Cholera in Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice*

Thomas Rütten

**Summary**

The article sets the cholera motif in Thomas Mann’s famous novella *Death in Venice* against the historical context from which it partially originates. It is shown that this motif, while undoubtedly appropriated to serve Mann’s own poetic ends, has a solid grounding in historical and autobiographical fact, thus blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction. The article illustrates the verifiable events of the outbreak of the Venetian cholera epidemic in May 1911, which Mann partly witnessed himself, during a holiday trip to Brioni and Venice, and partly heard and read about. It is established that Thomas Mann’s account of the cholera in Venice in his novella is characterised by a rare and almost preternatural insightfulness into an otherwise murky affair that was marked by rumours, speculations and denials.

*Keywords: Thomas Mann; Death in Venice; cholera; Brioni*

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Thomas Rütten, Newcastle University, School of Historical Studies, Armstrong Building, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 7RU, United Kingdom (Thomas.rutten@ncl.ac.uk).
Introduction

“Factum non brutum est.” This insight has, over recent years, gained increasing currency among historiographers. Interdisciplinary research on the concept of narrative has taught us that historical writing, as a linguistic artefact, may certainly be a methodologically sound, theoretically aware and empirically verifiable representation of a causally and chronologically ordered network of historical facts. And as such, it has its rightful place within the realm of scholarly endeavour. At the same time, however, – and this is a somewhat more novel idea – it is also the product of the creative imagination and is thus as much at home in the realm of fiction. In this paper I attempt to show that this duality also applies, conversely, to the literary text: “Fictum non brutum est.” The age of narratology has not least produced a growing awareness of the fact that tellers of stories can be, and indeed often are, tellers of history as well, interweaving fiction and fact, and illuminating both in the process.

This certainly applies to Thomas Mann’s writings, which are by no means exclusively or even predominantly the products of an outstandingly innovative story-teller’s creative imagination, conjured up, as it were, out of the “sorcerer’s” hat. Alongside the fictitious and the fabulous, they also contain and articulate experiential and textual facts, and just like historiographic writings, they, too, owe their very existence to re-readings of textual fore-runners that ‘represent’ reality. In the case of Death in Venice, these range from encyclopaedia entries and press reports to scientific papers. In a word, Thomas Mann’s writings attest to the fact that story-telling can, just as historiography, have its roots in a factual realism while retaining its literary status, and it is precisely this blend of fact and fiction that makes an examination of the medical themes in Thomas Mann’s oeuvre such an attractive and rewarding enterprise. The medical set pieces not only play an important part in Mann’s realism, but also contribute to the autobiographical character of his writing, and, as the example of the cholera motif in Death in Venice shows, lend a sense of solid scientific grounding that, for all of Mann’s playful experimentation with myth and fairy tale, style and composition, distinguishes his writings.

1 See the programmatic title “Auch Klio dichtet” of the German translation of Hayden White’s essay collection.
3 Kinsky/Rütten 2009.
4 For the methodologically complex issue of medical realism in fiction, see Rothfield 1992.
It may come as a bit of a surprise that, in view of the abundance and general lucidity of the existing critical commentary on *Death in Venice*, very little or, as in some cases, no attention whatsoever has been paid to a whole host of autobiographical and contemporary events that yet inform the novella in fundamental ways. If mentioned at all, cholera has been understood as a symbol or as a motif variously interpreted in psychoanalytical, sexual-pathological, political or mythological terms; elsewhere, cholera is referred to as a metaphor for the monstrous rebound effect of colonial ideology or as an intertextual reference to the lives and works of Platen and Flaubert, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, Tschaikovsky and Winckelmann, Turgenjew and Feuerbach. Only occasionally do we find a reference to cholera as a real and historically verifiable event that Thomas Mann himself witnessed, endured (at least retrospectively) and finally worked through intellectually. And only a few critics have recognised that Thomas Mann’s virtuoso realism does indeed extend to his treatment of cholera in *Death in Venice*, and only a handful seem to acknowledge that one of the last European cholera epidemics, after all a major event, forms one of the novella’s central themes.

**Chronology and narrative**

As established in an earlier publication, Thomas and Katia Mann left for Venice on Sunday, 7th May 1911. With some likelihood they took the overnight train to Trieste, stayed there for 24 hours, and, the next morning, a Tuesday, boarded a ship to Pola and thence to Brioni where they put up at the Hotel Neptun I (fig. 1). The *Brioni Island Gazette* lists “Mr Thomas Mann, writer, and wife” as among the guests staying on the island between 5th and

5 For the secondary literature on *Death in Venice*, see Shookman 2003.
6 For references and quotes see Rütten 2005, 126–129. For further details and lucid observations, see Braches 2007, 25–31. I am grateful to Dr Braches for sending me a copy of his commentary.
8 Hellpach 1913, 1f.
11 Rütten 2005, 130f.
12 The boat trip from Triest to Pola took between 4 and 8 hours. See *Illustrierter Führer*, 27. I am grateful to Ernst Braches for sharing this reference with me.
25th May (fig. 2)\textsuperscript{13}. Since Thomas Mann learned of Mahler’s death which occurred on 18th May at Brioni (XI, 583; see also XIII, 149), 19th May suggests itself as \textit{terminus post quem} for the Manns’ onward journey to Venice. They departed from Venice on 2nd June and, once more travelling by overnight train, would have arrived back home in Munich on Saturday, June 3\textsuperscript{14}.

As far as von Aschenbach’s itinerary is concerned, it is a well-known fact that the narrator in \textit{Death in Venice} remains conspicuously vague about the times and dates of the events he relates. While the century in which the story

\textsuperscript{13} Brioni Insel-Zeitung 16 (14th May 1911) 9. The Manns’ names are further mentioned in Brioni Insel-Zeitung 17 (21st May 1911) 9; Brioni Insel-Zeitung 18 (28th May 1911) 9. Heinrich Mann is not mentioned in any of the lists of guests staying on the island that were regularly published by the Brioni Island Gazette; we may thus conclude that, for this part of the holiday at least, he was not of the party. The authors of the commentary on \textit{Death in Venice} (2.2, 363) still hold with the received opinion that Heinrich Mann had accompanied his brother and sister-in-law to Brioni.

\textsuperscript{14} Mendelsohn 1997, 1426f. See also Hedwig Pringsheim, Tagebuch 1911, Thomas Mann Archiv, entry dated 3rd June: “[…] mit der frisch angekommenen Katja telephoniert”. 
Fig. 2. *Brioni Island Gazette*’s guest list (14th May 1911). Whitley Bay, archive Thomas Rütten.
is set is disclosed, the precise year is not only not mentioned, but positively effaced and replaced by two dots (2.1, 501). Von Aschenbach’s departure from Munich is vaguely described as taking place “on a day some time between the middle and the end of May” (2.1, 516), and he stays on the island of Brioni for “one and a half weeks” (2.1, 517) before travelling, via Pola, on to Venice, where he stays for at least four weeks before he dies. Thomas Mann’s notes (Arbeitsnotizen), however, reveal a somewhat more elaborate chronology. According to these notes, von Aschenbach leaves Munich on 22nd May so that he would have reached Brioni on 24th May. After a ten-day stay on the island, he would, as the notes explicitly state, have taken the ship across to Venice on 2nd June. As we will recall, it was on 2nd June that Thomas Mann left Venice to return to Munich. According to the notes (Arbeitsnotizen), this is also the day of von Aschenbach’s arrival at Venice. Should this be pure coincidence? If not, then 24th May, the day of his arrival on Brioni, is perhaps not wholly arbitrary either. In analogy to the literary play with the 2nd June, the 24th could be the day that the Manns left Brioni for Venice, which would agree with the Island Gazette’s list of guests for that week. In other words, the temporal vagueness of the novella’s narrative turns out to be grounded in a very precise chronology after all – a chronology, moreover, that stands in a direct relationship to Thomas and Katia Mann’s own travel itinerary. Lagging about two weeks

15 A diametrically opposed interpretation of these two dots can be found in 2.2, 21, where the passage in question is cited as an example of the narrative convention “die durch Geheimhaltung der angeblichen ‘Tatsachen’ die Illusion einer dahinter stehenden Wirklichkeit erzeugen soll”. The reality (“Wirklichkeit”) underpinning Mann’s novella, however, is anything but an illusion, and the concealment (“Geheimhaltung”) was not of alleged (“angeblichen”), but rather of historically verifiable facts. For a confirmation of my understanding of the two dots, see Braches 2007, 45–53, who also emphasises the mythological and symbolic meaning of such temporal vagueness.


17 The 24th May does, of course, jar with de Mendelssohn’s proposed time-scale. If de Mendelssohn and other scholars were right about the 26th May, we would need an explanation of the fact that the Manns are not listed as guests in the Brioni Island Gazette 19, which was published on 4th June 1911 and names all visitors who stayed on the island between 26th May and 1st June. As early as 22nd May, Hedwig Pringsheim receives an “Abschiedskarte aus Brioni”; on 24th May, a “Brief von Katja noch aus Brioni” arrives, followed on 26th May by a letter “von Katja vom Lido”; from 23rd May onwards, Hedwig Pringsheim posts her letters to her daughter directly to Venice. See Hedwig Pringsheim, Tagebuch 1911, Thomas Mann Archiv, entries dated 22nd, 23rd, 24th, 25th and 26th May. All these references as well as Thomas Mann’s letter to Joseph-Emile Dresch dated 25th May 1911 and written on the Lido (Bürgin/Mayer 1976, 134) suggest the 24th May as the more likely date of the Manns’ arrival in Venice, the more so as they were, as we know, planning to leave again on 26th May. I thank Ernst Braches for reminding me of the letter mentioned above.
behind, von Aschenbach nevertheless stays close on Thomas and Katia’s heels, yet wherever he arrives, the writer and his wife have just left. It seems that the writer and his alter ego can never quite merge into one, but merely wave to each other, as it were, from passing boats or trains travelling in opposite directions. Furthermore, Thomas Mann “corrects” and, in view of his own as well as his wife’s comments on their visit to Brioni and the Appenine Mountains\(^\text{18}\), somewhat idealises his own travels in the novella by both shortening von Aschenbach’s stay on Brioni and saving him, once in Venice, the detour into the Appenines. Most importantly, however, it is against the background of cholera that the game Mann plays with the two itineraries reveals its true significance. It may well have been quite late into his travels or maybe even only once he was safely back home in Munich that Thomas Mann realised what grave dangers he and his wife had so narrowly escaped, and the worrying thought of “What if?” now never seems far from his mind. What if they had set off a couple of weeks later, stayed that little bit longer, or had not made the acquaintance of that friendly clerk at Thomas Cook’s?

**Bacteriological preliminaries on the island of Brioni**

If our proposed chronology is correct, the Manns arrived on Brioni on Tuesday, 9th May 1911. While they would not have come into contact with cholera or even with credible rumours about it during their stay on the island, they would have encountered a figure whose name was and is inextricably linked to the disease: Robert Koch (1843–1910)\(^\text{19}\). It was centrally thanks to Koch’s efforts that the island of Brioni had, at the beginning of the 20th century, been able to transform itself into the “Pearl of the Adriatic”\(^\text{20}\); in 1901, at the request of Paul Kupelwieser (1843–1919)\(^\text{21}\), the former president of the Witkowitz Union and owner of the island since 1893,

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\(^{18}\) Plessen/Mann 1974, 70; Rütten 2005, 136, n. 38.

\(^{19}\) Even though Filippo Pacini (1812–1883) had discovered the pathogenic agent of cholera back in 1854, it took until 1883 for the first pure culture of the pathogen to be grown by Koch and his assistants from samples taken from the intestines of patients who had died of the disease. On Koch, see Gradmann 2005.

\(^{20}\) Brioni Insel-Zeitung 26 (23rd July 1911) 4.

\(^{21}\) To my knowledge, the most comprehensive study on Kupelwieser is: Heinz Waldhuber, *Der König von Brioni. Das Imperium des Paul Kupelwieser*, Judenburg 1998 (http://gemeinde.spielberg.at under “Geschichte”; last accessed 09/05/2006). A shortened version of this text has recently been published under the co-authorship of Katrin Kruse. For Kupelwieser, see also: Kupelwieser 1918. Shortly before contact with Koch was established, Kupelwieser himself (ibid., pp. 205–208) had been seriously ill with malaria.
Koch had first sent a number of his assistants to Brioni and later joined them in person to rid the island of malaria and thus make it a safer place to inhabit (fig. 3)\(^\text{22}\). This mighty deed earned him the enduring gratitude of the islanders, a gratitude eloquently expressed not only in the pages of the Island Gazette\(^\text{23}\), but also in the form of a monument commemorating Koch’s services to Brioni (fig. 4)\(^\text{24}\). Brioni had served as a sort of outdoor laboratory for the then just emerging scientific study of hygiene. Deadly pathogens – by now \textit{in absentia} – led a very public existence here, and the island became a showcase for Prussian prophylactic programmes whose civilising blessings were proudly paraded in front of the aristocratic, moneyed and intellectual elites of Europe. Thanks to technical advances such as a mainland-fed supply of drinking water, independent food resources, refrigeration and steam-heating systems, electricity, favourable climatic conditions and military rear cover in the shape of the naval port at Pola, Brioni had been delivered from malaria and also freed from other infectious dis-

\(^\text{22}\) For the relevant passage, see Rütten 2005, 137f., n. 42. See also Frosch 1903.
\(^\text{23}\) See, for example, \textit{Brioni Insel-Zeitung} 19 (9th June 1912) 1; \textit{Brioni Insel-Zeitung} 8 (24th March 1912) 3f. For quotes, see Rütten 2005, 138f., n. 44.
\(^\text{24}\) See \textit{Deutsche Medizinische Wochenschrift} 1913, 1156, \textit{Brioni Insel-Zeitung} 8 (24th March 1912) 3, as well as Mülder 2001.
Fig. 4. Koch monument by Josef Engelhart in Carrara marble, 1903, Intagliodruck von J. Löwy, Wien.
eases. The island presented itself as an open-air museum that showed increasing numbers of eager visitors what hygiene, incidentally celebrating another public-relations triumph at the Dresden Hygiene Exhibition that same year, was capable of achieving: nature itself could become a laboratory, the protective line against the plague – which, after all, also served as a protective line against cholera – could, geographical borders notwithstanding, be modified, and hygiene, together with the military, could, via the blessings of colonisation, advance the grand project of civilisation across the globe. During his stay on the island, Thomas Mann would undoubtedly have taken note of the cult surrounding the figure of Koch, especially since, at the time, rumours (swiftly denied in the pages of said Island Gazette) were circulating about an epidemic of scarlet fever. Bacteriological concerns would thus not have been far from everyone’s mind when, on 24th May, the Manns left Brioni for Venice.

Venice and the outbreak of cholera

Once within the bounds of the laguna, “the aged [...] craft of Italian provenance” (2.1, 517) came to a complete halt, “for we had to await the barge of the health authorities” (2.1, 521). I am, of course, quoting from Death in Venice here. It ought to be safe to assume, however, that Thomas Mann’s impressions of his arrival at Venice were not all that dissimilar to those he then ascribes to von Aschenbach’s fictional approach to the city. A health inspection of a domestic vessel, its cargo and its passengers would only make sense in the context of the 1911 cholera epidemic. The city may well have wanted to assure its visitors of its earnest endeavours to keep the cholera at bay and prevent its introduction to Venice by patrolling incoming traffic. In terms of narrative composition, the cholera motif in this instance functions much like a suspension would in musical terms. Cholera, the centrality of which to the overall conception of the novella can be gleaned from the long excerpts from

25 See the following contemporary voices: Flaton 1911/12; Pfleiderer 1912; Sudhoff 1911. See also Brecht 1999. On the spiritus rector of this exhibition, Karl August Lingner, see Neubert 1971; Köhne 1993; Funke 1996. The Italian pavilion for this exhibition was unveiled in Berlin on 31st May 1911, with both the king and the Italian ambassador in attendance.
26 Arthur Schnitzler’s diary gives a representative account of the sort of holiday one would have had on Brioni at the time. He was a guest on the island from 21st July to 24th August 1912. See Arthur Schnitzler. Tagebuch. 1909–1912. 345–349. Schnitzler seems first to have taken note of Thomas Mann’s novella, which he went on to find “außerordentlich”, on 20th November 1912 (ibid., p. 368).
27 Brioni Insel-Zeitung 18 (28th May 1911) 5.
an encyclopaedia that fill page after page of Mann’s notes (Arbeitsnotizien)\textsuperscript{28}, haunts the text as a “nameless horror” long before it is finally named towards the end of chapter 5 – long before the strategy of banishing fear by studiously avoiding all mention of the dreaded word finally falters\textsuperscript{29}. And yet, when the Manns arrived at Venice, the city had already identified its first cholera victims. A washerwoman from the De Prà laundry had fallen ill on 22nd May from the unmistakable symptoms of the disease\textsuperscript{30}. The woman had collapsed in front of the Scuola di Belle Arti the day after doing the barracks’ laundry. Under the pretext of needing some construction work done, the building was closed for 24 hours enabling authorities to undertake a thorough disinfection\textsuperscript{31}. The following day, however, the cholera claimed its first victim. In spite of numerous precautionary measures that had been in place since the previous year, during which the epidemic had already been rife in other parts of

\textsuperscript{28} Thomas Mann’s notes (Arbeitsnotizien), where they refer to cholera (Thomas Mann Archiv, Mp XI 13e/22 and 24; 2.2, 486–493; Braches 2008, 56–64, 66–73), show how thoroughly he had engaged with this seemingly marginal theme of his novella. On the provenance of his excerpts, see Braches 2008, 56–64, 66–73. His excerpts show how thoroughly Thomas Mann, consulting encyclopaedia articles at his disposal, researched not only the disease as such, but also individual cholera epidemics and related questions of public health and hygiene.

\textsuperscript{29} See Briese 2001. Against the assertion that the “dionysische Bedeutungsstrang” within the novella already becomes “endgültig dominant” prior to the “Entdeckung der fatalen Choleraepidemie”, as well as against the view that, in terms of plot, myth (i.e. Dionysos) dominates reality (i.e. cholera) and that the cholera infection merely happens “wie beiläufig” (Dierks 1972, 27), one has to argue that both the Dionysian element and the cholera undergo a sort of incubation period within the narrative prior to their actual manifestation (as “der fremde Gott” and “die Cholera”, respectively). Myth and reality thus run parallel to and are dramatised in conjunction with one another. The fact that cholera, too, is alluded to way before chapter 5, and the fact that dirt, fever, damp, stench and, last but not least, the tiger motif all prelude and anticipate the cholera is attested by the mention of the tiger (2.1, 504 and 507), the “unreinliche[n] Matrosen” (2.1, 517), the “schmutzig-schillernde[n] Wasser[s]” (2.1, 519), the “feucht[en] Wind[es]” (2.1, 520), the “Barke des Sanitätsdienstes” (2.1, 521), the “fauligen Geruch[s] der Lagune” (2.1, 533), the “faul riechende[n] Lagune” (2.1, 541) and the “Fieberdunstes” hanging over the laguna (2.1, 542) in chapters 1 and 3.

\textsuperscript{30} In his autobiography, Amadeo Nasalli Rocca (1856–1933), the Venetian prefect at the time, writes of a “caso violentissimo”. See Nasalli Rocca 1946, 283. On Nasalli Rocca, see Calendario generale del Regno d'Italia PEL 1911, 969; Missori 1989, 732. On the first cholera victim, see also Vivante 1917, 66. It was Zorzanello 1996, 186, who first alerted Thomas Mann scholars to the existence of this essay. Carini Venturini 2002, 1170, also mentions the statistical data from Vivante’s report. Vivante’s report, written towards the end of 1911, was slightly cut and edited for publication and can also be found in its original form in the Archivio Storico del Comune di Venezia (Celestia) under call number Colera Misure preventive contro il colera IV, 2, 19, 1910, as well as in the Archivio Centrale dello Stato in Rome, call number Ministero dell’Interno, Direzione Generale della Sanità, 1882–1915, b. 229, fasc. Rapporti dei Prefetti 1910–1913, sottofasc. Venezia. On Vivante (1864–1965), who received a “medaglia d’argento” in recognition of his services to public health during the 1911 cholera epidemic, see Somma 1981, 222–231. See also Gallo 1923, 93.

\textsuperscript{31} See Nasalli Rocca 1946, 283. Even though Nasalli Rocca’s autobiography, written in 1920, is teeming with errors, half-truths and historical misrepresentations, I see no reason to doubt the accuracy of this particular piece of information.
the country, the cholera had finally arrived in Venice. It had not been enough to monitor standards of hygiene in the soil, in housing conditions and in food supplies, to subject visitors and their accommodation to regular checks, to impress on all local doctors their duty to notify the authorities of each suspected new case or to train the local police force in the practice of disinfection\textsuperscript{32}. The health authority’s barge had been another one of those precautionary measures, but by the time the Manns were awaiting its arrival (and even more so when von Aschenbach was waiting for it), the barge had become little more than part of the elaborate game of hide-and-seek that the municipal authorities were playing with Venetians and visitors alike. Cholera had taken hold of the city, and the barge’s function was, by now, reduced to that of a sedative for new arrivals; it was, after all, in the authorities’ interest to leave visitors labouring under the illusion that Venice continued to be hermetically sealed off from the outside threat of infection.

\textit{Further cholera signs and official dementi of their existence}

By 28th May, the cholera incidence in Venice had risen to 6 new cases a day (fig. 5)\textsuperscript{33}. On the island of Sacca Sessola, an isolation ward had been set up to cater for up to 50 cholera patients. Anyone suffering from cholera whether clinically or bacteriologically confirmed, was taken there. And anyone who had come in contact with these diseased and any cholera suspect were in turn quarantined in the 60-bed Ospedale Umberto I and on the island San Elena, before being either released or transported to Sacca Sessola as well. During the last week of May – that is, during the time that Thomas Mann, discounting his short trip into the Appenine Mountains, stayed on the Lido –, at least two cases were bacteriologically, i.e. according to two of Koch’s criteria (isolation and cultivation), confirmed as incidences of \textit{cholera asiatica}\textsuperscript{34}. Thomas Mann seems to have come across rumours of these cases, for he writes in \textit{Death in Venice}: “But in the middle of May of that year, on a single day, at

\textsuperscript{32} Vivante 1917, 65f.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., p. 66.
\textsuperscript{34} On 2nd June 1911, Nasalli Rocca writes to Rocco Santoliquido, sanitary officer in the Ministry of the Interior, and informs him that the most influential physicians of Venice were “perfettamente edotti vera situazione, avendo essi stessi fatti esami batteriologici dei due casi avvenuti in ospedale”. Rome, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Ministero dell’Interno, Direzione Generale della Sanità, 1882–1915, b. 178, fase. Condizioni sanitarie del Regno. See also Snowden 1995, 349. According to the official statistics, there were only two dates in May where exactly two fatalities a day had occurred. These dates are 29th and 30th May. The fact that Thomas Mann antedates these events and has them occur in mid-May may suggest that he had at least heard rumours about them.
Venice, the dreadful vibriones were found in the emaciated and blackened bodies of a boatman’s assistant and a greengrocer woman” (2.1, 578). In fact, these two cases almost prompted the authorities to breach the moratorium, but because political pressure was enormous they kept quiet. In spite of the threats of draconian punishment that accompanied the official attempts at a cover-up, talk of cholera was rife among the residents of Venice, as is shown by a letter written by Italo Svevo to his wife Livia from Murano on 1st June 1911.

It is quite possible that some of that ubiquitous talk would also have reached Thomas Mann’s ears. At an official level, however, the potential commercial, economic, political and social implications of a disclosure of the true state of affairs had led to a nationally decreed policy of silence and appeasement, the enforcement of which Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti

35 Nasalli Rocca 1946, 285: “Però un giorno venne l’ordine di denunciare ufficialmente con l’appoggio di documenti scientifici, due casi di colera. La denuncia stava per partire, quando l’ordine venne revocato in seguito a rimostranze di un deputato.” According to Vivante 1917, 68, there were indeed “fruttivendoli” among the afflicted, but no “verdurieri”. For the time being, one can only speculate on whether Thomas Mann’s “Schifferknecht” denotes one of the ten “facchini di marittime” or one of the three “pescatori” listed by Vivante.

36 Svevo 1986, 402–404. I am grateful to Ragni Gschwend for drawing my attention to this as well as to a further letter, dated 11th July 1911 (ibid., 405–407), both of which refer to the Venice cholera outbreak.
being not only the president of the Council of Ministers but since March 1911 also the Minister of Internal Affairs and by default of a ministry of Health effectively also Minister of Health personally concerned himself with from his Roman seat of office – irrespective of the International Sanitary Convention of December 3, 1903, to which Italy had been a signatory and in which all signatories had committed themselves to notifying each other of every case of cholera confirmed according to Koch’s criteria.

Political and economical considerations

Another at least superficially crucial factor in the official cover-up were the constitutional festivities planned for 4th June, which were to mark the 50th anniversary of Italian unification with much pomp and the unveiling of a national monument to King Vittorio Emanuele II (Re galantuomo) in Rome. An open admission of a national cholera epidemic would hardly have enticed 200,000 people to travel to Rome for the occasion, and Giolitti would have cut a far less convincing figure when he remarked during his opening speech that the presence of Italy’s friends and allies from all over the world, who were attending the patriotic commemorations in such a remarkable spirit of cordiality, had to be regarded as “renewed testimony to their re-

37 At this point in time, Giolitti had just entered his fourth term of office as Italy’s Prime Minister (the fourth of a total of five terms: 1892–1893; 1903–1905; 1906–1909; 1911–1914; 1920–1921). His political longevity makes him one of the key figures of the transition period in Italian history flanked by the “epoca cavouriana” to the “epoca Mussoliniana”, i.e. the period between the Risorgimento and Italian fascism. For further references on Giolitti, see Rütten 2005, 146f., n. 57.

38 “Jede Regierung ist verpflichtet, von dem ersten Auftreten sichergestellter Pest- oder Cholerafälle in ihrem Gebiete sofort den anderen Regierungen Mitteilung zu machen. Dieser Mitteilung ist beizufügen oder haben sehr rasch zu folgen genaue Angaben über den Ort, wo die Krankheit aufgetreten ist, über den Zeitpunkt ihres Auftretens, ihren Ursprung und ihre Form, über die Zahl der sichergestellten Fälle und der Todesfälle, über die infolge dieses ersten Auftretens unverzüglich ergriffenen Maßnahmen.” Quoted from Neue Freie Presse 16803 (3rd June 1911) 4. Not until Nasalli Rocca was succeeded in office by Carlo Cataldi did the Venetian prefecture, on 9th October 1911, and in response to a formal request, contact the International Bureau of Hygiene in Paris (Boulevard Saint-Germain 195), but even then there was no mention of cholera. The correspondence from Venice merely contained copies of the various public notices that had been issued since May limiting and/or prohibiting the consumption of crustaceans, etc. See Rome, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Ministero dell’Interno, Direzione Generale della Sanità, 1882–1915, b. 229, fasc. Rapporti dei Prefetti 1910–1913, sottofasc. Venezia.

39 The memorial to Vittorio Emanuele II commemorating the unification of the Kingdom of Italy was begun in 1885 and unveiled in 1911. The Kingdom of Italy had been publicly proclaimed in 1861. 1911 thus marked the 50th anniversary of this historic date. For an impressionistic contemporary account of the ceremony, see [Correspondent], “The Victor Emmanuel Monument. Unveiling by the King”, The Times (5 June 1911) 5.
spectful recognition of Italy’s global mission of peace and civilisation” 40. The reality, however, was very different. The same Giolitti had ordered the local Venetian press to keep silent on the subject of cholera41. Henceforth the press confined itself to denying any cholera-related rumours. We thus also have to disagree most emphatically with a scholar whose comparative study of contemporary Italian press reports lead him to the doubtful conclusion that the 1911 cholera epidemic was much less serious than Death in Venice suggests, and that it did not damage the Italian tourist industry in the slightest during the 1911 summer season42. If we want to determine the true extent of the epidemic, local newspapers are by far the least reliable source of information – a historical fact that, incidentally, is also reflected in Mann’s novella: “Back at the hotel, he [i.e. von Aschenbach] went into the lobby and scanned the various newspapers on the table. He could find nothing in any of the

40 Thus the correspondent for the Vossische Zeitung in an article for the morning edition of 6th June 1911, [s. p.]. The original passage reads as follows: “La presenza dei rappresentanti delle nazioni alleate ed amiche, le quali parteciparono con tanta cordialità alla nostra patriottica commemorazione, è novella prova che esse riconoscono la missione di pace e di civiltà che l’Italia ha nel mondo.” See Rome, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Giolitti 1° e 2° v., b. 37, fasc. 151.

41 The fact that the Italian authorities displayed a range of reactions to the 1911 cholera epidemic can be gleaned from Sticker 1912, 128. Also interesting in this context is a letter from Nasalli Rocca to the Ministry of the Interior dated 18th June 1911, in which he writes: “A Burano vi è un certo fermento contro medico perché operando egli vaccinazione, si temette che inoculasse colera, ma equivoco fu dissipato e stamane vi è calma – Ho provveduto per la tutela ordine pubblico.” See Rome, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Ministero dell’Interno, Direzione Generale della Sanità, 1882–1915, b. 194 (casistica di colera; in ordine di provincia), fasc. Venezia. In his exculpatory autobiography (Nasalli Rocca 1946, 283), Nasalli Rocca claims that the press had unanimously agreed to keep quiet about the cholera in the interest of preventing the worrying news from spreading and to avoid a potential panic among the populace. There were definitely social reasons for keeping the cholera epidemic a secret, as recent events in Calabria seemed to prove. There, widespread rioting had broken out after the vast majority of cholera cases had occurred among the poor, who, by somewhat daring inference, accused the rich of being directly responsible for the cholera outbreak. The government, it was believed, had dispersed poisoned powder in an attempt to kill off a sizeable portion of the region’s poor, whose numbers had been recorded in a census only the year before. Cholera riots were as widespread as they were common. See, for example, for the earlier cholera pandemics Burrell/Gill 2005; Gill et al. 2001; Gill 2000; Rousseau/Haycock 2003; Richardson 1988/2001; Durey 1979; Pelling 1978; Morris 1976; Briggs 1961. In the early 20th century, in Italy as elsewhere, however, these riots were not any longer motivated by a fear of body-snatching or “burking”, but were rather an expression of popular resistance against government measures such as the isolation and quarantine of patients, special burial requirements, control of the movement of goods and people, and public assembly bans – coercive measures, in other words, which ran contrary to traditional cultural practices. Sticker 1912, 296, sums up the events, a repetition of which the Venetian authorities may well have been trying to avoid. For a typical example, see also [Correspondent], “Cholera Riots in Italy. A Town Hall Sacked”, The Times (17th October 1911) 5.

foreign-language ones” (2.1, 564). Once again, the writer reveals himself as a meticulous chronicler of facts.

A foreign cholera victim: Anton Franzky

In the same week, i.e. the last week of May, an incidence occurred which even the Italian authorities could not conceal from public notice. It finds the following echo in *Death in Venice*: “A man from the Austrian provinces, who had visited Venice for pleasure for a few days, died, once back in his hometown, of unambiguous symptoms, and so the first rumours of the visitation upon the city made their way into the German newspapers” (2.1, 578f.). This passage corresponds in every detail with the historical realities of the final week of May 1911. First of all: the man from the Austrian provinces really did exist. His name was Anton Franzky, and, just as the novella describes, he had died of cholera shortly after his return from Venice to his home town of Waltendorf near Graz. As far as Franzky’s case was concerned, Thomas Mann did not have to rely on rumours or on his command of the Italian language to acquaint himself with the facts. The case had been making the headlines in the German-language press for the entire month of June, and, once back in Munich, Mann would no doubt have followed the reports with some eagerness. The scandal had, after all, first broken while he himself had still been at Venice, and it is more than likely that Franzky’s case had played a major part in the Manns’ decision to cut short their visit and return home early. The “German newspapers” referred to in *Death in Venice* could have been any of the following: the *Vossische Zeitung*, the *Frankfurter Zeitung*.

43 The fact that the first cholera casualty happened to be an Austrian citizen is first of all a simple accident of history. This does not, of course, preclude the possibility that the decision to include this particular piece of factual reality in the novella was also influenced by a certain amount of “Völkerpsychologie”, as stated in Elsaghe 2000, 50–52.


45 See the evening edition of 29th May 1911, [s. p.]; the morning edition of 2nd June 1911, [s. p.]; the evening edition of 4th June 1911, [s. p.]; the morning edition of 6th June 1911, [s. p.]; the evening edition of 7th June 1911, [s. p.]; the morning edition of 8th June 1911, [s. p.]; the evening edition of 8th June 1911, [s. p.]. I was able to consult a microfilm copy of this newspaper at the library of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bonn. The missing page numbers are due to the quality of the filming.

46 See the evening edition of 29th May 1911, p. 3; the 2nd morning edition of 2nd June 1911, p. 2; the evening edition of 2nd June 1911, p. 3; the 1st morning edition of 4th June 1911, p. 2; the 3rd morning edition of 4th June 1911, p. 2; the 1st morning edition of 6th June 1911, p. 2; the 2nd morning edition of 7th June 1911, p. 2; the 1st morning edition of 8th June 1911, p. 2; and the 2nd morning edition of 8th June 1911, p. 2.
and the *Münchner Neueste Nachrichten*\(^{47}\). They kept their concerned readership up to date with the latest developments in the Franzky affair\(^{48}\). The most extensive coverage of the case, however, could be found in the *Neue Freie Presse*\(^{49}\), whose editor, Karl von Thaler (1836–1916), had kept the Manns’ company on Brioni\(^{50}\). During his time on the island, Thomas Mann had already made a habit of studying the pages of the *Neue Freie Presse*, a detailed account of the fate that had befallen Anton Franzky. During a one-week holiday trip to Italy Franzky reached Venice on 21st May, fell sick after consumption of oysters and/or mussels and took a train home on 23rd May. On 27th May, his doctor, Dr Ernst Ott, reported his case as one of suspected cholera whereupon Franzky was taken to the municipal hospital and quarantined. When on the following day a bacteriological examination of his faeces by Prof. Wilhelm Prausnitz (1861–1933)\(^{52}\), head of the University of Graz’s Institute of Hygiene, confirmed Dr Ott’s clinical diagnosis, everyone with whom Franzky had come into contact since his return was also taken to the Hospital. Eventually, the newspaper published reports about Franzky’s death at 12.30 p.m. that same day in the Protestant Hospital at Graz, and how his corpse was transported to the isolation room at Graz central cemetery where it was dissected before the coffin was sent to the protestant cemetery to be lowered immediately into its burial plot. Only then were members of the family, who had been granted leave from quarantine, allowed to approach the plot in front of which distressing scenes took

\(^{47}\) See the morning edition of 31st May 1911, p. 4; the morning edition of 2nd June 1911, p. 2; and the only edition published on 5th June 1911, p. 5. Press reports about cholera cases in Venice soon also appeared in the *New York Times* (14th July 1911) and the *Prager Tagblatt* (4th September 1911). See also Franz Kafka, 225. I am grateful to Reinhard Pabst for pointing out the latter piece of supporting evidence to me. See also Schader 1985 who quotes, on pp. 87f., from a similar report that appeared in the *Allgemeine Zeitung* on 2nd September 1911.

\(^{48}\) The case was also noted in the specialised medical press. See *Münchner Medizinische Wochenschrift* 58, 23 (6th June 1911) 1276; 58, 24 (13th June 1911) 1335; 58, 25 (20th June 1911) 1381; 58, 26 (27th June 1911) 1432. Even a year later, the case was echoed in the *Wiener Klinische Wochenschrift* 31 (1912) 1196. See also Pabst 2004, 202.

\(^{49}\) See 16798 (29th May 1911) 6; 16799 (30th May 1911) 2 and 9; 16800 (31st May 1911) 10; 16802 (2nd June 1911) 10f.; 16803 (3rd June 1911) 4, 10f.; 16804 (4th June 1911) 17f.; 16805 (6th June 1911) 12; 16806 (7th June 1911) 11; 16807 (8th June 1911) 11; 16808 (9th June 1911) 11; 16809 (10th June 1911) 16; 16810 (11th June 1911) 15; and 16816 (17th June 1911) 13.

\(^{50}\) See the visitors’ list published in the *Brioni Insel-Zeitung* 17 (21st May 1911) 9.

\(^{51}\) See, for example, 16787 (18th May 1911) 4, 9; 16788 (19th May 1911) 5f.; and 16789 (20th May 1911) 8f. It is safe to assume that Thomas Mann refers to precisely this newspaper when he writes of the “Wiener Presse” and its “in fürstlichem Stile gehaltenen Bulletins” (XI, 583).

\(^{52}\) On Prausnitz, Professor of Hygiene at Graz University since 1899, see Pagel 1901/1989, cols 1320–1.
place. There were reports that Franzky's by now empty house was promptly disinfect ed by a team of doctors dressed in cholera cloaks. The train in which Franzky had reached Graz was located in Marburg, withdrawn from circulation and disinfected as well.

Responses of the Venetian authorities

The Venetian authorities, meanwhile, reacted to the news by issuing further denials, trying their best to reassure an increasingly suspicious international public that Venice continued to be a completely cholera-free place. Probably in response to the reports in German-language newspapers that stated that Franzky had contracted the disease by consuming oysters and mussels, the authorities did concede that there had been a small number of cases of gastroenteritis and that the sale of oysters and seafood would henceforth be prohibited. Again with complete accuracy Thomas Mann describes the practical implementation of these measures in Death in Venice: “On every street corner, printed notices proclaimed that, due to certain affections of the gastric system, nothing out of the ordinary in this weather, the city’s elders warned the population against the consumption of oysters and mussels” (2.1, 564). These public notices really did appear all over the city at the time (fig. 6). They date from 25th May, which suggests that Thomas Mann must have seen them while walking the streets of Venice. Issued with the

53 On 2nd June, almost two weeks after the cholera outbreak had been confirmed, Count Filippo Grimani (1850–1921), the mayor of Venice, sent a dispatch to the Trieste correspondent of the Neue Freie Presse; the text was published in this newspaper on the following day, p. 10, and contained the following request: “Wollen Sie die unbegründeten Nachrichten betreffend die sanitären Zustände in Venedig, dementieren. Ich kann Ihnen versichern, daß die Gesundheitsverhältnisse in Venedig die besten sind. Die Vorsichtsmaßregeln haben die Phantasie der Korrespondenten erhitzt.” On 7th June 1911, the evening edition of the Vossische Zeitung published a telegram that the editors had received from the Berlin firm Ferdinand Bendix Söhne: “Wir offered auf Grund der Zeitungsmitteilungen, daß in Venedig Cholera ausgebrochen sei, telegraphisch Epidemiebaracken dorthin. Wir bekommen daraufhin folgendes Telegram: ‘Baracche offerte non occorrono essendo normali condizioni salute pubblica. Prefetto Nasalli.’” See also [Correspondent], “Cholera in Italy”, The Times (5th July 1911): “Two official statements have recently been made, one by the Marquis di San Giuliano, Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the other by Signor Giolitti, declaring that the condition of public health in Italy was excellent, and calling upon Italian authorities at home and elsewhere to contradict any rumours to the contrary.” In his autobiography (Nasalli Rocca 1946, 285), Nasalli Rocca blames Giolitti for the denials of the Venetian cholera outbreak: “Cosicché a Venezia il colera in modo ufficiale non esistette mai.”

54 Venice, Archivio Storico del Comune di Venezia (Celestia), Colera Misure preventive contro il colera IV, 2, 19, 1910. On the meaning and use of such notices for the purpose of public information (and manipulation), see Shepard 1973. Vivante 1917, 74, confirms this announcement: “Varie ordinanze furono pubblicate dal Sindaco per sopprimere, come si
express “purpose of preempting any possible causes of gastrointestinal complaints”, the notices first prohibited fishing for fish, crustaceans and mussels in ditches, ponds or heavily soiled canals as well as in the outlets of municipal sewers; to this were later added prohibitions against all fishing in the city’s rivers and canals as well as against all fishing within a radius of 100 metres off the city’s shores; eventually, even the washing of crustaceans in water from the city’s rivers or canals was prohibited. In case of noncompliance, the goods in question were to be confiscated and destroyed, and hefty fines were to be applied.


On the rationale of such measures and their relation to the cholera outbreak, see Raffaello Vivante, “Brevi note sull’epidemia colerica in Venezia del 1911” (Venice, Archivio Storico del Comune di Venezia [Celestia], Colera Misure preventive contro il colera IV, 2, 19, 1910) 9–12.
The protest of the Medical fraternity of Venice and the Veneto

On Wednesday 31st May – the Manns were still at Venice, or, to be more precise, had just returned to the city after their short trip into the Appenine Mountains –, the Medical fraternity of Venice and the Veneto held a meeting at which they registered their protest against the official hush-up. In a petition submitted to the city’s prefect, they demanded a public information campaign on cholera. The gathered medical professionals also passed a resolution in which they expressed their discontent at having been sworn to absolute secrecy by the government. They deplored the foolishness of the national and regional administrations that had led to the concealment of the true state of the city’s sanitary affairs and had, it was perceived, hampered the medical profession in doing its work. They demanded a hygiene propaganda campaign and the implementation of preventive medical measures, and decided to distribute 2000 leaflets that would warn the city’s population of the dangers of the *cholera asiatica* and provide information on sensible safeguards. However, the Venetian prefect, Amadeo Nasalli Rocca ordered a night-time raid on the printing shop the Medical Association had instructed and had both the general post office and the central train station searched. The leaflets were confiscated and the chief public prosecutor could be persuaded to give the operation his retrospective blessing. On 1st June, Giolitti, who had signed responsible or at least sanctioned the local authority’s actions in this respect, ordered the Venetian prefect to summon the leaders of the protest to his offices and impress on them the criminal nature of their actions. The punishments they were threatened with ranged from hefty fines to imprisonment. Davide Giordano

56 Snowden 1995, 348f.
57 Until 9th July, with the exception of weekends, Nasalli Rocca sent daily bulletins to the Ministry of the Interior in Rome. From 11th September onwards, this sad duty fell to his successor Carlo Cataldi (1844–1934). On Cataldi, see Missori 1989, 622; *Calendario generale del Regno d’Italia PEL 1912*, 969. I was able to consult these bulletins from Venice at the State Archive of Rome, where they are reposited under Rome, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Ministero dell’Interno, Direzione Generale della Sanità, 1882–1915, b. 194 (casuistica di colera; in ordine di provincia), fasc. Venezia. Nasalli Rocca ends his autobiography (Nasalli Rocca 1946, 282–289) with an account of the Venetian cholera epidemic.
(1864–1954), who in the files appears as “presidente sanitaria” representing the Medical fraternity of Venice and the Veneto, seems to have resigned from his post after being admonished. The central government sent reinforcement in the persona of the “ispettore generale medici” Alessandro Messea. In his novel Thomas Mann seems to echo rumours about such controversies when writing: “Venice’s chief medical officer, a man of outstanding merit, had resigned in protest and was, on the quiet, replaced by a more pliable personage. The people knew this” (2.1, 580). Even if “cholera riots” may be a rather grand term to describe the protests by the physicians of Venice – the confrontation did not, as it had done in other places, involve firearms and imprisonment after all –, it is still noteworthy that the medical profession apparently refused to take part in the closing of ranks displayed by politicians and businessmen at the time. The fact that the city’s entire Medical fraternity as well as the local press and printing shops had come to

59 Davide Giordano, at the time, was practising as “medico Chirurgo Primario” at the Ospedale Civile. See Venice, Archivio Storico del Comune di Venezia (Celestia), Elenco degli esercenti l’arte salutare relativo all’anno 1911, IV/3/5. On Giordano see Thorek 1924; Romani 1964; Artico et al. 1998.

60 For example in a cable from Nasalli Rocca to the Ministry of the Interior, dated 2nd June 1911, where we read: “Già aveva fatto pratiche ieri nel senso indicatomi da V. E. con suo telegramma 1 corrente N 15682 con Dottor Giordano presidente sanitaria che comprende tutti medici città e provincia.” Rome, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Ministero dell’Interno, Direzione Generale della Sanità, 1882–1915, b. 178, fasc. Condizioni sanitarie del Regno.


62 Even though Messea, according to Calendario generale del Regno d’Italia PEL 1911, 147, and Calendario generale del Regno d’Italia PEL 1912, 147, officially stayed in Rome, he seems to have been on at least a temporary secondment from Giolitti’s Ministry of the Interior to check on the state of affairs in Venice. This seems to be confirmed by his report entitled “Condizioni sanitarie di Venezia a tutto l’8 giugno 1911”. See Rome, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Ministero dell’Interno, Direzione Generale della Sanità, 1882–1915, b. 181, fasc. Rapporti degli ispettori sanitari sul colera, sottofasc. Venezia. In his autobiography Nasalli Rocca 1946, 283f., writes that Giolitti had been furious at the news of the cholera outbreak and had sent an “ispettore generale del Ministero” from Rome, who had forced him, Nasalli Rocca, to pen a “rapporto completamente falso” according to which two people had died of gastroenteritis as a result of the consumption of mussels. This report further stated that the cholera rumours that had subsequently spread among the general public were entirely unfounded as the bacteriological examinations ordered by the authorities had shown without a shadow of a doubt that there was no cholera in Venice. He, Nasalli Rocca, had sent this “favola” to Rome, accompanied, however, by a telegram in which he had expressed his indignation at having been forced to lie to his superiors by the central government’s envoy. Instead of accepting Nasalli Rocca’s offer of resignation, however, Giolitti had reputedly told him that he wanted him to stick to the truth at all times and remain in office. The “ispettore generale x” was, according to Nasalli Rocca, replaced by another, and the “Ufficio Batteriologico di Venezia” confirmed that the bacteriological examinations had found no suspected cases of cholera so that a cholera outbreak could be ruled out with absolute certainty. Nasalli Rocca muses that it was probably this document that was used by Rome to deceive foreign diplomats about the true state of affairs. I have so far been unable to locate the enciphered telegrams that went back and forth between the Venetian prefecture and the Ministry of the Interior in Rome during the last week of May 1911.
feel the repressive lash of central government could hardly have escaped the public’s notice. What is more, many Venetians would have been personally acquainted with one or more of the cholera fatalities that, by now, occurred on a daily basis, and they would have witnessed the disinfections or at least have come across their olfactory traces in the course of their everyday lives. Svevo’s letter, mentioned earlier and written on the selfsame 1st June, confirms beyond doubt that the cholera epidemic was, by now, in the public domain.

The provisional escape

Again on 1st June, the Manns went to see a travel agent – another real-life experience that the author subsequently seems to have incorporated into the narrative of *Death in Venice*:

The following day, in the afternoon, the obstinate writer took a renewed step into the outside world, and this time with considerable success in more than one quarter. That is to say, he stepped from the Piazza San Marco into the English travel agency located nearby, and after he had exchanged some money at the cashier’s, he addressed the duty-clerk with the air of a suspicious stranger and put to him his fatal question. (2.1, 577)

The travel agency in question was a branch of Thomas Cook’s, whose Venice office, in 1911, occupied the ground floor of the Hotel Bellevue on the “Piazzetta dei Leoncini No 289” At the time, this was the only branch of Thomas Cook’s in Venice; a second office was opened on the Lido in 1913. Unfortunately, the Thomas Cook archive, now held at Peterborough, does not contain any records that would shed light on the identity of the clerk in question. What we do know, however, is that Thomas Cook’s responded to the epidemic by not offering any Italian and/or Venetian tours between 20th May (the last day of regular travel) and 12th August 1911 (the first day of resumed regular travel). It should thus be safe to assume that this episode from Mann’s *Death in Venice*, too, has an autobiographical fundamentum in re. The fact that the British clerk was, on a hot day in June, “clad in woollens” (2.1, 577) would have signalled many con-

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63 Incidentally, the *Neue Freie Presse* also reported on the quarrel between the Venetian medical association and the municipal and national authorities. See *Neue Freie Presse* 16808 (9th June 1911) 11. See also 2.2, 450.
64 Plessen/Mann 1974, 72. Provided Katia Mann’s recollection can be deemed reliable and if, as Mendelssohn and others state, it is correct that the Manns left Venice on 2nd June, this visit to the travel agency would have taken place on 1st June.
65 Pabst 2004, 196, and 2.2, 447.
66 I am grateful to Paul Smith, archivist of Thomas Cook Ltd, for providing me with the relevant information. The 1911 volume of the fortnightly *Traveller’s Gazette*, in which all tours offered by Thomas Cook were advertised, supports this argument.
temporary readers of the novella that he was taking his own precautions against cholera. Further facts and fictions

On 2nd June, the Manns left Venice for Munich taking the overnight train. On the very same day, von Aschenbach, as we know, arrives at Venice. Again on the very same day, Nasalli Rocca sent the following telegram to the Department of Health in Rome:

I shall summon him [Giordano] once more to my offices and shall hold confidential talks with our most prominent and influential doctors, who are all fully cognizant of the facts since they personally carried out the bacteriological examination of the two cases that were admitted to hospital. Our most important newspapers continue to maintain their silence [...]. Two other papers have run reports on the public health system, but only in order to issue denials and allay fears. I shall nevertheless contact them again to remind them that they ought not to mention the subject at all, which would reassure people most.

These officially decreed sedation tactics did no fail to produce the desired effect on a sizeable number of contemporary witnesses. Hermann Bahr (1863–1934), for instance, not only writes in his diary that he is determined not to let “the ridiculous cholera agitation in the Austrian press” spoil “the wonderful time” he is having during his stay on the Lido in the early part of June 1911, but also pens a letter to the editor of the Neue Freie Presse, stating: “To the concerned enquiries of our friends I should answer that I am absolutely convinced, not least on the strength of the information I have received from reliable sources, that there has not been a single case of the cholera in the whole of Venice.”

67 See s.v. “Cholera”, Brockhaus’ Konversations-Lexikon, 14th revised edition, vol. 4, Leipzig, Berlin, 1892, pp. 254–259, on p. 259: “Weiterhin ist Warmhalten der Füße und des Leibes durch Flanell und wollene Leibbinden dringend anzuraten.” Thomas Mann, too, may well have been aware of the prophylactic qualities of woollen garments, as is suggested not only by his meticulous study of the various Brockhaus entries, but also by a passage from a speech given in September 1939 at the 17th International PEN Congress at Stockholm and published later in the same year (XI, 953): “Heinrich Heine, in seiner ambivalenten, halb bejahenden und halb ironisierenden Art, schrieb im Jahre 1832 aus Paris: ‘Beim Ausbruche der Cholera versammelte die gute Königin ihre Freunde und Diener und verteilte unter ihnen Leibbinden von Flanell, die sie meistens selbst verfertigt hatte.’” See also Longmate 1966, 69f.

68 Quoted from Snowden 1995, 349. The “andere Blätter” may refer to the newspaper L’Adriatico, where we read on 4th June: “[…] le condizioni sanitarie di Venezia nulla lasciano a desiderare”. Quoted from Zorzanello 1996, 187.

69 See Vienna, Österreichisches Theatermuseum, Nachlaß Hermann Bahr, Tagebuch 1911. The entry dates from either 12th or 13th June and comments on the period June 1 to 12.

70 Neue Freie Presse (morning edition) 16806 (7th June 1911) 11. Karl Kraus, in his magazine Die Fackel, was quick to ridicule Bahr’s misjudgement. See Die Fackel 13, 326/327/328 (8th July 1911) 76 and Die Fackel 14, 354/355/356 (29th August 1912) 55. See also Pabst 2004,
During the first phase of the cholera epidemic, which lasted from 22nd May to 16th June 1911, the Venetian authorities recorded 52 cases of cholera, 16 of which proved fatal. Thomas Mann exaggerates these figures slightly when he writes in *Death in Venice*: “But after just one week, there were twenty or even thirty, and in different quarters of the city at that” (2.1, 578). A second wave of the epidemic announced itself on 27th June with yet another confirmed case, followed on 2nd July by a second and, on 5th July, a third. Between 6th and 15th July, a total of 39 patients were confirmed as suffering from cholera, 11 of whom died of the disease during this period. A third phase started on 25th July and lasted for about two months. Twenty-two of the 64 cholera cases occurring during this period proved fatal. The situation was exacerbated during yet another wave of the epidemic: between 8th October and 2nd November, 89 people contracted the disease, 38 of whom died. According to Vivante, Venice saw a total of 247 cholera cases during the year 1911, 88 of them fatal.

*Death from cholera*

In his novella Thomas Mann presumably has Gustav von Aschenbach meet his death during the second phase of the Venetian cholera epidemic that lasted until 15th July. Von Aschenbach’s death, both viewed from the vantage point of today’s state of medical knowledge and according to contemporary medical views, could well have resulted from a cholera infection. Georg Sticker, for example, writes in his book on cholera:

190–193. As two as yet unpublished letters from Thomas Mann to Hermann Bahr (Vienna, Österreichisches Theatermuseum, Nachlaß Hermann Bahr, Inv. Nr. AM 20787Ba and AM 20788Ba) would suggest, the two writers seem to have narrowly missed one another on the Lido in 1911. In his first letter, dated 11th August 1911, Thomas Mann suggests a meeting on the Lido for May 1912. This plan eventually came to naught, the reasons for which Mann explains in his second letter in August 1912: “Was mich hinderte, unsere Verabredung auf dem Lido zu halten, war eine wirkliche force majeure. Meine Frau, etwas leidend, ist seit fünf Monaten in Davos, und ich verbrachte meine Ferien bei ihr. Im Geiste übrigens war ich all diese Zeit in Lido – Venedig. Eine Novelle gewagter Art, die nächstens in der Rundschau erscheinen soll, spielt unter jener weichlichen Zone.”

Perhaps Thomas Mann’s own count of confirmed cholera cases was influenced by press reports. On 6th June 1911, the *Neue Freie Presse* reported on p. 12 that, by 1st June 1911, 23 cases of cholera had occurred in Venice.

Snowden 1995, 378f., counts 116 bacteriologically confirmed cholera fatalities of a total of 252 presumed cholera deaths. Gallo 1923, 93, lists 247 cases of cholera and 103 fatalities, the latter figure including the 21 people who had died of the disease in hospitals in outlying parishes.

Once again remarkable is the fact that 27th June, according to Thomas Mann’s notes (Arbeitsnotizen) the start of the fictional cholera outbreak in the novella, coincides precisely with the real-life beginning of the second wave of the 1911 Venice epidemic.
In its most extreme form, the disease causes instant death, as is the case with [...] cholera sicca, which kills instantaneously or within minutes without preceding or concomitant symptoms. This form of the disease is rarer in European epidemics, but has been observed more frequently in India, where [...] natives fleeing from a cholera-infected place, soldiers on a march, or journeying pilgrims were seen sinking to the ground as if struck by lightning and, asked what might be the matter with them, answered that they were feeling dizzy, complained of a buzzing in their ears and a clouding or complete loss of vision, and expired within a few minutes.74

It seems plausible that Thomas Mann has his protagonist von Aschenbach die of precisely this, the “most Asian” form of cholera, which, incidentally, was also known as *cholera apoplectica*. After all, von Aschenbach himself complains on the day of his death of “feeling ill” and suffering from “half corporeal spells of dizziness” (2.1, 590). Vivante also confirms that, over the course of the epidemic, all clinical forms of cholera, ranging from abortive to rapidly fatal courses of the disease, could be witnessed75. The novella’s portrayal of cholera is thus not only plausible and naturalistic throughout, but also absolutely consistent with both medical and historical facts. The fact that the final phrase of this part of the novella’s contrapuntal score merges with countless other closing phrases to form a complex and often ambiguous final chord that also allows for mythological, philosophical and cultural interpretations of von Aschenbach’s death does not detract from, but rather enriches our medico-historical reading.

**Conclusion**

The cholera *motif* in *Death in Venice*, while undoubtedly appropriated to serve Mann’s own poetological ends, has a solid grounding in historical and autobiographical fact, including:

1. Thomas Mann’s own experiences of cholera and its far-reaching consequences at Lübeck76, Sopot77 and, as we have seen, at Venice in 1911.
2. The historically verifiable events of the Venetian cholera epidemic in 1911, which Mann would partly have witnessed himself and partly heard and read about in newspaper reports.

74 Sticker 1912, 328; pace Renner 1985, 42.
75 Vivante 1917, 69.
76 For Thomas Mann’s awareness of cholera in Hamburg and its repercussions in Lübeck, see Rütten 2005, 164f., n. 97.
77 As far as I am aware, the holiday in Sopot marks the second occasion on which Thomas Mann came into indirect contact with cholera. See Rütten 2005, 165, n. 98; Vaget 1984, 179; Pabst 2004, 170, and the contributions by Seemann, Kolle and Petruschky, *Klinisches Jahrbuch* 16 (1907) 65–104 and 351–358.
3. Detailed background reading on the subject of cholera. The general encyclopaedia articles identified so far merely represent the tip of the iceberg here. Robert Koch’s accounts of his journeys, for example, deserve a mention in this context; Mann drew on Koch’s descriptions of the Bengal jungle with its tigers and, if I am not mistaken, parodied them in *Death in Venice*.

We are, I think, for once justified in trusting the writer when, in his 1930 memoirs (XI, 124), he virtually invites us to unravel the historical and autobiographical clues he seems to have left for us. Some of the specific elements of the cholera motif in *Death in Venice* have so far not been recognised as historically or indeed autobiographically motivated at all. Their identification as such, however, confirms a statement that has been gaining increasing currency in Mann criticism over recent years, namely the assertion that the writer preferred to find rather than invent the material for his fiction. Our own findings underscore the novella’s autobiographical character, which, albeit in a different context, has always been recognised by the critical community.

In some instances the dates of individual autobiographical encounters such as the one with the street-musicians were altered to fit von Aschenbach’s fictional itinerary; as far as cholera is concerned, however, Thomas Mann incorporates the historical facts into his novella with complete accuracy. His treatment of the 1911 cholera epidemic thus forms an integral part of the realistic, compositionally meaningful (XI, 124) surface structure of *Death in Venice*. The medical set pieces in Thomas Mann’s polyphonic textual scores lend a sense of solid scientific and historical grounding that distinguishes his

78 The period during which Thomas Mann was working on *Death in Venice* coincides with the publication of Robert Koch’s *Collected Works*. On the passage in question, see Robert Koch, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 2, 44. See Otis, 2000, who was the first to point out the connection between Koch’s account of his journey and *Death in Venice* and, on p. 245, suspects that Thomas Mann had been familiar with either Koch’s original 1884 account “or a journalistic synopsis of it”. This hypothesis seems supported by the fact that Koch’s *Collected Works* appeared in 1912. Pabst 2004, 199, also regards a direct link between the motif of the tiger in *Death in Venice* and Koch’s account of his journey as conceivable. On the latter, see also Gradmann 2003, 51. On the tiger motif and the Asian origins of Dionysius, see – notably – also Nietzsche I, 113, as well as the passage from a letter by Gustave Flaubert, which Thomas Mann had most likely been familiar with since before 1900 and which Werner 1972, 123, cites in support of his argument: “Zu denken […] daß ich vielleicht niemals in den Wäldern die Augen eines Tigers werde leuchten sehen, der im Bambus kauert” (Gustave Flaubert, Corr. II, 76). For more recent comments on the motif of the tiger in *Death in Venice*, see also 2, 2, 400–402.

79 The hypothesis that Mann is actually parodying Koch would be supported by the fact that even contemporary scientists (e.g. Sticker 1912, 129) dismissed Koch’s proposition of cholera originating in the Ganges Delta as pure fiction and thus exposed the image cultivation at work in Koch’s account.

80 See also the 1940 text *On myself* (XIII, 148) and Plessen/Mann 1974, 72 (“In seinen Einzelheiten ist also alles erlebt […].”), as well as Erika Mann’s letter to Andrzej Dolegowski, her father’s Polish translator, dated 24th September 1964, as quoted in Rütten 2005, 166, n. 101.

81 For references, see Rütten 2005, 167, n. 102.
writing. Reviewed with the benefit of hindsight and from a medico-historical perspective, Thomas Mann’s account of cholera in Venice is characterised by a rare and almost preternatural insightfulness into an otherwise murky affair that was marked by rumours, speculations and denials. The city (and its authorities) is diagnosed by the writer with unfailing accuracy. The course of the epidemic and the responses to it are described with historiographical precision. Such characteristics almost turn the novella into the most reliable and accurate contemporary published source of information as regards the cholera epidemic that reached Venice in 1911.

Perhaps Thomas Mann was uniquely prepared to sense the cultural factors that, in addition to social, economical and political considerations, may have led the Venetian authorities to their

While 2.2, 506f., states that the newspaper cutting on the Palermo cholera contained in Thomas Mann’s notes (Arbeitsnotizen) is probably just “ein Beispiel […] für die Verbreitung genauerer Informationen über die Choleraepidemie von 1910–1911, die trotz der Bemühungen der italienischen Behörden allmählich europaweit bekannt wurde”, one nevertheless ought to consider the exceptional position Venice occupied both in the cholera epidemic itself and in the resultant information and disinformation strategies employed by both local and national authorities. News about cases of cholera in Venice spread only by hearsay, and there were about as many official denials as there were rumours going around. How easy it was to arrive at conclusions very different from Thomas Mann’s is shown by an article entitled “Cholera in Italy” and published on 5th July in The Times. At the time Mann’s novella was published, “die skandalösen Hintergründe der Epidemie von 1911” were only “längst allgemein bekannt” (as we read in 2.2, 381) in so far as they had been the subject of much discussion in editorial columns and letters to the editors of several newspapers. Even after Venice had been successfully ridded of cholera, there were no official statements (let alone statistical data about the epidemic). Vivante’s 1917 report is, to my knowledge, the first substantial admission on the part of the authorities that a cholera epidemic had indeed occurred. At that time people no longer cared two hoots about an event that had taken place before the First World War and, what is more, had “only” involved about a hundred or so fatalities. The quantum leap in fatality brought about by the First World War virtually dwarfed the ephemeral cholera deaths that had occurred in Venice in 1911.

As regards the latter, Thomas Mann may well have drawn on his reading of Ibsen, who, in An Enemy of the People (1882), relates a story that would also seem highly applicable to the cholera epidemic at Venice. I am grateful to Sander Gilman for having drawn my attention to this play. On historical precedents of such hush-ups, see Althammer. I thank Steven King and Beate Althammer for providing access to this forthcoming publication.
strategy of a hush-up. Such factors are centrally to do with the myth of Venice, spun and perpetuated in, above all, the second half of the nineteenth century by poets, thinkers, composers and visual artists. This myth had cast Venice as the threshold between Asia and Europe, between the Dionysian and the Apollonian, between nature and culture, making the city the epitome of ambiguity and, as such, a place of both fascination and fear. An official admission of a cholera epidemic would have put an all too obvious and ghastly grimace on the mythical Janus face of Venice. It would have turned the cultural entrepôt between the East and the West into a gateway for diseases of human traffic such as cholera – into a locus minoris resistentiae of the Western castle of health, into a weak point in the colonial fortifications against biological vengeance on the part of the colonised. It would have transformed a stronghold of culture and civilisation into a European hotbed of spreading infection. It would have forced the city where time marches to the beat of a different drum, where past and present are indistinguishable from one another, into the temporal grid of the age of hygiene, in which any claim to civilisation crucially depended on the absence of epidemic disease. It would have turned the city of (individual) love and (individual) death, the city of Tristan, the bacteriological low-point of which had traditionally been marked by the genialising syphilis, into a ghost town of collective and degrading mass dying. And, last but not least, it would have forced people to acknowledge that reality can, on occasion, catch up with and indeed belie even the most powerful of myths.

**Abbreviations**

“2.1” Reed, Terence/Malte Herwig (eds), *Thomas Mann. Frühe Erzählungen. 1893–1912* (Frankfurt am Main 2004) (= Thomas Mann. Grosse kommentierte Frankfurter Ausgabe, vol. 2.1)

“2.2” Reed, Terence/Malte Herwig (eds), *Thomas Mann. Frühe Erzählungen. 1893–1912. Kommentar* (Frankfurt am Main 2004) (= Thomas Mann. Grosse kommentierte Frankfurter Ausgabe, vol. 2.2)


85 See Bergdolt 2003; Corbineau-Hoffmann 1993.
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