

Fact Sheet: The Impact of Pandemic Disease on Mental Health

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Plagues in History

- Human beings are no strangers to epidemic disease. Recorded history is pocked with epidemics, many of them so severe that historians point to them as shapers of major world events.¹

The Plague of Athens (430 – 426 BC) killed over 25% of the Athenian population (approx. 100,000 people). Prior to the epidemic, Athens had been the strongest city-state in Greece, but the social, economic, and military collapse triggered by the epidemic contributed to the loss of the Peloponnesian war. Afterward, Athens was reduced to a state of near-complete subjection, and never regained its pre-war prosperity.²

The Antonine Plague (165 – 180 AD) destroyed as much as one-third of the Roman population and decimated the Roman army, likely creating the conditions for the decline of the Roman Empire.³

The Plague of Justinian (541 – 542 BC) the Bubonic Plague, killed 10,000 people per day for four months when it struck Constantinople.⁴ Carried by rats along caravan trading routes, the disease established a regular cycle of infection throughout the Mediterranean. By 500 BC, an estimated 25–100 million people had perished, reducing the population of the Byzantine Empire by around 40%.⁵ The losses left the Mediterranean open to invasion, and the center of European civilization subsequently shifted to the north.⁶

The Black Death (1347 – 1671 AD) brought intermittent waves of bubonic plague to Europe, the first of which killed between 30 and 60% of the population. All told, the

¹ Crosby, AW. *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press; McNeil, W. (1976). *Plagues and Peoples*. Hammondsworth: Penguin; Zinsser, H. (1935). *Rats, lice and history; being a study in biography, which, after twelve preliminary chapters indispensable for the preparation of the lay reader, deals with the life history of typhus*. London: G. Routledge & Sons.

² Littman, R. J. (2009). The plague of Athens: epidemiology and paleopathology. *Mount Sinai Journal of Medicine: A Journal of Translational and Personalized Medicine*, 76(5), 456-467.

³ Sabbatani, S., & Fiorino, S. (2009). The antonine plague and the decline of the Roman Empire. *Le infezioni in medicina: rivista periodica di eziologia, epidemiologia, diagnostica, clinica e terapia delle patologie infettive*, 17(4), 261-275.

⁴ McNeil, W. 141.

⁵ Huremović, D. (2019). *Psychiatry of Pandemics: A Mental Health Response to Infection Outbreak*. Cham: Springer International Publishing. Ch1

⁶ McNeil, W. 142.

“great pestilence” carried off 75-200 million people in Eurasia and North Africa.⁷ In the labor shortages that followed, wages increased and commoners came to enjoy more freedom.⁸ The subsequent decline of serfdom and emergence of the Renaissance may have been directly related.⁹

⁷ Aberth, J. (2010). *From the Brink of the Apocalypse: Confronting Famine, War, Plague and Death in the Later Middle Ages* (second ed.). Routledge

⁸ Scheidel, W. (2017). *The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the Twenty-First Century*. Princeton University Press, Haddock, David D.; Kiesling, L. (2002). "The Black Death and Property Rights". *The Journal of Legal Studies*. **31** (S2): 545–587.

⁹ Tuchman, B. (1978). *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century*. Knopf