

The Black Death's Influence on Conflict and Compromise During the Middle Ages

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Introduction

During the Middle Ages, Europeans were devastated by the conflict created from the spread of a bacterial disease known as “The Plague”. This highly contagious disease caused more than sixty-percent of the European population to die a horrible, incurable death. However, very few people realize that this incurable disease led to several compromises that had positive effects on history. The Plague “paused” the 100 Years War, stopped the Mongols from taking over Italy, and helped poor Europeans earn better incomes.

Background Information

Many people think that “The Black Death” or “The Bubonic Plague” began in England, but that is not true. The plague actually originated in Asia. The plague comes from a bacteria known as *Yersinia Pestis*. It was named after Alexandre Yersin, the physician who discovered the bacteria (Barnard, 6). The disease is transmitted from fleas on rats. Many rats have the infectious bacteria in their blood. However, when the fleas bite the rats and suck their blood, the fleas can’t digest the bacteria. Eventually the rat dies and the flea jumps to a new host, a human. If the flea bites the human, it will also unintentionally regurgitate the bacteria into the human. This leads to the human getting the plague (Peppas,8). Humans spread the deadly disease to others when he or she interacts with other people. This infectious disease led to the death of millions of humans during the Middle Ages.

Plague Spreads Conflict

In the early stages of the epidemic, the Mongolian troops planned to take over one of Italy’s ports. But someone or something started to kill off the Mongolian troops, the culprit was

the plague. More than half of the Mongolian troops died. The Mongols were forced to compromise with Italy due to the Black Death killing off so many of their troops. However, the Mongols did get some revenge when they decided to fill their catapults with the infected corpses in hopes that the disease would spread to Italian civilians, which it did (Ollhoff, 14-16).

The spread of the plague to Italy was helped by what the Italians called "Death Ships". The Italians called the Asian trade ships that came into the town Death Ships because the ship's crew were always dead or dying from being infected by the Black Death. Eventually, Italy had to close down its port so the "Death Ships" could no longer stop there. However, the port was closed too late and the plague had already reached the Italian townspeople (Peppas, 16-17). As more people continued to travel, the plague spread to other countries such as France, England, and Germany.

When the disease first started spreading, Europeans thought that God was punishing them for their sins. Many people went to the church to find help and forgiveness (Peppas, 24). But the disease just kept spreading. Then, people began looking for someone else to blame, which created more conflict. One group that was blamed for spreading the plague were Jewish people. The townspeople knew that the Jews drank fresh spring water, so they thought that the Jewish people were poisoning their wells. Europeans also blamed the Jews for killing Jesus and said that God was mad at the Jews for killing his son. To justify their blaming of the Jews, the Europeans tortured Jewish people in ways that were horrible and painful like the plague (Barnard, 7). The ways that the Europeans tortured the Jews were by repeatedly dunking them into wells, burning them, and some were put on the rack. The rack was a

medieval torture device that pulled the person popping joints out of place, ripping muscles and cracking bones in half, and eventually ripped a person in half.

In the 1340's, England's King Edward III had his most favored daughter, Joan, sent to Spain to marry the Prince of Spain. King Edward did this so his army would be united with Spain's troops and they would become the most powerful army of the time. But even the combined troops could not protect Edward's daughter from the plague. Sadly, the plague infected Edward's daughter and she died at age of thirteen. Her death caused internal conflict for King Edward the III as he fell into a state of grief and depression (The Great Plague).

The Black Death also ravaged in Avignon, France, Pope Clement VI feared that he would be infected by the plague, so he called a friend that was also his personal doctor. His friend was Guy de Chauliac. Fortunately, Chauliac also survived the epidemic and went on to try to find cures for the plague, but the cure was not developed until 1894, the cure was discovered by scientists in Hong Kong (Barnard, 9). Prior to finding that cure, a great deal of conflict was created throughout Europe.

As the plague continued to travel from town to town, the government began imposing some strict rules. The government ordered that infected families be locked in their homes. Even if some family members had not contracted the disease yet, they were forced to stay locked in the homes with the contagious family members. The locked up homes were marked as a quarantined house and had a red cross hanging over the door (Lynette, 22). If people tried to free the people inside the quarantined house, they would be arrested for committing a crime. They could also be tortured, killed, or risk the chance of being infected with the plague, too. Sometimes, people were allowed in the quarantined homes for a short time, but they

had to wear protective clothing. The protective clothing included long robes, gloves, boots and hoods with masks (Ollhoff, 23). However, these people had to be verified by a government official. During these times, people also blamed the disease on animals, but they were not sure which animals carried the plague. Therefore, the government ordered that all cats, dogs, birds, and even farm animals be slaughtered. Unfortunately, this just attracted more rats because they feasted on the rotting slaughtered animals (The Great Plague). Therefore, sacrificing the lives of the animals just led to spread of more disease.

Additionally, as more people tried to evacuate infected towns, more rats hitched rides on the travelers' supplies. So this meant that the people just took the plague infected rats with them to new towns and caused the epidemic to spread more. Even priests, bishops, and cardinals evacuated cities and towns to try and protect themselves. Also, they would not give the dead or dying their last rights, because they feared getting infected. Additionally, they would not hold Masses because they feared that someone at the Mass would have the plague (Peppas, 33). However, some people stayed in their towns and tried to develop ways to protect themselves. For example, the mayor of the first plague infected town chose to stay in his town. He stayed because he had a large glass case made for himself. The case had one small opening for him to receive letters. Unfortunately, his glass case could not protect him from the horrid disease, and he died (The Great Plague).

In towns throughout Europe, people posted signs that stated how many people died each week in that town. An image of one sign stated that around 7,165 people died of plague in one week, but there might have been more because so many people were dying that most of the deaths were not recorded (Lynette 2005, 9). But scientists today believe that over 75

million people died from the plague world wide (Ollhoff, 8). This includes the fact that over 60% of the European population died (*Britannica*. 2017).

Compromise Emerges from Conflict

Even though the spread of the Bubonic Plague caused a great deal of conflict throughout the world, not many people realized that the plague created a compromise for some people. The plague actually delayed conflict created by the Hundred Years of War. The Hundred Years of War was delayed for a few years. Many of the soldiers needed to stop fighting in the war so they could help fight the battle against the plague. The soldiers were needed to dig mass graves for the victims of the plague. Soldiers were also needed to guard the houses of the quarantined to make sure nobody came out and spread the plague. People were also needed to plant and harvest crops to help supply food for the living (The Great Plague). Therefore, the battle against the plague became more important than fighting over who should rule England and France. But after the spread of plague slowed down a bit, England and France resumed their war.

Another compromise that the plague unintentionally created was an increased income for the peasants who provided most of the manual labor during the Middle Ages. The peasants were paid to do the jobs that no one else wanted to do. In addition to farming, they would care for the sick and even dispose of the dead bodies that were infected by the plague. Since no one other than the peasants were willing to do these jobs, they were able to demand higher pay. As the peasants began receiving higher pay, a new social class called the middle class developed in Europe during the Middle Ages (Barnard,8) . The middle class is just what it sounds like, it is the class that is between the peasants and rich people. The peasants

became the middle class because there were fewer people left after the epidemic, and the rich never really did hard labor because they would have slaves. However, there were some people willing to do extra work for the rich, but only if the rich people would pay them higher wages. Although the peasants were happy to receive increased wages, much conflict developed in the social order during the Middle Ages because there had never been a middle class in medieval Europe before.

Who would ever think that a microscopic organism could create so much conflict? Even more so, who would think that a deadly epidemic would lead to compromise? Even though the European population was almost destroyed by the spread of "The Black Death", this very contagious disease led to a break in the Hundred Years War, prevented the Mongols from conquering Italy, and helped create the middle class in medieval Europe.

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