

ACTIVITY 15.1

The Economic Impact of the Black Death of 1347–1352**THE PLAGUE ENDS POPULATION GROWTH IN EUROPE**

Between 1347 and 1352, the Black Death killed more than 20 million people in Europe. This was one-third or more of Europe’s population.¹ The plague began in Asia and spread to Europe on trading ships. At the time, no one knew what caused the plague. Many years later, the source was found to be bacteria from black rats and fleas. The fleas infected rats, and the rats infected people after they hopped aboard ships and sailed to Genoa, Venice, Messina, and other European ports. From these cities, the plague spread quickly throughout Europe. “So lethal was the disease that cases were known of persons going to bed well and dying before they woke.... So rapidly did it spread from one to another that to a French physician ... it seemed as if one sick person ‘could infect the whole world.’”²

RULERS RESIST WORKERS’ DEMANDS FOR HIGHER WAGES

The plague had an important effect on the relationship between the lords who owned much of the land in Europe and the peasants who worked for the lords. As people died, it became harder and harder to find people to plow fields, harvest crops, and produce other goods and services. Peasants began to demand higher wages.

European rulers tried to keep wages from rising. An English law in 1349 tried to force workers to accept the same wages they received in 1346. A similar law, the Statute of Laborers,³ was issued in 1351. The statute said that every healthy unemployed person under 60 years old must work for anyone who wanted to hire him. Workers who violated the Statute of Laborers were fined and were put in stocks⁴ as punishment for disobeying the statute. In 1360, punishments became worse. Workers who demanded higher wages could be sent to prison and—if they escaped—branded with the letter “F” (possibly for Fugitive) on their foreheads.

¹ Rondo Cameron and Larry Neal. *A Concise History of the World* (4th edition). 2003. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 16.

² Barbara Tuchman. *A Distant Mirror – The Calamitous 14th Century*. 1978. New York: Ballantine Books, pp. 92-93.

³ The English spelling is “Labourers.”

⁴ Stocks were used in the medieval times as a form of punishment involving public humiliation. The stocks were often located in a public place, so that people who passed the victim would know he broke some law.

ACTIVITY 15.1, CONTINUED**GREATER SCARCITY OF LABOR RESULTS IN HIGHER WAGES**

Although worker population decreased because of the plague, the amount of land and the tools did not change much. Some farm animals died when the people who took care of them died. Because the remaining workers had more tools and land to work, they became more productive, producing more goods and services. When workers are more productive, employers are willing to pay higher wages.

The Statute of Laborers and similar laws in other countries were not very effective. Some lords avoided violating the statute by making “in kind” payments—paying workers with food or other goods rather than wages—or providing other “fringe benefits.” Some lords began to pay illegally high wages. Wages increased because there were fewer workers—labor had become more scarce.⁵

THE BLACK DEATH CHANGES EUROPEAN AGRICULTURE

Before the plague, the large population kept wages from rising. Most peasants did not consider leaving their villages to find work somewhere else. After the plague, workers asked for higher wages and better working conditions. Many lords agreed to these demands, and those who didn’t soon found that other lords would. Lords began to realize they had less control over workers and began to change what they produced. Many workers were needed to grow and harvest grain, so some lords began to raise sheep instead. Raising sheep required fewer workers and there were more customers for the meat and for woolen clothing. As their incomes rose, people were able to buy more vegetables, fruits, and clothing. Production of these goods increased. Peasants eventually became free to move away from estates owned by lords; some were even able to buy their own land.⁶

The Black Death was a great tragedy. However, the decrease in population caused by the plague increased the wages of peasants. As a result, peasants began to enjoy a higher standard of living and greater freedom.

⁵ Stephen Broadberry, et al., “British Economic Growth, 1270-1870,” <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/economics/staff/academic/broadberry/wp/britishgdplongrun8a.pdf>

⁶ David Routt, “The Economic Impact of the Black Death,” <http://eh.net/encyclopedia/article/Routt.Black.Death>.

ACTIVITY 15.2

The Statute of Laborers (1351)

... Because a great part of the people ... has now died ... some, seeing the straights of the masters and the scarcity of servants, are not willing to serve unless they receive excessive wages, and others ... prefer to beg in idleness: We have seen fit to ordain: that every man and woman of our kingdom of England ... who is able bodied and below the age of sixty years, not living from trade nor carrying on a fixed craft ... shall be bound to serve him who has seen fit so to seek after him; and he shall take only the wages ... which ... were accustomed to be paid in [1346] ... and if any man or woman ... will not do this ... he shall be taken and sent to the next jail.... And if a reaper or mower, or other workman or servant ... who is retained in the service of any one, do depart from the said service before the end of the term agreed, without permission ... he shall undergo the penalty of imprisonment.... Likewise let butchers, fishmongers ... all other vendors of any [food], be bound to sell such [food] for a reasonable price ... and if any one sell such [food] in another manner, and be convicted of it in the aforesaid way, he shall pay the double of that which he received to the party injured.... And because many sound beggars do refuse to labour so long as they can live from begging ... giving themselves up to idleness and sins ... let no one, under the ... pain of imprisonment presume, ... to give anything to such as can very well labour, or to cherish them in their sloth, so that thus they may be compelled to labour for the necessaries of life.

Statute of Labourers (1351)

<http://avalon.law.yale.edu/medieval/statlab.asp>

(“Statutes of the Realm,” vol. i p. 307.)

ACTIVITY 15.3

Sequence Chart**Name** _____**Topic**

Results of the Black Death

In the space provided below, list events in the order in which they occurred.

First:
Next:
Next:
Next:
Next:
Next:
Next:
Next:
Last:

ACTIVITY 15.4

The Trial of the (14th) Century

CHARACTERS:

Reginald (“Reggie”) Rattus	The accused
Atticus Flinch	Attorney for the accused
Beatrice Berger	Prosecuting attorney
Oliver Wendell Huts	Presiding judge
Nigel Snoddy	BBC reporter
Valerie Bennett-James	BBC reporter
Dr. Mats Swenson	Witness
Dr. Jane Maynard Friedman	Witness
Bailiff	

Setting:

The Global Court of Justice in Geneva, Switzerland

Nigel Snoddy:

Well, good morning once again from the Global Court of Justice in Geneva, Switzerland. This is your BBC legal correspondent, Nigel Snoddy, along with Valerie Bennett-James. We are watching the second day of the trial that will determine the fate of those accused of causing the so-called “Black Death” of 1347-1352. Valerie, the first day of the trial had a surprise development, didn’t it?

Valerie Bennett-James:

Yes, Nigel. Yesterday Judge Huts announced that one of the accused, Fiona Flea, had flown. Both Reginald Rattus and Fiona Flea are accused of spreading the plague throughout Europe. Mr. Atticus Flinch, attorney for the rat, argued that because the flea had flown the charges against Mr. Rattus should be dropped. But, Nigel, Judge Huts disagreed.

Nigel:

Yes, the judge agreed with Beatrice Berger that the trial of Reginald Rattus should continue. Fiona Flea will be tried when she is found. Ms. Berger explained, “Our prison cells cannot be expected to hold fleas. Fiona Flea slipped through the bars of her cell or maybe she jumped onto a guard or animal that walked by the cell. We have other fleas in custody who know where she is. We expect her arrest shortly. The trial of Mr. Rattus should go on.”

Valerie:

Nigel, the judge has just entered the courtroom. Let’s listen.

Bailiff:

All rise for the Honorable Oliver Wendell Huts.

Judge Huts:

Please be seated. Bailiff, please announce the case before us.

Bailiff:

Your Honor, the case is the people of Medieval Europe versus Reginald Rattus—representing *Rattus rattus*, the small black rat.

Judge Huts:

Very well, is the prosecution ready?

Beatrice Berger:

Yes, Your Honor.

Judge Huts:

And the defense?

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Atticus Flinch: Yes, Your Honor.

Judge Huts: The prosecution may make an opening statement.

Ms. Berger: Your Honor and ladies and gentlemen of the jury. Today we will present evidence that will show that *Rattus rattus* is guilty of infecting millions of Europeans with the plague bacteria in the 14th century. These infections led to terrible deaths. The defense claims that the rat is innocent. We disagree. The rat was aware of his role in this crime. In his greedy search for food—in garbage dumps, back alleys, and trading ships—he became a 14th century taxi for the flea. Together, they spread the plague all over Europe.

Ladies and gentlemen, it has been nearly 700 years since the flea and rat caused the deaths of over 20 million people. Justice delayed is justice denied! We cannot try the flea, but we ask you to find the rat guilty of mass murder!

Judge Huts: Mr. Flinch, you may make your opening statement.

Mr. Flinch: Your Honor, ladies and gentlemen of the jury. I have come to defend Reginald Rattus, not to praise him. We will agree that *Rattus rattus*—black rats—spread the plague bacteria throughout Europe. But my client’s ancestors did not realize this. We will hear testimony that the rats were victims of the plague. An economist will argue that, as terrible as the plague was, it led to an increase in the wages of workers who survived and improved their standard of living.

Mr. Rattus is appearing here to seek justice for his fellow rats. You know that Fiona Flea escaped from her jail cell yesterday. Is this the action of an innocent flea? Members of the jury: I ask that you not allow any opinions you have of rats to affect your decision. Judge my client on the testimony you will hear today.

Judge Huts: The prosecution may call its first witness.

Ms. Berger: The state calls Dr. Mats Swenson to the stand.

Bailiff: Do you swear that the testimony you are about to give will be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

Dr. Mats Swenson: I do.

Ms. Berger: Dr. Swenson, please state your occupation.

Dr. Swenson: I am a professor of European history at the State University of Sweden. I specialize in the period of the Black Death from 1347 to 1352.

Ms. Berger: Dr. Swenson, can you explain how the Black Death began?

Dr. Swenson: Before the time you asked about, from 850 through early 1300 C.E., the population in Europe steadily increased. But by 1347, something terrible had happened. Historians believe the plague started in Asia. We know that in October 1347 trading ships from Genoa docked at Messina, Sicily. This is where the rat and flea began to murder more than 20 million innocent Europeans ...

Mr. Flinch: Objection, Your Honor! Dr. Swenson is assuming that my client is guilty of the charge against him!

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- Judge Huts:** Yes, I agree. Objection sustained. Dr. Swenson, please comment only on the facts of the case.
- Dr. Swenson:** I'm sorry, Your Honor.
- Ms. Berger:** Dr. Swenson, please continue.
- Dr. Swenson:** By January 1348, the plague had traveled to France and North Africa. From Italy, it crossed the Alps into Switzerland and moved eastward to Hungary. At the time, no one knew the source of the disease. This added to the terror people felt. Some 500 years passed before we learned that the killers were the flea and the rat! Fleas!! Too small for people to notice. Rats!! They carried the fleas with them on trading ships. The ships' crews were unaware of the deadly cargo they had on board. And ...
- Mr. Flinch:** Objection, Your Honor!
- Judge Huts:** Sustained. Dr. Swenson, you must control yourself!
- Dr. Swenson:** What? Oh, yes. I *am* sorry. I get carried away whenever I think of this awful tragedy. Uh, where was I?
- Ms. Berger:** You described the spread of the bacteria throughout Europe by the flea and the rat.
- Dr. Swenson:** Yes, I remember now. The bacteria lived in the stomach of the flea and the bloodstream of the rat. The disease was transferred to humans by the bite of both the rat and the flea. The rat was the black rat, *Rattus rattus*. This plague killed probably more than a third of the population of Europe.
- Ms. Berger:** Thank you Dr. Swenson. I am finished with this witness.
- Judge Huts:** Mr. Flinch?
- Mr. Flinch:** I have no questions for this witness.
- Judge Huts:** Dr. Swenson, you are excused. Ms. Berger, you may call your next witness.
- Ms. Berger:** Your Honor, the state rests its case against the defendant.
- Judge Huts:** Very well. Mr. Flinch, you may call your first witness.
- Mr. Flinch:** I call to the witness stand Dr. Jane Maynard Friedman.
- Bailiff:** Do you swear that the testimony you are about to give will be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God?
- Dr. Friedman:** I do.
- Mr. Flinch:** Dr. Friedman, isn't it true that you have studied the history of Europe during the Black Death?
- Dr. Friedman:** Yes, I have.
- Mr. Flinch:** In addition to the human cost of the plague, you have written about the economic impact. Can you summarize this impact for the jury?
- Dr. Friedman:** Because so many people died there was a great decrease in the number of workers.
- Mr. Flinch:** What was the result of this?

ACTIVITY 15.4, CONTINUED

- Dr. Friedman:** Workers found out that they could demand higher wages. The lords who owned much of the land in Europe did not like it, but the price of labor—the wage rate— began to rise.
- Mr. Flinch:** You say the lords didn't like paying higher wages?
- Dr. Friedman:** Yes. In England and other countries laws were passed to keep wages from rising and to provide for punishment of workers who quit their jobs to work for someone else. But these laws did not work. Producers could not keep wages from rising.
- Mr. Flinch:** So, Dr. Friedman, the plague led to an increase in workers' wages?
- Dr. Friedman:** Workers also found that they could refuse to work if the jobs they were given were difficult or dangerous.
- Mr. Flinch:** So, workers were better off after the plague?
- Dr. Friedman:** The plague was a great tragedy, but it is true that workers who survived earned higher wages and better working conditions. Over time, peasants had greater freedom. Years later, some were even able to own their own land and start their own businesses.
- Mr. Flinch:** I have no further questions of this witness.
- Judge Huts:** Ms. Berger?
- Ms. Berger:** I have no questions for the witness.
- Judge Huts:** Thank you, Dr. Friedman. You are excused. Mr. Flinch, you may call your next witness.
- Mr. Flinch:** The defense calls to the stand ... Reginald Rattus!
[Loud murmuring fills the courtroom]
- Judge Huts:** *[pounds his gavel]* Order in this courtroom! Bailiff, wait until we have silence before the next witness is sworn in.
- Nigel:** This is certainly a surprise announcement. Valerie, this is a risky move ...
- Valerie:** Nigel, I believe that Mr. Rattus wants to testify against his lawyer's advice. Now Ms. Berger will be able to cross-examine Mr. Rattus.
- Judge Huts:** Bailiff, please swear in Mr. Rattus.
- Bailiff:** Do you swear that the testimony you are about to give will be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God?
- Reginald Rattus:** I do.
- Mr. Flinch:** Mr. Rattus, you are testifying on behalf of all black rats accused in the deaths of 20 million Europeans between 1347 and 1352. Please explain why.
- Mr. Rattus:** Mr. Flinch, please call me Reggie. I am here today on behalf of my fellow rats, who have been accused of this awful crime for over 600 years. Rats did spread the plague throughout Europe. We are really sorry about this, but we were victims of the plague, too. We had no idea that we were carrying the disease until it was too late, for people and for rats.

ACTIVITY 15.4, CONTINUED

I know what people think of us; dirty, grubby, hanging out in old buildings, raiding dumpsters. But what's a rat to do? We look for food where we can find it. Rats have made important contributions to humans. Many have given their lives for scientific research. And some rats are kept by humans as pets—would people keep rats as companions if they thought we were a threat to them? In China, people born in the Year of the Rat are said to have qualities including creativity, honesty, and ambition.

Some say we are nuisance, but in many ways, we are like you—all of you here in this courtroom. Hath not a rat eyes? Hath not a rat hands and organs? We eat the same food—at least that portion that people toss into dumpsters—and are subject to the same diseases, including the plague. If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us—well, OK; I admit that few humans tickle rats, but if they did ...

- Ms. Berger:** *[interrupts]* Your Honor, we agree that rats have eyes and eat garbage.
- Judge Huts:** Mr. Rattus, please comment only on the facts of this case.
- Mr. Flinch:** Reggie, you said that rats were victims of the plague. Please explain what you meant.
- Mr. Rattus:** The source of the bacteria was the flea, not rats. When fleas jumped onto rats they often bit us. It is true that we spread the disease, but only because fleas got into our fur. When the fleas bit us, we were infected. Many rats died from the plague. That's why I said we were also victims of the plague.
- Mr. Flinch:** Thank you, Reggie. I have no further questions.
- Judge Huts:** Ms. Berger, do you want to cross-examine the witness?
- Ms. Berger:** Yes, Your Honor. Reggie, you claim that your fellow rats had no idea that they were carriers of the plague. But those rats died many years ago. How can you be sure that this is true?
- Reggie:** Well, the story has been handed down by rats throughout the centuries. My grandparents told me about the plague.
- Ms. Berger:** Members of the jury, this is not evidence from eyewitnesses. No one living today can know that rats were “innocent victims.” Reggie, isn't it true that if rats had not transported infected fleas throughout Europe, the plague would not have spread beyond Asia?
- Reggie:** Well, I suppose that's true, but ...
- Ms. Berger:** Thank you, Mr. Rattus. That will be all.
- Judge Huts:** Reggie, you are excused. The defense may call its next witness.
- Mr. Flinch:** Your Honor, the defense rests.
- The case now goes to the jury.**