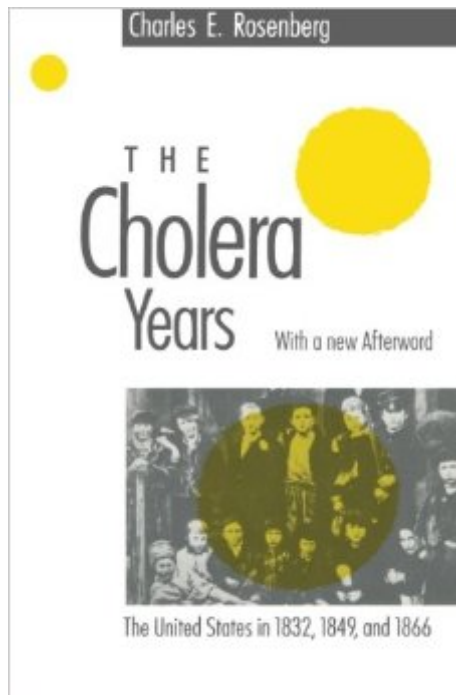


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# The Cholera Years: The United States In 1832, 1849, And 1866



## Synopsis

Cholera was the classic epidemic disease of the nineteenth century, as the plague had been for the fourteenth. Its defeat was a reflection not only of progress in medical knowledge but of enduring changes in American social thought. Rosenberg has focused his study on New York City, the most highly developed center of this new society. Carefully documented, full of descriptive detail, yet written with an urgent sense of the drama of the epidemic years, this narrative is as absorbing for general audiences as it is for the medical historian. In a new Afterword, Rosenberg discusses changes in historical method and concerns since the original publication of *The Cholera Years*. "A major work of interpretation of medical and social thought . . . this volume is also to be commended for its skillful, absorbing presentation of the background and the effects of this dread disease." "I.B. Cohen, *New York Times*" "The Cholera Years is a masterful analysis of the moral and social interest attached to epidemic disease, providing generally applicable insights into how the connections between social change, changes in knowledge and changes in technical practice may be conceived." "Steven Shapin, *Times Literary Supplement*" "In a way that is all too rarely done, Rosenberg has skillfully interwoven medical, social, and intellectual history to show how medicine and society interacted and changed during the 19th century. The history of medicine here takes its rightful place in the tapestry of human history." "John B. Blake, *Science*

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In the Republic era of America, people were assaulted daily by their own visions of success, failure,

the expectations and weaknesses of a still developing concept of democracy, poverty, and illness. One such illness, Cholera, infected America three times during this period: 1832, 1849, and 1866. In America, "Cholera represented a constant and randomly reoccurring stimulus against which the varying reactions and systems of Americans could be judged", and it caused gradual changes in social attitudes, government, religious thought, and medicine as people tried to understand and cope with the disease. Historians have recently given little attention to defining and then writing about the social changes brought about by cholera, both as a process and its final result. It is part of history's recent interest in social aspects such as family and school, which medicine is a part of because the two are linked by every day life concerns. The Cholera Years is an interesting and easy to read book. One of its strengths lies in its readability and in how it engages the reader through primary sources. Historical books that tell stories and relate true life accounts and words are more interesting than those that simply move from one fact to the next. Also, Rosenberg is very organized in his presentation of information. The sections, chopped up by cholera year, follow the same patterns as far as how information is addressed. As a result, though we are reading from one year to the next, the progressions of society and thought are easy to follow and connect together. It actually made more sense this way than if Rosenberg had approached the book topically, which would have jumped around and only confused. Unfortunately, as a weakness, Rosenberg is very repetitive.

"The Cholera Years: The United States in 1832, 1849, and 1866," by Charles E. Rosenberg, University of Chicago Press, 1987. This 265-page paperback tells the story of cholera, one of the most deadly diseases of the nineteenth century. Rosenberg's story covers the three major epidemics through the eyes of New York city newspapers. The symptoms of cholera are characteristic. The patient experiences a sudden onset of violent vomiting, severe cramps, and diarrhea. Patients become dehydrated and often are pale and cold. Many die rapidly often within 24-hrs. The disease is thought to have originated in India. Hence, the name Asian cholera. The epidemics traveled slowly, usually with considerable forewarning. Quarantine was the usual means to delay its spread, but this method usually failed. Smallpox, the scourge of the eighteenth century had been conquered with vaccination, but cholera posed frightening new challenges. Germ theory would arrive only in the 1850s, and be accepted only in the 1890s. Medical practice was primitive. Bleeding was still a common treatment. Diseases were poorly understood. Hospitals were considered death wards for the poor; nursing an unclean profession. The cause of cholera was widely debated. Even the idea the disease was contagious was uncertain. Were the victims both

exposed to the same cause, or did one catch the disease from the other? The poor living in the slums of the cities were often the victims. This was not a disease of the upper classes, so much so that if one fell to the disease, the cause was "previous indiscretions." Not surprisingly in 1849 in New York, most victims were Irish and Catholic. Slum dwellers often lacked clean drinking water and relied on privies rather than sewers.

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