



## **What Can We Learn from Past Pandemics?**

In 1347, 12 ships from the Black Sea entered the Mediterranean Sea and docked in Genoa. Onboard was a virus that came from the Far East and would spread around Europe with devastating effect. The virus took three to five days to manifest into obvious signs of swollen lymph glands, boils, fever, chills, headaches, shortness of breath, hemorrhaging and coughing blood in a delirious state.

The virus would later be called the Black Death, and today, it is known as the bubonic plague. The disease was terrifying, and people looked for reasons for why it came. One explanation was that it was a punishment from God for sinful ways. The Flagellants of Germany danced and whipped themselves, and others wore bird dung or worse around their neck to prevent the disease. Dancing was a common preventative of the disease, and today our children play a game based on the dancing with the song “Ring-Around the Rosie.”

The blame for the disease was placed on scapegoats, and one group was the Jewish population. They became a target, and in Strasbourg on Valentine’s Day, Jews were massacred by the thousands. During this period, there were over 500 Jewish communities destroyed. Rumors of the Jews poisoning the water and that they were immune to the disease helped spread the fear. Other groups—heretics, witches and gypsies—were also targeted for scapegoating for the wrath of the people.

The Black Plague took 20% to 50% of the population of Europe at the time. Those that were affected had a 20% chance of surviving the disease. Rich homeowners hired the poor to stay in their home toward the end of the plague to see if it was safe. During the period, there were upheavals and revolutions, and the aristocrats took measures to prevent more of these.

When the disease abated, society had changed. There were fewer workers, and wages went up as did the prices of goods. Medical studies improved with better sanitation habits. The private bathtub replaced public bathing. The loss of old intellectual centers allowed new ideas to take root.

A common cause of the spread of the disease are the fleas on black rats, also called house rats because they like to live in people’s homes. The rats were pushed out of the environment by brown rats, which do not like to be next to humans. It was a time when cats were not considered for house pets.

The bubonic plague is still with us today. In the western United States, there are between one and 17 cases each year. However, the disease is not as virulent today as in the past, and medical treatment has provided a better survival rate.

Can we learn from the past? Are rumors spread today? Are individuals scapegoated? Is there a rush to judgement? Is there a political element to the reactions? Look at the past and see if there are any parallels.

D.H.Coop is a retired fire/paramedic and retired teacher having taught IB and AP World History 30 years. He continues to substitute, tutor and consult. [www.HistoryDepot.com](http://www.HistoryDepot.com)