nje.v8i1.426>
- Rogan, B. (2023). *Kapitler av Nordsjøens historie. Revtorsk, sørlandsklippfisk og reker til Boulogne*. Oslo.
- Västerbro, M. (2018). Spanska sjukan slog hårdast mot unga. *Populär historia*, nr 6.
- Åman, M. (1990). *Spanska sjukan*. Uppsala.

Newspapers

Aftenposten
Akershus
Bohuslänningen
Dagbladet
Fredrikshalds Avis
Glommendalens Sosialdemokrat
Indre Smaalenenes Avis
Morgenbladet
Morgenposten
Nordlands Avis
Rogaland
Strömstads Tidning
Varden
Øvre Smaalenene
Norrvikens Tidningar