

The Impact of the Black Death

At first, the direct impact of the Black Death was fear, dislocation, and death. The population of Europe dropped from 60 million people to 40 or 35 million. A wandering traveler could enter a village or town and find it abandoned or, worse, littered with rotting corpses. Death was commonplace.

This pattern recurred over and over again. After its initial run from 1348 to 1351, the plague returned in later decades. It appeared four different times in Spain and nine times in Italy between 1381 and 1444. England witnessed five separate outbreaks between 1361 and 1391. The Black Death struck in France six times between the years 1361 and 1436.

Since men and women of the Middle Ages didn't understand how diseases spread, they manufactured explanations to satisfy themselves. Although Jews died from the plague like everyone else, Christians blamed the Black Death on the Jews. They created elaborate plots by which Jewish Europeans were destroying Christianity by poisoning wells and other water supplies.

Campaigns to kill Jews took place in southern France, Spain, Poland, Austria, and Germany. Jewish populations were massacred, burned alive, and attacked by dogs. In more enlightened villages and towns, city fathers protected local Jews, certain they had nothing to do with the spread of the disease.

In many instances, the threat of the Black Death brought out the worst in people. However, despite the destructive and deadly impact of the plague across Europe, there were some changes which resulted in positive differences across the Continent.

With the threat of the plague, people farmed less, produced fewer goods, and became generally less enterprising. This caused the economies of whole regions to plunge into chaos. Many basic items, including food, grew scarce and their values rose, causing inflation.

While this made life more difficult for most, such scarcities were not all bad. With the deaths of so many people, a scarcity of labor developed across Europe. This shortage of workers caused the labors of those still alive to be worth more.

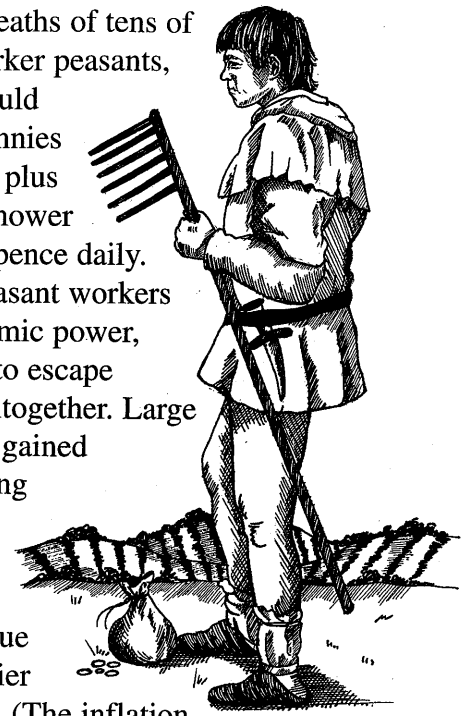
For example, prior to the initial outbreak of the Black Death in the mid-14th century, the normal wage for a field worker was a penny a day. After the

plague and the deaths of tens of thousands of worker peasants, a grain reaper could demand eight pennies (or pence) a day, plus a noon meal. A mower could expect 12 pence daily.

Suddenly, peasant workers had a new economic power, many managing to escape feudal services altogether. Large numbers of serfs gained freedom, becoming landowners in their own right.

Those who survived the plague were now wealthier and bought more. (The inflation caused by the Black Death was only temporary.) Business flourished once again, great trading centers were reestablished in the towns and cities, and significant profits became the rule.

Renewed emphasis on trade and buying brought on a new banking industry, accounting firms, and large international trading companies. One such group was known as the Hanseatic League. Led by two northern cities, Lubeck and Bremen, the Hanseatic League controlled much of the trade between the North Seas and the Baltic, from Scandinavia to the Germanies. By 1450, a smaller population in Europe was enjoying a better standard of living than the population of 1300.



Review and Write

1. How were Jewish Europeans victimized by the Black Death?
2. How did the Black Death bring about an increase in the wages of the average European worker?