

## **The Political and Social Consequences of the Black Death, 1348 – 1351** **By Walter S. Zapotoczny**

The Black Death was one of the worst natural disasters in history. It swept over Europe and Asia and ravaged cities causing widespread hysteria and death. The Black Death, also known as the Black Plague, was a devastating pandemic that struck Europe in the mid-14th century. Plague epidemics also occurred in large portions of Asia and the Middle East during the same period, which indicates this outbreak was actually a world wide pandemic. The initial 14th century European event was called the "Great Mortality" by contemporary writers, and with later outbreaks, became known as the Black Death. The name comes from a symptom of the disease, called *acral necrosis*, in which sufferers' skin would blacken due to subdermal hemorrhages. Historical records attribute the Black Death to an outbreak of bubonic plague, an epidemic of the bacterium *Yersinia pestis* spread by fleas with the help of animals like the black rat. The result of the plague was not just a massive decline in population. It irrevocably changed Europe's social and economic structure and was a disastrous blow to Europe's predominant organized religion, the Roman Catholic Church. It caused widespread persecutions of minorities like Jews and lepers, and created a general morbid mood, which influenced people to live for the moment, unsure of their daily survival.

The Black Death had many long-term consequences. One was a series of vicious attacks on Jews, lepers, and outsiders who were accused of deliberately poisoning the water or the air. Lepers were singled out and persecuted. Anyone with a skin disease such as acne or psoriasis was thought to be a leper, and leprosy was believed to be an outward sign of an inner defect of the soul. They were, for the most part, exterminated throughout Europe. The attacks against Jews began in the south of France, but were most dramatic in parts of Switzerland and German areas with a long history of attacks on local Jewish communities. Massacres in Bern, Switzerland were typical of this pattern; after weeks of fearful tension, Jews were rounded up and burned or drowned in marshes. Sometimes there were attacks on Jews even where there was no plague. This persecution was often done, not solely out of religious hatred, but as a way of attacking the Kings or the Church who normally protected the Jews. Jews were often called the King's property and it was a way for people to lash out at the institutions who they believe had failed them. Fewer Jews died from the Black Death, in part due to rabbinical law which called for a lifestyle that was, in general, cleaner than that of a medieval villager. Also, Jewish ghettos kept them more separate from the general population. This made Jews looked suspicious. The Pope, the leader of the Catholic Church, and most public officials condemned the massacres and tried to stop them. In the face of mob fury, however, they were often unsuccessful. Renewed religious fervor and fanaticism bloomed in the wake of Black Death. Fierce *pogroms* (massacres of helpless people) frequently resulted in the death or banishment of most of the Jews in a town or city. By 1351, 60 major and 150 smaller Jewish communities had been exterminated, and more than 350 separate massacres had occurred.

An important legacy of the Black Death was to cause the eastward movement of what was left of north European Jewry to Poland and Russia, where it remained until the 20th century. In World War II, the most hideous crimes were committed against the Jewish population of Eastern Europe. Because of the Black Death, the Jewish population of Europe became identified as the traditional scapegoat. The Black Death intensified the mediaeval Christian tradition of the Jew as a scapegoat and, by causing the migration of so large a number to the east and north of Europe, can be linked to the pogroms of Imperial Russia and the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

It is estimated that between one-third and one-half of the European population died from the outbreak between 1348 and 1350. As many as 25% of all villages were depopulated, mostly the smaller communities, as the few survivors fled to larger towns and cities. The Black Death hit the towns and cities disproportionately hard. Some rural areas, for example, Eastern Poland and Lithuania, had such low populations and were so isolated that the plague made little progress. Larger cities were the worst off, as population densities and close living quarters made disease transmission easier. Cities were also strikingly filthy, infested with lice, fleas and rats, and subject to diseases related to malnutrition and poor hygiene. According to historian John Kelly, "woefully inadequate sanitation made medieval urban Europe so disease-ridden, no city of any size could maintain its population without a constant influx of immigrants from the countryside." The influx of new citizens facilitated the movement of the plague between communities, and contributed to the longevity of the plague within larger

communities. Bremen in Germany lost almost 7,000 of its 12,000 inhabitants. The prosperous city of Florence, Italy, may have lost 40,000 of its nearly 90,000 inhabitants. Nearby Siena probably lost two-thirds of its urban population. Paris, the largest city north of the Alps, lost more than 50,000 of its 180,000 inhabitants. Most major cities were quickly forced to create mass graveyards where the dead could be buried. Many towns and villages lost almost all of their populations, and some eventually disappeared altogether. Larger towns declined drastically, as their workforces and merchant classes either died or fled. The initial population losses could have been quickly made up, but new epidemics prevented a return to the high population levels of the period before 1348. European population only began to grow again in the last decades of the 15th century.

The precise demographic impact of the disease in the Middle East is impossible to calculate. Mortality was particularly high in rural areas, including significant areas of Palestine and Syria. Many surviving rural people fled, leaving their fields and crops, and entire rural provinces are recorded as being totally depopulated. Surviving records in some cities reveal a devastating number of deaths. The 1348 outbreak in Gaza left an estimated 10,000 people dead, while Aleppo recorded a death rate of 500 a day during the same year. In Damascus, at the disease's peak in September and October 1348, a thousand deaths were recorded every day, with overall mortality estimated at between 25 and 38 percent. Syria lost a total of 400,000 people by the time the epidemic subsided in March 1349. In contrast to some higher mortality estimates in Asia and Europe, scholars believe the mortality rate in the Middle East was less than one-third of the total population, with higher rates in selected areas.

The plague did more than just devastate the medieval population. It caused a substantial change in the economy and society in all areas of the world. Economic historians have concluded that the Black Death began during a recession in the European economy that had been under way since the beginning of the century, and only served to worsen it. The Black Death should have opened the way to increased peasant prosperity. Europe had been overpopulated before the plague, and a reduction of thirty percent to fifty percent of the population should have meant less competition for resources. There was more available land and food, and higher wages. The great population loss brought economic changes based on increased social mobility, as depopulation further eroded the peasants' already weakened obligations to remain on the land.

In Western Europe, the sudden scarcity of cheap labor provided an incentive for landlords to compete for peasants with wages and freedoms, an innovation that, some argue, represents the roots of capitalism. The resulting social upheaval caused the Renaissance and even Reformation. In many ways the Black Death improved the situation of surviving peasants. In Western Europe, because of the shortage of labor, they were in more demand and had more power. Because of the reduced population, there was more fertile land available. However, the benefits would not be fully realized until 1470, nearly 120 years later, when overall population levels finally began to rise again.

The death of so many people concentrated wealth in the hands of survivors. In many cases, those workers who remained alive could earn up to five times what they had earned before the plague. In the towns, plague had the effect of consolidating wealth somewhat, especially among the middle class. The drop in population was accompanied by a corresponding rise in per capita wealth. There were large increases in spending in the towns at this time. Profits, however, for property owners and merchants declined as they found themselves having to pay higher wages and getting less when they sold their products. Governments were forced to adjust to the social disruption caused by plague. First local governments, and then in the case of England, the monarchy, attempted to regulate the movement and price of foodstuffs as well as wages paid to laborers. The English Statute of Laborers of 1351 tried to hold wages at pre-plague levels. Similar statutes were passed in various parts of France, Germany, and Italy. Property owners tried to collect higher fees from tenant farmers as a way to increase declining incomes. Unrest among the peasants was one of the major causes of the English Peasants' Revolt of 1381. The English rebels objected to high payments to landowners and legal limitations on the rights of some peasants. Economic and political unrest occurred in most parts of Europe during the second half of the 14th century.

The governments of Europe had no effective response to the crisis because no one knew its cause or how it spread. Although many governments had medical workers trying to prevent the plague, it persisted. The majority of medical workers quit and journeyed away because they feared getting the plague themselves. Most countries instituted measures that prohibited exports of foodstuffs,

condemned black market speculators, set price controls on grain, and outlawed large-scale fishing. At best, they proved unenforceable, and at worse, they contributed to a continent-wide downward spiral. The hardest hit lands, like England, were unable to buy grain abroad from France because of the prohibition, and from most of the rest of the grain producers because of crop failures from shortage of labor. Any grain that could be shipped was eventually taken by pirates or looters to be sold on the black market. Meanwhile, many of the largest countries, most notably England and Scotland, had been at war, using up much of their treasury and exacerbating inflation.

In Eastern Europe, by contrast, renewed stringency of laws tied the remaining peasant population more tightly to the land than ever before through serfdom. The Black Death less affected sparsely populated Eastern Europe and so peasant revolts were less common in the 14th and 15th centuries, not occurring in the east until the 16th through 19th centuries. Since it is believed to have in part caused the social upheavals of 14th- and 15th-century Western Europe, some see the Black Death as a factor in the Renaissance and even the Reformation in Western Europe. Therefore, historians have cited the smaller impact of the plague as a contributing factor in Eastern Europe's failure to experience either of these movements on a similar scale. The Black Death is seen as partly responsible for Eastern Europe's considerable lag in scientific and philosophical advances, as well as in the move to liberalize government by restricting the power of the monarch and aristocracy. A common example is that England is seen to have effectively ended serfdom by 1550 while moving towards government that is more representative. Meanwhile, Russia did not abolish serfdom until 1861.

The Black Death changed religion drastically. The old religious moorings were weakened. Many believed the wrath of God seemed to be raining upon earth. Symptoms of mass neurosis appeared. Some people sought refuge in merriment or luxury and self-indulgence. Others became preoccupied with grisly subjects. Inspired by Black Death, *Danse Macabre* (Dance of Death) is an allegory consisting of the personified death leading a row of dancing figures from all walks of life to the grave. They were typically with an emperor, king, pope, monk, youngster, beautiful girl, all in skeleton-state. They were produced to remind people of how fragile their lives were and how vain the glories of earthly life were on the universality of death. Many frantically performed the Dance of Death in cemeteries, while others secretly celebrated the Black Mass, mimicking religion in a mad desire to appease the devil. The Black Death led to cynicism toward religious officials who could not keep their frequent promises of curing plague victims and banishing the disease. No one, the Church included, was able to cure or even explain the plague. In fact, most thought it spread somehow through air. This increased doubting of the clergy. Pope Clement VI reigned during the plague years in Europe during a time when the papacy was based in Avignon, France. This period in papal history, known as the Babylonian Captivity to its detractors, was a concurrent cause of the people's lack of faith in the Catholic Church. The Avignon popes were seen as having subordinated themselves to the French monarchy, and their ineffectiveness regarding the Black Death only compounded the common man's disillusionment. Extreme alienation with the church culminated in support for different religious groups such as the Order of Flagellants, which grew tremendously during the opening years of the Black Death angering church and political officials greatly. Flagellants practiced self-flogging to atone for sins. Its members went into the streets, two by two, beating each other with chains and whips. Flagellants traveled from town to town and were often looked upon as spreaders of the disease. The Black Death hit the monasteries very hard because of their close quarters and their kindness in helping the sick. There was a severe shortage of clergy after the epidemic cycle. This resulted in a mass influx of new clergy members, most of whom did not share the life-long convictions and experiences of the veterans they replaced. The result was abuses by the clergy in the years afterwards and a further deterioration of the position of the Church in the eyes of the people.

The Black Death had an effect on the arts. After 1350 European culture in general turned very morbid. The general mood was one of pessimism, and the arts turned dark with representations of death. Both sculptors and painters began to portray the dead and dying, as well as images of death and the grim reaper. People's attitudes towards music and art changed as they began to see the depression surrounding them. The horrific nature of the Black Death was reflected in the realistic depictions of human suffering and carnage as well as the symbolic use of the skeleton. In Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, a group of young people fleeing the plague takes refuge in a house outside of Florence where they entertain each other with colorful and irreverent stories. While these stories are often seen as a rejection of traditional medieval values, Boccaccio himself was critical of those who abandoned relatives and friends in the face of the plague. Like the artists of the day, Boccaccio continued to hold

traditional social and religious values. The primary impact of the Black Death on painting and sculpture was the willingness of the newly rich to invest in religious art for churches and chapels. These contributions were often made in gratitude for being spared the plague, or with the hope of preventing future infection.

The science of *alchemy* (medieval chemical science and speculative philosophy) was also affected by the plague. As a specialty and method of treatment, it was considered the norm for most scientists and doctors prior and during the Black Death. However, after the plague had taken its toll, the practice of alchemy slowly began to wane. The citizenry began to realize that, in most cases, it did not affect the progress of the epidemic and that some of the potions and "cures" used by many doctors throughout Christendom and the Islamic world only helped to worsen the condition of the sick. Because the stench of decaying bodies from those who had succumbed to the plague was so noxious, many thought that the plague was spread via the atmosphere and so used pungent scents hoping to keep it away. Scents such as pine and rosemary were burned like incense or processed into oils in which handkerchiefs were dipped and placed over the mouth and nose. Church bells were chimed in a futile bid to ward off the plague. Merchants sold charms and spells to ward off the plague. Rumors that claimed a person had done or worn something particular to survive led to the newest fad to prevent or cure the disease. Liquor (distilled alcohol), originally made by alchemists, was commonly applied as a remedy for the Black Death, and as a result the popularity and consumption of liquor in Europe rose dramatically after the plague.

The Black Death was a historical event of great magnitude, and one with many consequences. The indirect influences on history are significant and give rise to many speculations on what might have happened had there been no Black Death. The impact of plague was greater on England than any other European country. The Black Death struck such a blow to the already weakened feudal system that it lost much of its meaning within two generations and had entirely disappeared within 150 years. On the European continent, the system was more rigid and lingered on for centuries, giving way year by year in one country after another to monarchy and other forms of government. The Black Death greatly accelerated social and economic change during the 14th and 15th centuries. It also led to peasant uprisings in many parts of Europe, such as France (the Jacquerie rebellion) and in Italy (the Ciompi rebellion, which swept the city of Florence). One of the groups that suffered the most was the Christian church. It lost prestige, spiritual authority, and leadership over the people. The church promised cures, treatment, and an explanation for the plague. They said it was God's will, but the reason for this awful punishment was unknown. People wanted answers, but the priests and bishops did not have any. Many of the clergy abandoned their Christian duties and fled. People prayed to God and begged for forgiveness. After the plague ended, angry and frustrated villagers started to revolt against the church. The survivors were also enraged at doctors, who said they could cure patients but did not. Soon after the last eruption of the Black Death, the views on children also changed. Although carrying on the family name was still considered important, the birth rate dropped. Children were considered "not worth the trouble" to raise since they would probably die anyway. It took four hundred years before Europe's population equaled the pre-Black Death figures. The demand for agricultural workers gave survivors a new bargaining power. Workers formerly bound to the land could now travel and command higher wages for their services.

In addition, people left rural areas and migrated to cities for higher wages. The economic structure of land-based wealth shifted. Portable wealth in the form of money, skills, and services emerged. Small towns and cities grew while large estates and manors began to collapse. The very social, economic, and political structure of Europe was forever altered. One tiny insect, a flea, toppled feudalism and changed the course of history in Europe.

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