

Hatred, Hysteria, or Holocaust:
Understanding the Jewish Pogroms of 1348-1350

Markolf Volkhart von Thuringen
(Jordan D. Smirl)
May 17, 2020

One of the most terrible examples of Jewish persecution prior to that which occurred under the Nazi regime was the series of pogroms during the Black Death. From 1348 to 1350, Jewish communities across central Europe were snuffed out not by the plague, but by their Christian neighbors. The precise nature of this wave of violence has been debated fervorously in recent years, with some attributing it to underlying economic tension and some viewing it as an indistinct manifestation of Jew-hatred. In the shadow of the past century's horrors, the latter perspective has come to dominate popular historical narratives. Many people see the episodes of persecution in the Middle Ages merely as links in a long chain of anti-Semitism stretching back to the early origins of the Jewish people, through the Holocaust, and into the 21st century. While anti-Semitism has been a major aspect of Western society and politics for centuries, its character has evolved over time. Preventing future tragedies requires that we study not only the common trends of history but also the distinctions between different events. The Black Death pogroms were not simply the result of hatred or hysteria, nor did they truly constitute a medieval Holocaust; rather, these pogroms arose from a unique combination of apocalyptic desperation, religious prejudice, and judicial impropriety.

The precise origins of the Black Death are unclear. It possibly began as early as 1331 in China before spreading to other parts of Asia in the following years. Trade caravans carried it westward in the mid 1340s to Islamic markets where Italian merchants waited to bring exotic commodities back to Europe. These late medieval trade routes were highly efficient, allowing animal and human carriers of the disease to reach their destination and spread it to new hosts before dying. Constantinople and Genoa, both major trading hubs along the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, were struck by the disease in late 1347. From Genoa, the plague spread into Tuscany and southern France in early 1348. It reached northern France in the spring of that year, then spread into the Low Countries, England, and Scandinavia. It was carried across the Rhine and over the Alps into Germany, where it rampaged through villages and towns in the latter months of 1348 and into 1349. By the close of 1350, the epidemic in Europe was largely over. Its impact varied; in Bremen, as much as two thirds of the population fell victim, but in Nuremberg (which had excellent public health regulations relative to the era) only one in ten people died. Altogether, roughly one third of the entire population of Europe was wiped out by the disease.

While people from every level of society and every cultural background suffered from the effects of the Black Death, Europe's Jews suffered the worst. The plague's spread was followed by the brutal destruction of Jewish communities throughout the continent. These massacres began in southern France in the spring of 1348, but quickly grew worse as the plague reached German-speaking areas. In September of that year, Zurich's Jews were cast out of the city. In the

following winter, hundreds of Jews were burned alive in Basel and Strasbourg. Frankfurt and Cologne exterminated their Jews in early 1349, and in Mainz, the Jewish population was slaughtered after attempting to fight back against their Christian assailants. Robert S. Gottfried's *The Black Death* states that there were similar massacres "in Brussels, Solothurn, Zofingen, Stuttgart, Landsberg, Burren, Memmingen, Lindau, Freiburg, Ulm, Gotha, Eisenach, Dresden, Worms, Baden, Erfurt, and Speyer." Most of these pogroms occurred in 1349, and they subsided as the epidemic neared its end. By 1350, over two hundred Jewish communities had been destroyed, with unknown thousands of people expelled from their homes, slaughtered, or immolated.

The question arises as to why the Jews were the target of such malice when the plague's impact on them was almost undoubtedly as harsh as it was on their Christian neighbors. It seems that the whole epoch had a severe psychological impact on the minds of medieval Christians. People across Europe struggled to make sense of what was happening. The disease's symptoms were horrifying and its high rate of lethality seemed inexplicable in terms other than the apocalyptic. Faith in science was broadly abandoned in the years Europe was ravaged; Simon de Couvain, a French doctor, wrote in 1350 that "the art of Hippocrates was lost." Existential crises appear to have been widespread, with few people showing any hope of their own survival or that of humanity. The Irish monk John Clyn ended his *Annals of Ireland* by asking that the work be continued "in case anyone should still be alive in the future." In their helplessness and despair, many turned their backs on the Catholic Church, which provided little comfort or relief from the epidemic. They did not, however, lose faith in Christianity; instead, people largely turned towards religious mysticism and sought catharsis from sources other than the established priesthood.

In Germany, where anti-Semitic violence was most pervasive, numerous penitent movements arose in response to the plague, and the most prominent of these were the flagellants. They travelled from town to town in groups of up to three hundred, lived in extremely ascetic conditions, and were ritually scourged by their leaders on a daily basis, all in hopes of making living martyrs of themselves. This was done very publicly and became quite a popular attraction, with townspeople flocking to see the flagellants and local councils often donating money to aid their movements. While the clergy was perceived as largely idle and ineffective in protecting people against the plague, the flagellants' dramatic behavior seemed a more proportionate response to the epidemic's severity. Notably, while it was the official policy of the Catholic Church at the time to protect Jews (Pope Clement VI issued two bulls in an effort to end the pogroms), the flagellants' public pronouncements were vehemently anti-Semitic. This, among other reasons, led to their

suppression by the Church, but not before rumors that the Jews were responsible for the plague had been widely propagated.

The bitter rhetoric espoused by flagellants had its roots in medieval theology and in the perceived “otherness” of the Jewish people. Christian theologians had interpreted various parts of the New Testament to imply that the Jews, supposedly God’s original chosen people, had been succeeded by Christians because of their innate corruption. The Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 10:21 that Jews were “a disobedient and contrary people,” and accused Jews in 1 Thessalonians 2:15 of killing “both the Lord Jesus and the prophets.” These and other verses, whatever their original intention might have been, were taken to mean that the Jews were spiritually incorrigible, and that their rejection and murder of Christ made them the ultimate antithesis to Christianity. From this stemmed the belief, although it was not universally accepted, that the Jews, if not devils themselves, were at least servants of the devil, and were responsible for many of the ills that befell Christians. This was exacerbated by the Jewish desire, dating back to the Roman occupation of Judea and the resulting diaspora, to retain a sense of identity separate from the European communities among which they lived. Suspicion and prejudice in the minds of Christians were not assuaged by the tendency of Jews to keep to themselves, and even where they were not explicitly demonized, Jews were largely viewed as foreigners.

Spontaneous violence against Jews was not uncommon, as they were often accused of poisonings, ritual murders, and host desecration. Passion plays frequently resulted in attacks on local Jewish settlements, and the town of Freiburg even cancelled a show in 1338 out of fear of such an outcome. What is surprising is that the pogroms that took place during the Black Death were not largely enacted by hysterical peasants. The flagellants who spread anti-Semitic rhetoric were, as recorded by contemporary chroniclers, mostly members of the nobility. Czech historian František Graus wrote that “the flagellants were certainly not a movement of the underclass.” When rumors began circulating that the plague had been caused by Jews poisoning wells and rivers, members of the lower class did not initially act on them. Instead, authorities arrested and interrogated Jewish leaders. The first is believed to have been a doctor named Balavingus in Switzerland, who confessed after being tortured that he knew of a plot to kill Christians by tainting fresh water with a noxious potion. His confession and those extracted from other Jews were taken as factual and resulted in guilty verdicts and death sentences for entire communities. These verdicts were circulated through correspondence with other towns, where they were used as evidence in the trials of other Jewish populations. Some local councils were hesitant to persecute Jews, since they often provided good business, but members of the middle and upper classes insisted that they be removed.

The position of Jews in the late medieval class hierarchy played little role, if any, in their persecution during the Black Death. Many towns and principalities granted Jews special privileges, and as previously mentioned, it was Church policy to ensure their safety. This has led to the assumption that the Black Death pogroms were rooted in the jealousy of peasants, but the evidence instead suggests that the massacres were initiated by aristocrats and members of urban bureaucracies. Given this fact, it is also erroneous to conclude that the persecution was borne of a desire among the upper echelons of society to be rid of their debts to Jewish moneylenders. While it is true that most loans from Jewish bankers went to the bourgeoisie, few Jewish businessmen were arrested, and none arrested were accused of usury. The majority of Jews tortured were doctors or clerics. They were accused of poisoning wells rather than financial exploitation, and their Torahs were destroyed instead of their account books. In the immediacy and apocalyptic dread of the plague, financial concerns seem to have been forgotten. People feared for their very existence, and any potential economic grievances were likely considered irrelevant with regard to the pressing need for spiritual relief and the preservation of Christendom.

The latter half of the 14th century saw Europe recover from the Black Death in a few different ways. Trust was once again placed in the sciences, and the plague's severity was attributed to natural causes and poor sanitation rather than divine judgement or demonic machinations. Jews were given new rights in many places, and those who had not been killed were allowed to resettle. With the struggle to survive alleviated, people were able to turn to less existential concerns, including those of an economic nature. Anti-Jewish actions erupted again in the 1380s, but these were part of a broader emergence of class warfare rather than apocalyptic superstitions; angry peasants and artisans looted both Jewish and Christian property but harmed very few people. In 1391, Spain's lower class revolted more violently and targeted Jews because of their relation to the aristocracy. Hundreds were killed and many were forced to convert to Christianity. Of those pardoned for participating in the violence in Barcelona, the most high-ranking member of society was a notary. In contrast, a notary was the lowest-ranking person who made any accusation against the Jews during the Black Death. Anti-Semitism would not become more ferocious until the 1420s, when Dominicans and Franciscans began spreading messages against Jews, and later in the mid-16th century when Martin Luther penned his anti-Semitic treatise.

The Black Death pogroms represent a singular event in history. They were certainly rooted in underlying prejudice, but the religious authorities of the time did not initiate or condone them. They were also not carried out by a hysterical and undirected mob, but were instead executed upon the directives of decentralized secular authorities who, although quite erroneously, determined

their course of action through judicial procedures. None of this is likely to have occurred if it were not for the apocalyptic circumstances of the plague and the desperation it produced. How, then, do they relate to later tragedies, especially those of the 20th century? There were numerous social, economic, and political developments in Europe leading up to the Holocaust. The “otherness” of Jews continued to be a regular feature of their position in society as many Jewish men became financiers of Europe’s powerful monarchies. They were viewed as valuable because of their Jewishness, which meant that they remained separate from Christian society whilst playing a powerful role in it. In the 19th century, a middle-class Jewish intelligentsia arose which sought to become more integrated with European culture. During this period, Jews became the subject of ire both from the right and the left; socialists (including Karl Marx, himself a secular Jew) criticized Jews for their association with capitalism and imperialism, and conservatives (notably Otto von Bismarck) expressed contempt for the rising intelligentsia which threatened to alter culture.

The most important developments in the years leading up to the Holocaust were the emergence of racism as an ideology and the advent of mass politics. Earlier in European history, people associated with those who spoke the same language and practiced the same religion, but the idea of a “race” or a “nation” unified by ethnic and cultural ties did not really exist until the 19th century, when political systems began to facilitate mass participation. Jews had been demonized, scapegoated, and seen as “others” for ages, but it was not until after these developments that they could be viewed as a wholly separate people suitable to be dominated or exterminated. This was the context in which Nazism arose: a world where racial prejudice supplanted religious superstition, and where thousands of people could be incited and mobilized on the basis of national unity. As psychoanalyst Erich Fromm wrote in 1941, Nazism appealed simultaneously to a sadistic desire for “unrestricted power over another person” through the persecution of Jews and a masochistic inclination to “[dissolve] oneself in an overwhelmingly strong power and [participate] in its strength and glory,” that power being the German nation and its leader. This is rather distinct from the circumstances surrounding the Black Death pogroms. Although both were horrendous tragedies, and although they were linked by a similar animosity, the burning of Jews in 1348-1350 and the Holocaust of 1941-1945 vastly differed in character.

Few events in history have been as crippling as the Black Death, and few have inspired such sudden and dramatic changes in social psychology. With modern technology and medical science, the likelihood of another pandemic reaching the severity of the 14th century’s plague is slim, and the liberalization of Western society has diminished the political efficacy of racial and religious prejudice. Even so, the conditions of our modern age have allowed certain animosities to fester

beneath the surface, and individuals on the fringes of society are quick to interpret new crises through a superstitious or xenophobic lens. The COVID-19 pandemic, although not nearly as deadly as the plague, has been the subject of new conspiracies about Chinese bioweapons and Zionist schemes. Many who are not quite so eccentric are still paranoid to some degree, believing that the government's efforts to mitigate the disease are veiled attempts to oppress them. If we face a situation more tantamount to an apocalypse in the coming decades, as climate scientists have predicted, will more people turn to irrational explanations for the adversity they face? Will more become amenable to extreme actions in hopes of alleviating their suffering? Can we expect a climate catastrophe to be coupled with a human one? These are the questions that must be kept in mind as we move forward, and we must do everything we can to ensure that the answer to each is "no."

Bibliography

- Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994.
- Cohn, Samuel K. "The Black Death and the Burning of Jews." *Past and Present*, August 2007.
- "Coronavirus: Antisemitism." Anti-Defamation League, April 22, 2020.
<https://www.adl.org/blog/coronavirus-antisemitism>.
- Foa, Anna. *The Jews of Europe After the Black Death*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.
- Fromm, Erich. "Psychology of Nazism." In *Escape from Freedom*. New York: Holt, 1994.
- Gottfried, Robert S. *The Black Death: Natural and Human Disaster in Medieval Europe*. London: Free Press, 1983.
- Katz, Steven T. *The Holocaust in Historical Context*. Vol. 1. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Graus, František. *Pest, Geissler, Judenmorde: Das 14. Jahrhundert als Krisenzeit*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988
- Wein, Berel. "The Black Death." Edited by Yaakov Astor. Jewish History. Accessed May 17, 2020.
<https://www.jewishhistory.org/the-black-death/>.