

**THE BLACK DEATH AND ITS EFFECT ON THE HISTORY
AND SOCIALIZATION OF THE WESTERN WORLD**

Encountering America
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W. Randolph Stilson
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PREFACE

The Black Death of 1346 - 1348 and its relation to historical change is not one of direct cause but of contributory effect. The disease helped cause historic and social change, but the change (especially in economic systems) was not initiated by the historical event known as the Black Death but accelerated by it.

In this paper I hope to show what effects the Black Death has had on the history and socialization of Europe and consequently on the United States. Most is fact or interpretation by experts, but I have interspersed some serious speculation on what would have happened had the Bubonic Plague not appeared in Europe in the fourteenth century?

The primary significance of this paper is based on English history and how the plague helped cause major changes in the socialization, social structure, and the history of England thus effecting the subsequent history of America as well. In addition, plague in the history of France and that of Scandinavian countries may also have some validity in speculations on how the Black Death has effected American history and socialization.

I. INTRODUCTION

"Pestilence was endemic in an age of narrow, filthy, and sunless streets and almost complete ignorance of sanitation, but there existed no parallel for the plague which came sweeping out of the East in 1347 'by operation of the superior bodies, or rather for our enormous iniquities, by the just anger of God'"^[1]

These words aptly describe the setting in which the Black Death occurred. The towns and cities were poorly prepared to handle such a catastrophe. The people lived in dirty, unsanitary, and crowded towns with open sewers and here they were more prone to all epidemic diseases. The country folk and the aristocrats and nobles in their country houses were comparatively safe from plague though it often invaded the country as well because of roving plague victims who did not realize their own sickness or did not care if others caught it from them.

Many of the townspeople, though not sick with the plague, died of starvation while attempting to run away from the cities where the pestilence was destroying the population. "The people did not understand it (the plague) and feared it so terribly that it sent a tremor through the whole of society".^[2] Their fear can be seen in the characterizations they made of the Black Death. Much art and popular imaginings during this time depict the Black Death in a variety of ways: "An armed man on a huge black horse, or a vast, black coated giant towering above the tops of the houses".^[3] Dancing also was used to try and express the plague in a concrete form - thus the "Danse Macabre"^[4] came into existence.

The Church used the Black Death as an opportunity to show the uncertainty of human life and to impress upon the people the idea that master and peasant were indeed equal at least in death. The people responded by asking, "Why us"? Why was the plague visiting them and how could it be sent away? The pious turned to God and the Saints for answers. Others became more anxious about sin and damnation and the popular religion of saints, the Holy Virgin, the Pieta^[5] - and fear of demons became common. The practice of selling indulgences (or pardons from sins) for money or other gifts was increased by the church - a practice which would be condemned by others after the disease had passed.

It is not surprising that all this should happen. People were superstitious and when, in the

evening, cartloads full of the dead were pulled through the streets towards the burial trenches, it is a little easier to understand why the people behaved as they did.^[6] So great was the number of dead that in many areas there was no one left to bury them. Those bodies which were buried were likely to be dumped in a shallow pit along with many others - clothed and unclothed - and covered with a scant covering of earth. There was no time and little money for digging individual six-foot-deep graves. Only the rich could afford coffins and burial in a church cemetery.

"The Black Death was not just another incident in the long list of epidemics which have smitten the world. It was probably the greatest European catastrophe in history".^[7] Let us now see why.

II WHAT IS THE BLACK DEATH

Origin of the Name

Briefly, the Black Death is what is known now as the Bubonic Plague. The disease became identified as the Black Death because of the enormous amount of dead and the color of the corpses. The speed and result of the disease is shown in this description by a physician in the Great Plague of London in 1665. The physician describes "the fifteen year old servant of a certain William Pick of Petticoat lane who developed buboes on a Thursday and died the following Sunday. The autopsy, in his own words, 'much exhilarated by spirits'. The boy's body was placed in an open courtyard with a porringer containing sulphur burning beneath it, and the doctor's description speaks for itself. 'A skin so beset with spots black and blue more remarkable for multitude and magnitude than any I have yet seen'".[\[8\]](#)

Other names for this disease are known according to the environment in which it takes place. In urban areas it is sometimes called Murine (rat) or Urban Plague. In desert or rural areas with sparse human population but a large population of infected rodents, the disease is labelled Sylvatic (woodland) or Campestral (field) plague.

Types of Plague :

There are three types of plague which can appear separately or together. The most common form is the bubonic type. "Bubonic refers to the characteristic bubo or enlarged lymphatic gland which usually occurs in the groin but also in the armpit or on the neck. The disease is spread by fleas from rodents which have the plague bacilli.

The second type is the Pneumonic plague. This is the contagious variety and the most dangerous from the point of view that most epidemics and pandemics are caused when the disease changes from the bubonic type to the pneumonic one. Pneumonic plague can be spread directly from man to man just like the common cold. The breath and sputum of the victim can spread the bacilli when he speaks, coughs, or sneezes. Any bystander is in danger of catching the disease by inhaling the bacilli. The characteristic symptom of this type is the blood-stained sputum as in ordinary pneumonia. The widespread and high mortality of the plague indicates that this was the predominant form of the disease in all the major plague epidemics.

The third type and the most deadly for the individual victim is the Septicaemic form in which "the organism, *Pasteurella Pestis* rapidly multiplies in the bloodstream causing a high temperature and death from septicaemia".[\[9\]](#) In this case, blood poisoning occurs

before buboes can develop.

The Cause:

As stated above, the organism responsible for all forms of plague is the bacilli *Pasteurella Pestis*, also called *Bacillus Pestis*, or *Yersinia Pestis* after one of its two discoverers. The bacilli and the disease are normally found in rats and other rodents. In most of the European epidemics, the plague was at first of the bubonic type which can only be spread to humans by the fleas of rats. This will only occur if the flea cannot find a rodent host and so the outbreaks of plague in humans can usually be forecast when large numbers of rodents, (especially rats) have died from the plague.

In England and probably in other European countries as well, the Black rat (*rattus rattus*), also known as the Old English Rat, was the main carrier of the plague bacilli. This particular rat is companionable with man, that is, it likes to live in close proximity to man. This allows for more chances of human infection and consequently the spread of the bubonic plague to small epidemic levels - perhaps two to three hundred human deaths per week.

Endemic Reservoirs:

Today there are many areas in which *Pasteurella Pestis* is still endemic. The countries in South America, the Indian sub-continent, China and Indo-China, and some parts of Africa and the United States west of the Mississippi river have large rodent populations which harbor the bacilli.

Prognosis of the Victim:

The plague is a quick killer. Its onset is sudden. After a brief incubation period of 36 hours to six days, the first symptoms appear. "First symptoms were headache, feverish, shivering and sneezing. These were followed swiftly by the appearance of dark red spots on many parts of the body and painful swellings or buboes like huge boils usually in the armpits and groin, and sometimes by vomiting. The fever would augment rapidly, the pulse become feeble and in a matter of days the patient would be near death".^[10] The appearance of buboes occurred about the second day.

kept open by a clyster. Intercourse with women is mortal; there should be no coition nor should one sleep in any woman's bed".[\[12\]](#)

Though some of the preceding may have helped prevent catching some other diseases such as the common cold, most of it is as full of superstition and ignorance as the quacks, most of whom made a fair profit but lost their lives in the plague themselves.

The first truly helpful measure taken was the quarantine of sick individuals in their own houses. This measure was accompanied by other useless methods however, and even some which helped spread the plague further. For example, large bon fires were lit and kept burning night and day at the street corners and in front of every sixth house to "purify" the air. Also, when a sick person was quarantined, his family was usually made to stay with him. Thus many healthy people contracted the disease from another member of their own family who would have desired their family to escape the dreaded contagion.

As history progressed after the Black Death event of 1348, we find that other methods of dealing with the plague and other communicable diseases slowly come into existence, some by accident, others by intent. When sea routes to the Indies were established, the land routes fell into disuse. This fact, in addition to a quarantining of ships in the harbor, helped rid Europe of plague. The agrarian revolution also had an effect as it led to better housing for the peasant and helped exclude rats from human dwellings.

By far the most helpful new method for plague prevention at that time was the adoption of health and sanitation laws which were intentional acts by most European governments once they learned how valuable a prevention measure it was for all diseases.

Modern Methods:

Today, treatment and prevention methods are available and plague is no longer the mystifying ogre it once was. Prevention now includes:

- *Appropriate sanitary measures
- *Efforts to enhance the resistance of the individual
- *The isolation of the sick and cautious handling of all infectious material

In addition, insecticides and rodent poisons eliminate the vectors of the bacilli. DDT was used very effectively in World War II to prevent plague by killing the fleas before they could infect the soldiers.

Aside from vaccines using weakened and dead plague bacilli to build up the resistance in the individual, two chemical medicines have been proven effective in the treatment of plague. These are the sulfonamides and streptomycin.

I have tried to show what the people of the middle ages had to contend with without the benefit of today's miracle drugs or even the knowledge of what was killing them. It is no wonder that their behavior was as it was.[\[13\]](#) The rest of the material to be presented should show how the plague effected society as a whole.

III. A SHORT HISTORY OF PLAGUE IN THE WORLD

First Known Existence:

The first known existence of the bubonic plague dates back to ancient Egypt and Greece. There is also a possible reference to it amongst the Philistines in the Bible. "I Samuel" chapters 5 and 6.

Fall of the Roman Empire:

The fall of the Roman Empire is perhaps partly a result of the plague. In 542 A.D., the city of Constantinople "was struck by a plague that is said to have killed three out of every five inhabitants; the decline of Constantinople dates from this catastrophe".[\[14\]](#) This plague was known as the "Plague of Justinian" as it occurred while Justinian was emperor of Rome.

Since one case of pneumonic plague can cause a pandemic, it is a wondrous miracle that in the one thousand one hundred years between 540 and 1666 there have been only three. Justinian's Plague was one of these and coincides with the fall of the Roman Empire. The second pandemic during this period was the Black Death (1346-61) which closed the age of feudalism.

To Europe: Invasion of the Black Death.

The Crusaders had carried the disease back to Europe with them from the Middle East, but the

Black Death itself was begun in the small fortified trading post of Caffa (now Theodosia) on the

Crimean shore of the Black Sea. Here a company of Italian merchants, engaged in overland trade between Europe and China took refuge from an attack by a Tartar horde. The trading post was besieged for two years but in 1346 the siege was raised due to plague which is thought to have been introduced by the Tartars throwing corpses into the fort.[\[15\]](#)

From this small trading post, the plague was spread to the Caspian Sea; north from there to Russia and East to India and China (by 1352) by the Tartars. The Italians departed for Genoa carrying the plague with them. The contagion spread from there wreaked havoc throughout Europe and reached Moscow from the west in 1352. It spread further to include parts of Africa in the southern hemisphere and as far north as the Scandinavian countries. It reached west as far as Greenland having an adverse effect on the Viking

settlements there.

A possible contribution to the propagation of plague in Europe was the climate. There was a series of three abnormally wet and cold summers culminating in that of 1348, "when it is related the rain fell unceasingly from midsummer until Christmas, implying a period of prolonged dearth with consequent malnutrition, illness, and reduced resistance to infectious diseases".[\[16\]](#)

The plague reached France from Provence in 1347. Provence had received it from the eastern Mediterranean area (Levant) in the same year. During the first visitation of the Black Death in France (1347-1350), the population was decreased by one-third. There was to be several more visitations in the Fourteenth century.

In 1348 the disease spread from Normandy to England and by 1349 had reached Scotland. The Scots might have avoided the touch of death from plague altogether but seeing England in a weakened condition they made the fatal error of going to war against the English and the plague soon had both countries defeated.

In Italy, the Pope issued a decree to all good Catholics. Pope Clement VI (while sitting in a palace isolated from the general populace and between two bon fires) declared the year 1350 a holy year and promised complete absolution from their sins to all who might die on a pilgrimage to Rome. Two million souls made the journey, only a third of them returned.

Effect on the Population:

Several waves of plague hit Europe between 1346 and 1361. The one in 1361 is considered to have been the worst. In England alone, population studies show one and a half million people missing between the years of 1349 and 1377. In all of Europe it is estimated that 24 to 25 million people died, a quarter to a third of Europe's population at the time. Both urban and rural populations were effected so there was no salvation in running to the countryside.

Plague in England, 1665:

The third great pandemic to occur between 540 and 1666 A.D. has become known as the "Great Plague of London" though it was grave in most of the rest of Europe and the world as well. The Great Plague of London raged for only one year in England (1665-1666 and was followed by the Great Fire of London in 1666. Justinian's Plague and that of 1665

began as rat-flea-man infections and spread from the coast inland. Those who attended the sick in the early stages of the epidemic ran no greater risk of catching the sickness than those who did not.

Records show that plague was practically endemic in London from 1590 onwards. It was originally brought from the continent by the armies returning from the wars against France. The first serious outbreak in England in 1603 claimed 33,000 lives and the disease returned at ten year intervals until the Great Plague.

The Great Plague of London began as only the bubonic type. The rise in the weekly death rate in London to 200 - 300 people per week can be attributed to a great increase in the number of infected rats. But soon the weekly bills were listing thousands of deaths which signified a direct man to man infection. On 7 June 1665, several houses were marked with the "red cross" to signify they had been sealed off and the occupants were quarantined. "From the seventh of June to July 1, the weekly return of plague deaths was 100, 300, 450, but thereafter the rise was increasingly steep, reaching 2,000 by the end of July, 6,500 at the end of August, and 7,000 at the peak in the third week of September".[\[17\]](#)

The London Plague reached its peak in September 1665, had a secondary rise in November and finally ran its course by March 1666 when the last cases were reported. At the end of 1665, seventy thousand out of a population of 460,000 were lying in London burial trenches.

The 1665 plague was part of the last large outbreak in Europe. It was the last outbreak in London and its abatement is credited to the fire of 1666 which burned down much of London. England had escaped most of the European visitations over the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries and after 1667 there was never again an epidemic anywhere in the country until the most recent pandemic when the coastal towns became infected once again.

After 1672 there were very few cases of plague in western Europe. One of the major exceptions to this was in Marsailles, France where 40,000 died in the city and another 10,000 in the countryside round about.

The Mysterious Disappearance:

"The bubonic plague remained one of the more lethal European diseases for three centuries after the Black Death".[\[18\]](#) Then it disappeared spontaneously from Europe

although it remained endemic on the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean, in Asia, in Africa and South America. Several possible explanations exist for why Europe was no longer bothered by the plague. One states that the Black Rat had almost disappeared from inland Europe by the 17th century, exterminated by the stronger and more ferocious Brown Rat which is not companionable with man. The most probable explanation is that with the institution of health and sanitation laws, the cities became less of a favorable environment for the spread of plague.

Modern Pandemic

The only modern pandemic, and the one which covered most of the world, started in Yunnan Province in China. The rebellion of the Muslims in 1855 in China caused the movement of refugees who carried the disease throughout China. Twenty eight years after reaching the provincial capitol of Yun-nan-fu the cities of Canton and Hong Kong were decimated (May 1894). By 1922 the whole world was touched; Bombay in 1896, Calcutta 1898, Japan and the Philippines 1897; Australasia, Hawaii, Central and South America in 1899; Cape Town, South Africa and San Francisco, California in 1900; Egypt and Singapore 1901; Bangkok, Thailand 1904; Guayaquil, Ecuador in 1908; Java in 1910; New Orleans, Louisiana and Colombo, Ceylon 1914; Galveston and Beaumont, Texas and Pensacola, Florida in 1922. Nearly all European sea ports were also effected as the result of the shipping trade with Hong Kong.

In 1894, while the plague was only in Hong Kong and the rest of China, the major breakthrough in the medical treatment of plague came. Working separately and independently, two scientists made the discovery of *Pasteurella Pestis*. The discoverers were Alexandre Yersin, a French microbiologist and Shibasaburo Kitasato, a Japanese physician. Thirteen years later, the Second Indian Plague Commission of the British government announced that rat fleas were the conclusive vectors of the bacilli.

Plague entered the United States in 1900. San Francisco, Seattle, New Orleans, Florida and Texas fell victim to a small epidemic which was part of the global pandemic. All together, 121 persons were infected in San Francisco over the four years of the epidemic (1900-1904). Of these, 113 died. Evidence of rats as the source of the disease was abundant. Again, in May of 1907 through November of 1908, plague struck down 89 of 169 patients. Rodents were trapped and examined. Two percent were plague ridden rats in highly infected districts of the city.

Further epidemics occurred in New Orleans in 1914 (30 cases) and 1920 (25 cases, 11

died). There were also a total of 41 cases reported in Florida and Texas. In the years 1942-44, infected rats were found in Tacoma, Washington and in 1963 one infected rat was found in San Francisco.

Other rodent carriers besides rats have been discovered in the last seventy years. Oakland, California in 1919, thirteen cases of pneumonic plague were reported followed by thirty one cases in Los Angeles in 1924, both instances attributable to squirrels.

The total number of cases in the United States between 1900 and 1969 has been 558. Of these, 384 occurred in California and 65% were fatal. The picture is brightening, for while 410 of those human cases (287 deaths) occurred between 1900 and 1965, the rate has slowed considerably. Between 1940 and 1969 only 10 human cases have been reported (five deaths) from a disease that in the fourteenth century completely decimated Europe and the known world.

IV. Historic Effect

Description of Feudal Europe

In the feudal system, everything ultimately belonged to someone else. The King owned everything and everyone else owed him some kind of service. "The great lord held his lands from the king, the knight held his manor from the lord; the smaller landowner from the knight, and the villein from the village landowner".^[19] Rental was paid by service. The Baron was a vassal of the king and had sworn fealty to him.^[20] In return, the king would give the Baron a tract of land which became his fief to hold as long as he remained loyal to the king. The same relationship existed between the knights and the Baron. This system provided local governments all across Europe and also provided for the raising of armies. Providing men-at-arms was part of the required service of the holders of fiefs.

At the bottom of the system were the villeins and serfs. They owned nothing but owed service to the hierarchy. The peasant was forced to work so many days upon his lord's land before he might till the portion he had been given to support himself.^[21]

"Around the baronial villa some fifty to five hundred peasants-serfs, half free, or free - built their village, living not in isolated homesteads but, for safety's sake, close together within the walls of the settlement".^[22] Cooperative tillage of land may have been left over from a primitive communism. Distribution of land was made by village officials appointed by the Baron (manor landholder) and usually was quite equitable.

The economic situation just prior to the Black Death was excellent. The economy was based on agriculture and toward the end of the 13th century the harvests were so good that the English were able to export grain to the continent. This resulted in a higher standard of living in England

indicated by better roads and traveling conditions, a higher live birth rate and life expectancy. By

1300, this resulted in an estimated population of 3.5 to 5 million.

Due to the excess of wealth from the abundant harvests, there was a greater circulation of money and those who were obliged to do service to a lord or master were more likely to commute their service by paying the lord in cash. In this manner a peasant or villein would pay the rent on his land with money then demand wages for working the land of his lord. (This of course was inconsistent with the system of feudalism). As the oppressed peasants became used to the new freedoms the new economy gave them, they were less likely to

settle for a return to the old ways. This was to be forcibly expressed after the Black Death which helped to make it impossible to return to feudalism.

Immediate Effects During the Epidemic:

The Black Death was the most significant cause of economic distress in the middle ages.[\[23\]](#) The immediate effect was a general paralysis. Trade largely ceased; war between England and France was halted by truce (the Hundred Years War), and peace lasted for six years. As the armies were terribly thinned by war and plague, defense of the countries became a concern and towns were required to supply men-at-arms and sailors, which helped to further deplete the work force and caused greater economic hardship.

As the plague increased in intensity, agricultural surpluses became harder to obtain or preserve. Standards of living, so high just a few years before, began to plummet (as measured by diets and furnishings). Only a few leading commercial centers prospered though hard hit by plague. Money surpluses, if any, were not put back into business to improve competitiveness but were used to purchase land instead.

Within the populace of Europe at that time, one or the other of two extremes in religion and morals were being practiced. Morals for one part of the population hardly existed and a cynical unhappy pursuit of pleasure swept this segment. Others developed "a masochistic urge to accept or divert the divine punishment" which resulted in the "mania for organized mass flagellation". [\[24\]](#)

The Flagellants existed prior to the Black Death but their ranks swelled with new penitents during the plague scourge. The movement spread throughout Europe. They were a mass of people who carried with them scourges, (whips of leather strips with nails sewn into the tails) and with these they would travel from place to place striking themselves and each other on the back and legs until they were quite bloody. The Flagellants thought the Black Death was a divine chastisement and so they sought to divert the divine punishment by chastising themselves.

The Flagellants began the notion that the Jews were the cause of Gods wrath on the remainder of the populace. The Jews were particularly suspect in the spread of the plague. Mass persecutions resulted as "at Basel and Freiburg all known Jews were herded into a large wooden building and burned to death. At Strassburg over two thousand are said to have been hanged on a scaffold set up in the Jewish burial ground".[\[25\]](#) The plight of the Jews became so bad that the liberal Pope Clement VI had to issue two "Bulls" declaring the Jews to be innocent. Because of the persecution in western Europe, many Jews fled to eastern Europe and Russia where they were tolerated.

The Flagellants are probably the first hint of the reformation. Again, as in the fall of feudalism, the Black Death accelerated the course of events. The plague led people to question the authority of the Church at a time when the Church was weakened materially also. With the loss of manpower, the Church was becoming impoverished because of its inability to cultivate the vast tracts of land that were its main support.

Another cause of the Catholic Church's loss of influence and power came with the people's loss of love and respect for the Friars and clergy, "who had previously been renown for holiness and charity," but now "gave themselves up to 'gayness and gluttony', while country parsons and parish priests spent their time in London, touting for high places, instead of ministering to their parishioners".[\[26\]](#) This was perhaps due to the large number of holy and charitable clergy who died of the plague and who the Church had been forced to replace with those who were not so devoted to the ecclesiastical life.

The clergy were not the only ones to lower their high moral virtue. The city of Florence, Italy, known during the Renaissance as the great initiator in morals of dress, manners, speech, etc., had lost its highly moral identity just prior to the Black Death (according to the writings of Dante and Giovanni Villani). It might be thought that the plague would end the downward trend of moral degradation but it did not. Instead of being cowed back into the moral discipline which the Church demanded, the Florentines "surrendered entirely to the joys of the world, which seemed the more precious after the horrors of the plague".[\[27\]](#) Civic as well as moral virtue disintegrated.

Effects After the Epidemic

As previously stated, the authority of the Church was being questioned during the plague. After the plague's dissipation all authority became subject to questioning. Open opposition to the authority of Pope and Church came in the person of John Wyclif, a notable theologian and master of Balliol College, Oxford, (1320-1384). He not only questioned the Churches power, but also attacked the worship of images and relics, the sale of pardons, and masses for the dead. Wyclif was dismissed from his position at Balliol College for his views but many people flocked to his teachings and his large following became known as the Lollards.

The Lollards were persecuted by the established Church as heretics and so became guarded about their religious beliefs until Martin Luther began the Reformation. As a movement, they surfaced only occasionally when a leader arose as in the reigns of Richard II, Henry VII, and Henry VIII in England. Luther had received many of his ideas for reform

of the Church from John Huss of Bohemia, one of his teachers who had been a pupil of Wyclif. By 1350 the plague had abated leaving one-third to one-half of Western Europe's population dead and had "bequeathed to the survivors acute social and economic problems".[\[28\]](#) Morally and intellectually the Black Death "left an indelible impression, heightening the violence, the ecstatic piety, the complete depravity, which mark this stark period".[\[29\]](#)

European society could not return to what had been "normal" before the plague. The system was irrevocably changed by the loss of 20% of the population of Europe by 1348 and an estimated 50% by 1381. The Black Death had brought about a social and economic upheaval which continued to alter the relationship between peasant and lord for many years after and finally finished the toppling of the feudal system.

Hundreds of villages and some small towns were left without any inhabitants. Those who were left became quite prosperous, i.e., they had more money per capita, more wills were probated, etc. Due to the decrease in the population there was a buyers market. Prices fell steeply to a third of their previous (pre-plague) value.

The manor survived but did not retain the same identity. Lords lived away from their peasant tenants, provided them little or no protection, and relied on salaried managers to collect payments. During the harvest of 1349, landowners had to offer high wages to get sufficient help in harvesting their fields. Wages became at least doubled from those of pre-plague years. Everything was in plenty for a few short years.

The manpower shortage in England meant that only a limited number of cattle could be tended and only limited acreage cultivated. Land barons discovered that they could operate more cheaply with hired labor and by turning much of their cultivated lands into sheep pasture. To this end they created a change in the appearance of the landscape by dividing the open fields into smaller hedged or fenced enclosures. "The feudal lordship had degenerated into an unsentimental economic practice".[\[30\]](#)

The critical shortage of labor was the cause of the disappearance of the many onerous obligations and services to which the peasants were subject. Because of it, the transition from servile to rental tenures was largely completed by the end of the 15th century. Many serfs were freed during this period and became free laborers. This resulted in the laboring class becoming mobile for the first time in English history.[\[31\]](#) Another factor in this phenomenon was the natural desire to escape from the areas where the pestilence

continued. Finally, the loss of population also resulted in the need for a "purposeful mobilization of the available labour force" to assure the completion of the harvest in the fall of 1349.

Many peasant uprisings occurred subsequent to 1350. These were caused partially by the heavy taxation and the new expressions of egalitarianism, both more or less the offspring of the Black Death. The towns were re-populated, (the birthrate doubled in the years after 1348), business and trade resumed but the villeinage system was in decay. Two further outbreaks of plague in the next thirty years (the worst being in 1361), and reactionary legislation by governments to force peasants to work according to the old feudal system, resulted in the Peasant's Revolt in England (1381) and the Jacquerie in France (1358). Both were caused by overburdensome demands placed on the peasants by the government composed of the land owning aristocracy.

There were several laws enacted in the years following the Black Death of which the primary function was to tie the peasant to the land of his former master - to keep the feudal system from dissolving completely. The Statute of Labourers of 1351 stated that no laborer could receive more than the wage paid him in 1346 and no employer could offer to pay more. It also called for prices of commodities to remain at a fair level, i.e., at the pre-plague level. This was the first price-wage freeze in European history.[\[32\]](#) The law was generally ignored by everyone and could not be enforced so that in 1361, after the work force had again shrunk from that years plague epidemic, another law was passed which made it illegal for any worker to leave his job for another which paid higher. It attempted to force the peasants and land owning villeins to commute their required service with service rather than with money. Even those who had commuted with money for that year already were forced to perform their required service.

The Peasant's Revolt (England) is a good example for describing nearly all the revolts that took place at this time. It was the first English struggle between capital and labor.[\[33\]](#) Caused by war, the Black Death, decaying feudalism, bad government, and the exploitation of the lower by the upper classes in the cities, the last straw was the Poll Tax of 1377. The objectives of the peasants were to get a "commutation of all servile dues for 'a fair rent' of fourpence an acre",[\[34\]](#) the ending of serfdom altogether, and several other reforms in the way they were treated. The revolt failed and was followed by severe repression by the aristocracy, but the landlords were forced into the awareness that in the future they would have to make the best bargains they could with their villeins.

The New System Develops.

The last gasp of feudalism in England came during the War of the Roses (1455-61) between the dynasties of the House of York and the House of Lancaster who were vying for the throne of England. Between the Peasant's Revolt and this event, the landlord had retained ownership of the land and his "reeve" (overseer of the laborers on the lord's fields), became the "steward" of the estate who collected the rent from his lord's tenants. The service-laborer or villein became the tenant farmer. The tenant farmer again reduced the amount of arable land in favor of increased pasture to reduce the expense of a large work force necessary to crop farming. Sheep became the farm staple and in some areas completely replaced crop farming. Here we have a reversal, for by the reign of Henry VIII, sheep farming had caused a glut of labor. "We catch a glimpse of the starving, out-of-work ploughman and reaper in the often-misquoted nursery rhyme:

'Baa Baa, Blacksheep, have you any wool.

Yes Sir, no Sir, three bags full.

Two for my master and one for his dame

But none for the little boy who cries down the lane'[\[35\]](#)

During the War of the Roses, many of the old feudal aristocracy were either killed in war or committed suicide and the tenant farmers bought up the lands of their former masters. "Had it not been for the labour crisis that followed the Black Death, the ex-villain would never have been able to take advantage of the anarchy that accompanied the Wars of the Roses".[\[36\]](#) English society now became based on Saxon and villein ancestry rather than on the Normans who had been an aloof caste, like the continental aristocracy. "England's social system is strong because continuing shifts have prevented a rigid differentiation between classes".[\[37\]](#)

Through all this social upheaval the governments of Europe were also being changed. England and France provide excellent examples. The English Parliament enacted three principals which were of great importance to the development of popular government:

1. That grievances must be redressed in return for new taxes.
2. Parliament was to have a voice in choosing the King's ministers.
3. If the King refused to recognize his limitations he might be deposed.

In France, the "Great Ordinance of 1357" put restrictions on nobles by forbidding them to

leave France or to wage private war. It instructed local authorities of the towns to arrest any noble violating the edict. "In effect the aristocracy was to be subject to the communes, the nobles to the business class; King, Prince, and Barons were to obey the chosen representatives of the people. France was to have a constitutional government four centuries before the revolution".[\[38\]](#)

"War, pestilence, and bad government influence and distort the evolution of England in the fourteenth century; War, pestilence, and bad government overwhelm France in these years and make of her history a record of misery and horror".[\[39\]](#) England's history during this century is more important for the development of popular government than that of France for this same period.[\[40\]](#)

V. CONCLUSION

The Historic Effect Revisited: What Might Have Happened?

The Black Death was a single historical event in a series, one of great magnitude, and one with many consequences. The indirect influences on history are clear 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. "Thus 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".[\[41\]](#) On the 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. Had the plague not hastened the decline of feudalism, parts of Europe might still be subject to this system which negates any and all attempts towards progress. It might be said that Europe as a whole might never have emerged into the modern epoch and America may have never been discovered until much later without the benefit of the eloquent philosophies of democratic government and individual freedom which was a legacy of the plague.

The Black Death changed religion drastically. The appeal of the Flagellants to great masses of the population and John Wyclif's questioning of certain parts of the Roman Catholic dogma were the initial stages in a larger rebellion against a corrupted orthodoxy. "Thus it is not too much to claim that the Protestant Reformation, the sailing of the Brownist Pilgrim Fathers in the Mayflower from Plymouth on 6 September 1620 and the foundation of Pennsylvania by the Quaker William Penn in 1681, can be linked with the deviation from established religion that followed the disaster of the Black Death".[\[42\]](#)

Religion in the time of the Black Death set the stage for another tragedy. In World War II the most hideous crime was committed against the Jewish population of Eastern Europe. Most people do not realize that this was not an isolated incident. 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 scapegoat-Jew and, by causing the migration of so large a number to the east and north of Europe, is linked to the pogroms of Imperial Russia and the gas-chambers of Auschwitz".[\[43\]](#)

What effect has the Black Death had on the history of the United States? Aside from the obvious loss of those people who have died since 1900 of plague, the only influence has

been indirect, filtered through the history of the European nations. One way in which the plague of 1346-1361 may have completely altered the history of the North American continent can be visualized through this quotation:

Indeed, it is just possible that the devastation wrought in Scandinavia may ultimately have had a greater effect upon world history than did the English catastrophe. Ships carried infection to the Greenland settlements founded by Erik the Red in A.D. 936. These colonies were so weakened by the plague and by failure of supplies from enfeebled Norway that they could not withstand Eskimo attacks. The last Viking settlers disappeared in the fifteenth century and Greenland became an unknown country until rediscovered by John Davis in 1585. It is thought that the Viking settlements maintained sporadic contact with 'Vinland', which was part of the coast of Canada or Newfoundland, so the Black Death may have entirely altered the history of North America .[\[44\]](#)

Even though the Scandinavians were not the settlers of the North American continent, the Black Death's effects on the development of popular government in England and France have had a profound impact. From the ideas of egalitarianism, to the new denominations within the Christian Church, the influence of those years of horror in the fourteenth century is such that in North America has developed the greatest representative democracy in history and the most advanced society in the modern world.

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NOTES

[1] Munro, The Middle Ages 395 - 1500, p.421

[2] Tremain, "Black Death", *British History Illustrated*, p. 3.

[3] *Ibid.* p.6

[4] Dance Macabre or Dance of Death. Originally a 14th century morality play.

[5] The Pieta: In Christian art, the representation of the Virgin mourning over the dead Christ. First depicted in the 13th century.

[6] For a complete description of the behavior of the populace during a plague epidemic read

DeFoe's A Journal of the Plague Year.

[7] Cartwright, *Disease and History*, p. 38

[8] Rhodes, "Year of Terror", *Today's Health*, Vol. 43, p.12

[9] Cartwright. *Disease and History*, p. 30.

[10] Tremaine, "Black Death", *British History Illustrated*, p. 5.

[11] The following is from: Rhodes, "Year of Terror", *Today's Health*, and Tremain, "Black

Death", *British History Illustrated*.

[12] Tremain, *Ibid.* p. 7.

[13] *Op. Cit* 6.

[14] *Encyclopedia Britannica Macropedia: Knowledge in Depth*, vol 9.

[15] *op.cit.* 2. p. 36.

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 51.

[19] Ibid., p.51.

[20] Stephenson, *Mediaeval Feudalism*, chapter II.

[21] Ibid., read for a better understanding of the feudal system.

[22] Durant, *The Age of Faith*, p. 558.

[23] op. cit. 14, vol. 7.

[24] op. cit. 7, p.47

[25] Ibid., p.46.

[26] Ibid., p. 48

[27] op. cit. 1., p.496.

[28] Ibid., p.422.

[29] Ibid.

[30] op. cit. 14. vol. 7.

[31] op. cit. 7., p. 43.

[32] Ibid., p. 43.

[33] op. cit. 1., p.424.

[34] op. cit. 7., p.44.

[35] Ibid., p. 35.

[36] Ibid., p.45.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Durant, *The Reformation*, p.66.

[39] op. cit. 1., p.426.

[40] Ibid.

[41] op. cit. 7.,p. 45.

[42] *Ibid.*, p. 50.

[43] *Ibid.*, p. 46.

[44] *Ibid.*, p. 32.