

How the economy
was affected by the
bubonic plague.



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Medieval people called the catastrophe of the 14th century the "Great Pestilence." The Black Death is the name later given to the epidemic of plague that took Europe by storm, between 1347 and 1351 (C. Warren Hollister). The Black Death is categorized into three specific types of plague: bubonic plague (infection in the lymph nodes, or buboes), pneumonic plague (the infection in the lungs), and septicemic plague (the infection in the blood and the most deadly of the three). Scientists and historians at the beginning of the 20th century assumed that the Black Death was an outbreak of the same diseases, caused by a bacterium called *Yersinia pestis* and spread by fleas with the help of

Animals like the black rat. Once infected by the *Yersinia pestis* bacterium, Death could be very quick for the weaker victims. It is estimated that victims would die within three to seven days (Knox). However, this view has recently been questioned by some scientists and historians, (Kelly) and some researchers believe that the illness was, in fact, a viral hemorrhagic fever based on epidemiological interpretation of historical records of the spread of disease. (Lavelle)

The plague affected every part of life. Depopulation and shortage of labor rushed changes already built into the rural economy; the substitution of wages for labor services was accelerated, and social stratification became less rigid (Knox). Psychological illness affected the arts; in religion, the lack of educated personnel among the clergy gravely reduced the church's hold. "[In less than four years the disease carved a path of death Through Asia, Italy, France, North Africa, Spain and Normandy, made its way over the Alps into Switzerland, and continued eastward into Hungary]" (C. Warren Hollister).

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After a small break, the plague continued crossing the channel into England, Scotland, and Ireland, and eventually made its way into the northern countries of Norway, Sweden,

Denmark, Iceland and even as far north as Greenland. In other words, the plague touched almost the entire known world. (C. Warren Hollister)

So much death could not help but tear economic and social structures apart.

Figures for the death toll vary widely by area and from source to source as new research and discoveries come to light. It killed an estimated 75-200 million people in the 14th century (Philipkoski). Lack of peasants and laborers sent wages soaring, and the value of land took a serious downfall. For the first time in history the odds were against wealthy landlords as peasants and serfs gained more bargaining power. Without architects, masons and artisans, great cathedrals and castles remained unfinished for hundreds of years. Governments, lacking officials, floundered in their attempts to create order out of chaos.(Knox)

Those that were still alive lost all sense of morality and justice, and a new attitude toward the church surfaced. Many saw the plague as a form of punishment from God. Medieval people could find no Divine reason for the four-year nightmare, and dissatisfaction with the church was the driving force to reform movements that, in the end, broke apart the amalgamation of the Catholic Church.(Knox)

The middle 14th century was not a good time for Europe. The European economy was already seeing hardships. It was inching towards the limits of

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expansion, both on its frontiers and in regaining land from forest and swamp (Knox). The entry of the Mongols and the Ottomans caused confusion in trade routes, and certain areas of Europe were on the verge of depression. The Church was also in poor shape. The popes resided at Avignon, not at Rome, to the scandal of many. Blasphemy could be found in England and Bohemia and southern France, and the Church seemed unable to control it. (Kelly)

The Holy Land had been lost in the 1290s and efforts to recover it had been Dismal failures. The Black Death intensified the strains of war and a tightened economy. (Knox) There is a relationship here, of course. The effects of the plague were made worse because of these other problems. And the problems themselves were redoubled because of the plague.

The Jewish population was another problem. In multiple villages, the common people placed the blame on the Jewish community. Hundreds of Jews were accused of poisoning wells and put to the question, medieval code for torture, and burned. When the Black Death raged through the German lands between 1348 and 1352, over 300 Jewish communities were either destroyed or expelled from their homelands. (class lecture)

There was a substantial change in Europe's demography because of the Black Death. Birth rates were also at an all time low. The net result was that by 1400, Europe's population was half what it had been in 1345. Many medieval church, census, and tax records that have survived show some accuracy of this. Europe's population took about six generations to recover. (Knox)

The cities were really affected by the plague. Financial business was disrupted as those who borrow died, their creditors have no one to pay them back. There was simply no one to collect from. Construction projects stopped for a time or were abandoned altogether. Guilds lost their craftsmen and could not replace them. There was no industry unaffected by the plague. (Knox)

The most immediate effect of the plague here was the severe shortage in labor, consequently, wages rose. Because of the mortality, there was an oversupply of goods, and so prices dropped. As a result the standard of living rose for those still living. With the post-Plague labor shortage, many nobles tried to reverse the process in order to keep their land under cultivation and their income up. Free tenants were taking advantage of the labor shortage to demand better terms from their landlords and that the nobles were reluctant to see their incomes but the labor reduced. Governments tried to fix wages, shortage was irresistible. (The plague video)

The Plague caused many peasants to demand a restructuring of society, often religious based. Democracy was in high demand and with it a limit of aristocratic rights and privileges. When ideas of democracy were dismissed, many commoners rose in rebellion. All of the rebellions were unsuccessful

A land rent system, with the freedom of the peasants was organized. This system still exists in many parts of Europe, although the desire of peasants to own their land eventually led to migration to places like Russia, Australia, Africa, and the Americas centuries later. Never was there enough land, and

dividing it among the sons soon led to economic situations that were left unattended to.(Lavelle)

Governments also had to adapt. Land was abandoned, rents were not paid, and tax Revenue declined. This had a drastic effect on the war, as the wages of mercenary soldiers increased while available tax revenue decreased by more than 50 percent. There was fewer trained soldiers available and those that were still around wanted a lot more money or simply had better financial prospects doing something else.(C. Warren Hollister)

As a result of the Plague, the French converted to a system of paid, professional, army, whereas the English had been there and done that for quite sometime. Smaller armies were a result of lower taxes. The world after the plague was one of with more opportunity for the creative and capable individuals. While the Black Death killed off medieval society, it gave birth to the beginnings of our own industrialized consumer society.