

Plagues, Diseases and Epidemics in History

HIST 258B
T/Th 2.30-4.00

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Broadsheet describing the advent of the “scabies epidemic” (1496).

Introduction

Epidemics burst onto the historical scene unannounced, killing with complete impunity aristocracy and paupers alike. Through a series of case studies, this course analyzes the impact of epidemic diseases on human societies, from the Plague of Athens in the fifth century BCE to

Typhoid Mary in early 20th-century New York. In particular, a constellation of related questions will exercise participants in this class: How did people explain the advent and spread of an epidemic? What demographic, social and political impact have epidemics caused? To what extent were epidemics agents of social, economic, religious and political change? What is the relationship if any between epidemics and public health?

Epidemics depend on the presence a disease. Consequently, the course will begin by exploring the concept of disease from antiquity through the Renaissance and contrast the concept of disease with the concept of epidemic.

Plagues will introduce four basic areas that dominate studies of epidemics — their social, economic, and political impact, and their representation. Although the Black Death is frequently considered the archetype for later responses to epidemics, we will see that it solidified a range of rhetorical and social practices that had been prefigured in earlier plagues. Due to the historical and imaginative importance of the Black Death, however, it will provide much of the material for the this section of the course.

The French Disease or, as the French called it, the Neapolitan Disease was always entwined with national politics and debates about culture. It provides another opportunity to explore the ways that epidemics are social phenomena, used to control, stigmatize or vilify certain groups of people based on characteristics that might bear little relation to the disease they are thought to attract.

Epidemics demand not only explanations, but also methods of containment and control. In response to both plague and the French Disease, European society developed a range of techniques to check the spread of an epidemic. These early attempts rarely merit the term “public health”. During the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1793 in Philadelphia, however, the “public’s health” became an important concept in the city’s response to the epidemic. By the time of the typhoid epidemic in 19th-century New York, public health had become the central concept around which the identification and explanation of an epidemic revolved.

Writing requirements

Response papers

Each Thursday I will hand out three or four questions intended to guide your reading and to help organize the material for the following week. You are to pick one question for each meeting and to write a short (no more than 250 words) response to that question. Do not choose the same question twice. I will randomly collect at least 14 of these responses, which I will read and mark.

Essay review

You are required to write an essay review of John Kelly’s *The Great Mortality*. The essay should be no more than 1000 words and offer an insightful and well written critique of the book. Some themes you might want to address in your review include:

- What is the causal agent in Kelly’s account?

- What are the environmental and social conditions that contributed to the plague?
- What is Kelly's overall argument?
- Who is or are the villains in Kelly's book?
- To what extent does Kelly rely on other published materials? To what extent on primary sources?
- Do you find his account persuasive?

In addressing these topics, you will want to do more than simply recount them. You should offer some critique and possibly criticism of Kelly's position on each.

Mid-term paper

For the mid-term you will be asked to analyze Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* using any of the critical readings we have completed up to that point (either assigned reading or recommended reading). This essay should not exceed 1000 words

Final paper

The course ends with a short research paper, ca. 3000 words. In conversation with me, you will select some aspect of one of the epidemics explored in class. I encourage you to begin thinking about this early in the term and to visit me regularly to discuss your progress. You will be expected to hand in an outline with bibliography and a draft.

Assessment

The components of your grade and their approximate weight:

- Response papers — 15%
- Essay review — 20%
- Mid-term essay — 20%
- Final paper — 35%
- Participation — 10%

Required Texts

- John Kelly, *The Great Mortality. An Intimate History of the Black Death, the Most Devastating Plague of All Time.*
- David Herlihy, *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West.*
- Carlo Cipolla, *Fighting Plague in 17th-Century Italy.*
- Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year.*
- Kevin Siena, *Sins of the Flesh.*
- J.H. Powell, *Bring Out Your Dead. The Great Plague of Yellow Fever in Philadelphia in 1793.*

Judith Leavitt, *Typhoid Mary. Captive to the Public's Health*.

In addition to these texts, various articles will be available through Blackboard.

Syllabus

Is there a disease in this class? Is it an epidemic?

17 January — Introduction

J. Kelly, *The Great Mortality* — read carefully chapters 1-4 and 10-12; read quickly chapters 5-9. Ignore for now the “Afterword”.

19 January — What is a disease?

C. Rosenberg, “Framing Disease”

C. Rosenberg, “Explaining Epidemics”

V. Nutton, “The seeds of Disease”

Ancient Plagues, Athens and Byzantium

24 January — Ancient accounts of plague

Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, bk II, chaps 47-55

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, bk VII, ll. 500-660

Virgil, *Georgics*, bk III, ll. 440-566

26 January — The ‘first’ pandemic

ESSAY REVIEW DUE

P. Sarris, “The Justinianic Plague: Origins and Effects”

Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, chap 43 (excerpt)

Procopius, *History of the Wars*, bk II, 22-23

John of Ephesus, excerpts

The Advent of the Black Death

31 January — Florence: the archetypal response

P. Strong, “Epidemic Psychology: A Model”

de Mussis, *Historia de morbo*, excerpt.

Boccaccio, *Decameron*, excerpt

Stefani, *The Florentine Chronicle*

Review Kelly, *The Great Mortality*, chap 5

2 February — Beyond Italy

Austria

France

England

Islam

M. Dols, "The Comparative Communal Response to Black Death in Muslim and Christian Societies"

Review Kelly, *The Great Mortality*, chaps 6–9

The Black Death: Social and Economic Impact

7 February — Economic

D. Herlihy, *The Black Death*, chap. 2.

J. Hatcher, "England in the Aftermath of the Black Death"

Economic sources

9 February — Social and Religious

Herlihy, *The Black Death*, chap. 3

Religious sources

Social sources

Recommended

W. Bowsky, "The Impact of the Black Death upon Siense Government and Society"

The Black Death: Medical Responses

14 February — Universities and Physicians

J. Arrizabalaga, "Facing the Black Death"

University sources

Physicians sources

16 February — Plague Tractates

A. Campell, "Contents of the Tractates"

Tractates excerpts

Regulating Plagues

21 February — Policing the Contagious

A. Carmichael, "Contagion Theory and Contagion Practice in Fifteenth-Century Milan"

B. Pullan, "Plague and the Perception of the Poor in Early Modern Italy"

23 February — Plague and public health in 17th-century Italy

Cipolla, *Fighting Plague*, concentrate on chaps 1–3; skim the intro and the apendices

Read Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year* over the weekend

Representing Plagues

28 February — Metaphors and Tropes

C. Jones, "Plague and its Metaphors in Early Modern France"

F. M. Getz, "Death and the Silver Lining: Meaning, Continuity and Revolutionary Change in Histories of Medieval Plague"

Recommended

A. Weinstein, "Infection as Metaphor"

M. Healy, "Defoe's *Journal* and the English Plague Writing Tradition"

2 March — Memory

MID-TERM ESSAY DUE

A. Carmichael, "The Last Plague: The Uses of Memory in Renaissance Epidemics"

Recommended

C. Boeckl, "Visual Sources of Plague Iconography"

C. Boeckl, "The Black Death and Its Immediate Aftermath (1347-1500)"

BREAK

What was the Plague? What is the Plague?

14 March — Essentializing plague

Herlihy, *The Black Death*, chap 1

Kelly, *The Great Mortality*, "Afterword"

16 March — Rejecting the *Yersina pestis* model

Cunningham, "How the Laboratory Changed the Plague"

Cohn "The Black Death: End of a Paradigm"

Recommended

D. Davis, "The Scarcity of Rats and the Black Death"

The Scabies Epidemic

21 March — A pox on you

C. Quétel, *History of Syphilis*, chaps. 1 & 2

Hutton, *On the Wood Called Gvaiacvm*, excerpt

R. French, "Coping with the French Disease"

23 March — RESEARCH DAY

The French Disease

28 March — The seeds of sin

Siena, *Sins of the Flesh*, chap 1 & 2

Fracastoro, *Syphilis: or, a Poetical History of the French Disease*, excerpt

30 March — Blaming the French

Siena, *Sins of the Flesh*, chap 5 & 6

Προφλακτικόν, or *Some Considerations of a Notable Expedient*, excerpt

Blaming the Victim and Policing Sexuality

- 4 April — Blaming the poor
L. Qualtiere, “Contagion and Blame in Early Modern England”
Siena, *Sins of the Flesh*, chap 10
- 6 April — Controlling the contagion
Siena, *Sins of the Flesh*, chaps 8 and 9
J. Wynell, *Lues venera*, excerpt

Yellow Fever and the Creation of Public Health

- 11 April — A personal epidemic
J.H. Powell, *Bring out your dead*, 1–139
- 13 April — A public epidemic
J.H. Powell, *Bring out your dead*, 140–279

“Public Health” Creates an Epidemic

- 18 April — For the public’s sake
J. Leavitt, *Typhoid Mary*, 1–125
- 20 April — Representing Mary
J. Leavitt, *Typhoid Mary*, 126–254
- “Typhoid Mary: The Most Dangerous Woman in America” (Film)