

James Belich. *The World the Plague Made: The Black Death and the Rise of Europe*. Princeton, NJ/Oxford, UK: Princeton University Press. 2022. v-ix + 622 pages. Hardcover, \$39.95.

In his new book, Oxford historian James Belich examines the mid-fourteenth century outbreak of the bubonic plague in Europe and its far-reaching global impact on world history. *The World the Plague Made* traverses scholarly debates and disagreements to offer new analyses of historical events. The catastrophic plague, which started 1346, has been variously referred to as the “The Black Death,” “Bubonic Plague” or simply “The Plague,” reduced populations by 33 percent to 50 percent—even 60 percent—in some areas, and left tremendous death and suffering wherever it struck. For 300 years, the plague persisted intermittently across different regions of the world, including Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Russia, China, Mughal India, and the Muslim South (Middle East and North Africa). Although casualty numbers vary, it is estimated that about 75 million people perished during the plague in the fourteenth century, which makes the Covid-19 pandemic, with a 6.49 million global death rate, comparatively mild in its death toll. Paradoxically, despite the decimation of populations, Belich contends that the bubonic plague was the catalyst for Europe’s rise to greatness, including its expansion into Asia and the Americas.

According to Belich, the Black Death brought about economic and cultural improvement and modernization. For example, labor shortages incentivized the improvement or development of new technologies, such as waterpower, wind power, and gunpowder. In addition, increases in economic productivity and commerce led to a growth in disposable incomes, which, in turn, led to an increase in the consumption of luxury goods like silks, furs, spices, sugars, gold, and slaves. In Belich’s telling, Western Europe prospered because of the plague.

What was the origin of the bubonic plague? Medieval society did not know what caused the plague or how it was transmitted. Hence, superstition and conspiracy theories were rife. Belich concedes that some aspects of the plague, including its origin, remain controversial. The point of origin has not been identified with any precision, particularly given the paucity of documentation and lack of epidemiological knowledge in the Middle Ages. The plague reportedly started in Western China, though some scholarly interpretations establish its origins as possibly Southern China or even Central Asia around contemporary Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. It was spread by fleas that lived on plague-infested rats, and such rats were pervasive on trading ships; hence, the name “ship rats.” By contagion, the plague spread via trade routes from Asia to Italy and, from then on, to Europe. Accounts point to infected merchants from the city state of Genoa, who returned home in 1347 from a voyage across the Black Sea, with an entire crew either dead, ill or overcome with fever. The disease spread from Italy to France, Spain, Portugal, England, Germany, Scandinavia, and Russia.

The transmission of the plague was through the bacillus germ *Yersinia pestis*, named after Swiss physician and bacteriologist Alexandre Yersin, who discovered it in 1894 in Hong Kong. The germ is often carried by the fleas that live on rodents like rats and squirrels. Thus, Belich fingered rodent species as villains. He cites research showing that scientists found bubonic plague’s pathogens at ten different Black Death burial sites in various countries, including evidence from graves excavated in London in 2013. The most common way the plague spread in fourteenth-century Europe was through flea bites. The fleas, having ingested plague-infested blood from their hosts would feed on other victims, thereby injecting the infected blood into new hosts. The infected would suffer from fever, headaches, nausea, and vomiting. Swelling and dark rashes appeared on the groin, legs, armpits, and neck of victims, who died within a few days.

Due to its high rate of transmission, either through direct contact with fleas, serving as secondary hosts to the bacterium, or through airborne pathogens, the plague quickly spread and decimated densely populated urban centers. Florence, Venice, London, Paris, Hamburg, Bremen, Moscow and other great European cities reportedly lost 30 to 60 percent of their populations. Such numbers point to the unimaginable tragedy caused by the plague.

The main thrust of Belich's analyses was the global impact of the Black Death. Amassing a huge trove of research data, he established a strong causal link between the plague and Europe's rise to global importance through technological innovations, overseas exploratory adventures, and colonial and imperial conquests. The core argument of Belich's thesis is that almost every major historical event from the mid-fourteenth to the nineteenth century was affected somehow by the plague. In fact, he boldly suggested that Western Europe might never have ascended to global power without the plague. On this score, think colonization, imperialism, the founding of the United States and Latin America and Trans-Atlantic slave trade. To be clear, Belich does not claim the Great Plague was the deciding factor in those events, but he persuasively argues that it was a powerful influence.

Considered one of history's greatest paradoxes, the Bubonic Plague fundamentally changed labor, trade, and technology and orchestrated Europe's global expansion. So, why did Europe's dramatic rise begin in the wake of the Black Death? Belich maintains that the plague signaled a cultural and economic renewal. A host of factors contributed to this. Despite the high casualty toll, the plague left the material world untouched. This meant more resources were available to survivors, better living conditions, and competitive wages for workers. Implicitly, a shortage of laborers meant workers were able to charge higher prices. Furthermore, *serfs* were no longer tied to specific feudal landlords or plot of land. They demanded higher wages and better

working conditions. This probably contributed to the decline of feudalism and the rise of capitalism.

What's more, the number of people privileged with disposable income increased. Demand for luxury consumer goods and slaves grew and supply stepped up to satisfy the demand. In addition, labor scarcity accelerated the use of improved or new technologies like waterpower, wind power, and gunpowder. As a consequence of the plague, water-powered blast furnaces, heavily gunned sailing ships and musket technologies advanced rapidly, thereby improving shipping technology and warfare. Belich suggests that the consequences of the Black Death was far-reaching that its effects rival those of the Protestant Reformation, the Renaissance, the Industrial Revolution, and the European Enlightenment. Putting the rise of Western Europe in historical context, Belich shows how empires of Russia and the Muslim South prospered after the plague. *The World the Plague Made* convincingly demonstrates that the Black Death influenced many aspects of human life. In short, it is global history.

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