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Perspective

The curfew bell and the COVID-19 pandemic: A historical–medical perspective based on the Italian case



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ABSTRACT

The present communication examines the phenomenon of curfew in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic with special attention being laid on the management of the epidemic by Italian health authorities. A literature review and a historical–medical analysis were performed. A historical–medical excursus on the word curfew is offered and a comparison between military and health scenarios is given. Finally, this article stresses how words connected with wartime events should be contextualized when adopted in unmilitary scenarios such as pandemic emergencies and related public health responses.

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Introduction

In the Middle Ages, at nightfall, a bell mandated the extinguishing of all fires to prevent blazes and nocturnal gatherings [1]. Nowadays, in contrast, it is necessary to tackle other types of 'fires', namely the outbreaks of epidemics by staying indoors so as not to frustrate the efforts of physicians and health workers. For instance, to counter the coronavirus emergency, declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 12 March 2020, the Italian government launched a series of restrictive measures, which can be summed up in one expression *Io resto a casa* ("I am staying home"), which was rapidly popularized and reached both traditional mass media as well as social media [2].

The contraction of social interactions, as painful as it was, was indeed essential to halt the epidemic of COVID-19 (infectious disease caused by SARS-CoV-2) while waiting for the arrival of effective vaccines. Empty streets, store shutters down, lights off in the squares, a ghostly silence (interrupted only by chants, sometimes carelessly, on the balconies of buildings), and a capillary and sys-

tematic control of citizens' movements by the police created a condition that was dubbed 'curfew' (It. *coprifuoco*) by the media.

The term has sometimes appeared in quotation marks, as if to mean 'a certain kind of curfew', while at times its use has been explicit, such as by the then mayor of Messina (Sicily), who first announced a curfew ordinance, only to revoke it and re-propose it as a new one subsequently in line with the Prime Minister's pandemic emergency-related decree. For his part, the Governor of the Veneto Region hinted that if the imposed containment measures would not prove enough, the next step would be a curfew. These interactions once more highlight the interconnection between pandemic phenomena and the sphere of politics [3,4].

A historical overview of the remote origins of the word

Yet, where does this peculiar term, *curfew*, come from? The origin of the term is undoubtedly Medieval. It is derived from the Middle English *curfeu*, itself borrowed from the old French word *couvre-feu*. Originally, its meaning was literal, that is, at a given signal from the authorities, it was obligatory to cover the fires (not necessarily to extinguish them completely) in homes. Controlling fires inside dwellings, which at the time were often

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Figure 1. The enforcement of the curfew law in the time of William I, by Joseph Martin Kronheim. Image in the public domain from *Creative Commons*.

made of wood, was essential, as stated above, to prevent fires with devastating consequences while also preventing nocturnal gatherings [5]. Curfews were experimented with in England as early as the time of Alfred the Great (AD 849-899), who apparently issued a restrictive decree for the inhabitants of Oxford, who were required to retire to their homes at a certain time in the evening. However, traditionally, the origin of restrictive regulations on the freedom of movement of subjects is traced back to William I the Conqueror (Fig. 1 AD 1028-1087) [6]. The Duke of Normandy conquered England through the decisive victory at the Battle of Hastings (AD 1066). William the Conqueror's curfew was triggered every evening at 8 o'clock and, as one can well guess, was aimed at keeping people off the streets or preventing them

from gathering [6]. The conquest of a nation, as history teaches, is not the outcome of a single battle or military campaign but requires gradual consolidation: indeed, William the Conqueror could hardly allow the never-tamed pride of his Saxon rivals to organize rallies and conspiracies against his power in the middle of the night.

In AD 1103, many years after William the Conqueror's death, his fourth son and successor to the throne, Henry I (ca. AD 1068-1135), at the insistence of his wife Matilda (AD 1180-1118), finally abolished the curfew law [7]. From then on, the tolling of the curfew bell (curfew bell, or *ignitegium* in Latin) took on a cultural and literary significance, while curfew would characterize war and major emergency events in history [7].

The legacy of curfew in Italy: dark memories from a bygone age

But what exactly is a curfew in the more recent times? Was it really in effect in Italy during the first phase of the emergency or could it happen in future pandemics?

Curfew means a ban imposed on the civilian population from leaving their homes, especially during the evening and night hours for security reasons, such as a serious health or military emergency [7]. It is now an obsolete term, probably unknown to new generations, and in the collective imagination, it is associated with military life, *coup-d'état*-like scenarios, or wartime contexts. It is no coincidence that, in Italian history, its best-known use dates back to World War II, precisely to July 26, 1943, when, in the aftermath of the fall (after the night of the Grand Council of Fascism, 24-25 July 1943) of the dictator Benito Mussolini (1883-1945), the new government led by Marshal of Italy Pietro Badoglio (1871-1956), of an exquisitely military nature, imposed this restrictive measure of freedom across Italy [8].

The subjects of the Kingdom of Italy were forced to remain locked in their homes from 9 PM in the evening to 5 AM the next morning. The military was ordered to shoot anyone caught in the act of violating the curfew. At the same time, gatherings of various kinds, including theatrical performances, were prohibited: *In the present situation, with the enemy pressing, any disruption of public order, even the slightest, [...] constitutes treason* [9] – according to the circular issued by General Mario Roatta (1887-1960) on the evening of July 26th. The order was clear, as were the consequences of any violations: *any movement must be inexorably crushed in origin* [9]. No mercy nor weakness was allowed to servicemen on pain of being immediately executed.

Was the word's use justified during the COVID-19 pandemic?

While the interesting parallels with past situations like the one seen above can be effectively drawn, to speak of curfew with reference to the Italian pandemic restrictions of 2020 appears improper. In fact, it appears to be more correct to refer to that situation as a set of rigid prescriptions, thus limiting the freedom of movement of Italian citizens, who could not leave their homes without a valid reason. The rationale for those limitations was to contain the number of contagions and avoid putting the national health care system under further strain. However, a constant reminder of a martial and highly coercive wartime curfew led some citizens to experience the said situation in an excessively negative spirit, failing to understand the highly charged investiture of personal and collective responsibility.

Indeed, in wartime, leaving one's house during curfew, one would end up being executed by the military. During the COVID-19 pandemic, on the contrary, one simply had to certify why he was not at home, being aware that false statements could mean risking prosecution and potentially criminal penalties.

Despite the sociocultural perspective offered above, it is worth underlining that curfews applied to the COVID-19-related situation proved effective and in other countries, it was also recommended that they be *implemented timely with additional restrictions* [10]. Moreover, as highlighted by Al-Tameemi et al. [11], *the complete application of the curfew and social distance makes the basic reproduction number less than one and hence prevents the outbreak of disease*.

While definitely much more under control today than in the midst of the epidemic outbreak of 2020, still a considerable number of COVID-19 cases are being recorded in Italy. Indeed, the

Ministry of Health's weekly COVID-19 report for the week 01-07 August 2024 (published on 9th August) registered 17,381 new cases across Italy with 87 deaths, showing how this disease, despite its current endemicity, is far from being defeated [12]. In addition, increasing attention is being paid to the psychological long-term effects in COVID-19 survivors as well as to the limitations experienced by patients in their daily activities [13].

Conclusion

Epidemiology teaches that it is necessary to quench a special type of fire, namely the outbreaks of the epidemics by staying indoors so as not to frustrate the efforts of healthcare workers, but at the same time, words connected with wartime events should be better contextualized when adopted in unmilitary forms of fight such as the one against pathogens. By highlighting what happened in Italy during the COVID-19 pandemic, this perspective can be extended to other nations and public health systems.

Declarations of competing interest

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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Francesco Maria Galassi: first draft, conceptualization, literature search, revision; **Luigi Cofone:** literature search, revision; **Ivano Pindinello:** literature search, revision; **Domenico Ribatti:** literature search, revision, supervision; **David L. Smith:** conceptualization, literature search, revision; **Mauro Vaccarezza:** conceptualization, literature search, revision, supervision, correspondence; **Elena Varotto:** first draft, conceptualization, literature search, supervision.

Patient consent

Not applicable.

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