

*Hist/Spec*

# Bubonic Plague



**CHAIR:** Kathleen Evans

*GWCLA 30*

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## **Letter From the Chair**

Dear delegates,

It is my pleasure to welcome you to the Bubonic Plague Committee at GW CIA XXX! My name is Kathleen Evans, and I am so excited to be your chair for this committee!

I am a sophomore at George Washington University, studying International Affairs with a concentration in International Development and a minor in Public Health. I joined the GW Model UN team in the spring, and this year I will be working as Director of Public Relations as a part of the secretariat for WAMUNC, the high school conference GW hosts.

Aside from MUN, I'm a member of GW Students for OneHealth, as well as GW Partners in Health. Outside of school, I love finding new coffee shops and visiting museums around DC!

This is a complex topic, but this is also a novice committee. I had never done Model UN prior to joining GWMUN, and I completely understand if you're feeling nervous. Feel free to reach out if you have any questions, comments, or concerns about the topics, the committee itself, or anything else that may come up!

Best regards,

Kathleen Evans

[kathleen.evans@gwu.edu](mailto:kathleen.evans@gwu.edu)

## **Introduction to Committee**

Instead of the traditional resolutions found in GA-style committees, this committee will enact all actions via directives. These directives are only a few pages long (at the discretion of the chair) and include brief actionable points on what the committee intends to do. These directives will be sent to the backroom and will influence the committee's events through the discretion of the Crisis Director. This committee will NOT feature full crisis elements, delegates will not write notes, and will not have personal backrooms.

The year is 1348, and Europe is in crisis. A deadly illness, which later becomes known as the Bubonic Plague, is sweeping across the continent. Those who fall ill often die within days.

Leaders at the time do not quite understand what is happening, Some believe that the disease comes from miasma, or bad air. Others claim that the plague is a punishment from God. Some physicians are beginning to explore how disease could be transmitted from person to person, but these theories are new and underdeveloped.

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This committee brings together people with different backgrounds and priorities from across and beyond Europe. Every delegate in this committee brings a unique perspective. Heads of state must balance protecting their people with protecting their economies, religious leaders must find a way to maintain faith in a time of crisis, doctors and scientists search for cures and an explanation.

As delegates in this committee, you are tasked with deciding how Europe should respond to this catastrophe. Is it worth ordering quarantines, even if there's an economic cost? Should the authority of heads of state be strengthened, or questioned? Every choice made will shape not only the response to the plague, but the future of Europe as a whole.

## **Committee Topic**

### **Arrival of the Plague**

Europe, in the 14th century, faced what is still known as one of the deadliest events in human history: the Bubonic Plague. Between 1346 and 1353, up to 50 million people died, about half of Europe's population at the time. Today we know the Bubonic Plague was caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*, carried on fleas and spread through the air. At the time, this was not known, due to highly limited scientific knowledge regarding disease.

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The plague began in Central Asia, and spread along trade routes such as the Silk Road. By around 1347, the plague reached Europe through trade ships in the Mediterranean. The first known city in Europe to be hit by the plague was Messina in Sicily, a lively port city. Once the plague reached Messina, it spread inland rapidly, throughout Italy, Spain, France, England, and the Holy Roman Empire. Within a few years, every part of Europe had been struck by the plague.

## **European society before the plague**

Part of the reason the plague was so destructive was due to how European society was organized at the time. Medieval Europe was built on the feudal system, which split up society into a caste system. The king was at the top, nobles and merchants followed, and then serfs (also known as peasants) were at the very bottom. Kings would give land to nobles, and peasants worked the land in exchange for safety. The functionality of the feudal system was dependent on stability and human labor, both of which were threatened by the plague. The other significant structure that shaped European society at the time was the Catholic Church. Religion was a key part of daily life, religious leaders provided education and charity in addition to spiritual guidance. However, the plague destabilized the church's authority because they could not provide an answer to

the current crisis. At the time, trade and urban life was also a hallmark of European society. Cities such as Genoa and Venice were flourishing centers of trade and culture, where merchants connected Europe with the Middle East, Asia, and North Africa. These trade networks, though prosperous, provided a venue for the plague to quickly spread from port to port. The existing social order was already under strain from events such as the Hundred Years' War between England and France, and periodic famines. The plague provided another strain on the system, effectively pushing it to a breaking point.

## **Reactions to the Crisis**

Some groups believed the plague was a punishment from God. Flagellants would march from city to city, hitting themselves in atonement. Others turned to prayers, saints, etc. for guidance, however disillusionment with the Church grew as prayer failed to stop the spread of the disease. Doctors and scholars at the time made their best efforts at addressing the disease with the knowledge they had. A leading medical theory was the imbalance of the “four humors”, treatments included bloodletting, herbal mixtures, and measures like carrying herbs. Socially, fear was a defining part of the response. The plague was highly unpredictable— one day a neighbor could be healthy, while the next day they could have succumbed to the plague. The unpredictability contributed to mass panic. Rumors also spread quickly, which made fear worse. People

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became suspicious of strangers, travelers, and sometimes their neighbors. Families frequently abandoned their sick relatives, demonstrating just how deep the fear ran. The fear caused many communities to shut down, because of the fear of gathering in a large group. Fear was also a motivating factor for leaders to act. Quarantines and travel restrictions were motivated by desperation of the situation. Religious movements, like the Flagellants, gained traction because people were scared to a point they sought any possible solution.

## **Long term impacts**

The massive death toll had significant impacts on Europe. Serfs perished in the greatest numbers. With fewer workers available, labor became significantly more valuable, giving surviving serfs the ability to negotiate higher wages and better conditions. Nobles struggled to maintain their land, weakening the feudal system. The Church lost many priests and monks to the plague. People increasingly questioned why God allowed that level of suffering, leading to deepened faith for some, but doubt for others, which allowed mysticism and other reform movements to gain influence. Writers and artists shifted their focus to depicting how people behave in times of crisis. Works such as Giovanni Boccaccio's Decameron captured both the simultaneous fear and humanity of the time.



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## **Why it matters for committee**

The Bubonic Plague was not just a pandemic, it marked a shift in Europe that challenged the organization of society. In this committee, delegates must think like those facing the challenges of the 14th century. These are topics that shaped the lives of millions in medieval Europe, and they are the topics you as delegates will contend with as you step into 1348.

## **Key Terms**

- **Yersinia pestis:** the bacterium that causes the Bubonic Plague
- **Feudal system:** the mode of organization for land and society in medieval Europe. Kings gave land to nobles, and nobles had peasants work the land in exchange for protection.
- **Quarantine:** a practice used to stop the spread of disease by keeping ships, travelers, etc. isolated for a designated period of time, typically 40 days
- **Flagellants:** religious groups that publicly hit themselves, believing that their suffering could stop the plague.

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- Hundred Years' War: a longstanding conflict between England and France that lasted from 1337 to 1453. The war put a strain on resources, presenting an additional challenge for rulers when the plague began.
- Pestilence: a word frequently used in the Middle Ages when referring to a deadly outbreak of disease. At the time, the Bubonic Plague was often referred to as “the Great Pestilence”

## **Guiding Questions**

Please consider the following questions as you prepare for this committee, allow the following to guide your research:

1. What is causing the plague?
  - a. How should leaders choose what theory to follow and respond to when there is very little scientific knowledge?
  - b. How should physicians and scientists best advise leaders– especially when there are disagreements?
2. What role do religious leaders play in responding to the plague?
  - a. The Church's authority is being tested by the plague– should the priority be maintaining faith? If so, what can religious leaders do?
3. What can be done to stop the spread?

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- a. Should cities close ports, shut down markets, etc. to slow the spread, even at the risk of their economies?
  - b. How can leaders handle travelers to best reduce the risk of spreading the plague further?
- 4. How should information be handled?
  - a. What role can leaders play in stopping harmful rumors while keeping the people informed?
  - b. How should writers and scholars collaborate and record what is happening?
  - c. How might fear influence people's actions, and what can be done to maintain order despite this fear?
- 5. How much collaboration is necessary?
  - a. Is one unified disease response plan for all of Europe something to consider, or should each country be left to handle it their own way?

## **Character List:**

**Pope Clement VI:** Head of the Catholic Church (1342-1352), based in Avignon during the plague.

**King Edward III of England:** King of England (1327-1377), led during Hundred Years' War and outbreak of the Bubonic Plague, contending with military, economic and social disruption

**Peter IV of Aragon:** Ruler of Aragon (1336-1387). Ruled over Aragon, which comprised several Mediterranean territories that were heavily reliant on trade. The plague disrupted commerce, causing unrest among merchants and nobles in Aragon,

**Guy de Chauliac:** French physician and surgeon who served as Pope Clement VI's personal doctor. Wrote numerous detailed medical accounts of the Plague's symptoms and potential medical treatments.

**St. Aloysius Gonzaga:** Jesuit saint, the patron saint of plague victims. Plays a deeply symbolic role, believing in care for all victims regardless of social status

**Giovanni Boccaccio:** Florentine writer, documented social impacts caused by the Plague in The Decameron.

**William of Ockham:** English philosopher known for challenging papal authority and advocating for reason in governance

**Archbishop of Canterbury:** Senior church official in England, responsible for guiding the clergy during mass death, responsible for moral and religious leadership

**Conrad of Megenberg:** German scholar trying to explain the plague through theology and natural philosophy, provided a bridge between religious interpretation and scientific observation

**Amadeus VI of Savoy:** ruler of an Alpine trade route between France and Italy, decisions greatly influenced commerce.

**Queen Joanna I of Naples:** Queen of Naples, ruled during a time of great political unrest, balancing governance, and public health.

**Ibn al-Khatib:** Muslim scholar and vizier in Granada, one of the first to note person to person plague transmission

**Jean de Mandeville:** Travel writer whose accounts shaped European understanding of distant lands and diseases.

**Abraham Cresques:** Cartographer from Majorca, knowledgeable about geography and trade routes

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**Hermann von Werdenberg:** Nobleman in Holy Roman Empire, lands were severely disrupted by the plague and unrest.

**Saint Bridget of Sweden (Birgitta of Sweden):** Swedish religious reformer, viewed disasters as a call for moral renewal.

**Gentile da Foligno:** Italian physician, wrote early works on plague causes and treatments.

**Agnes de Repigny:** Parisian merchant, influential in commerce and heavily concerned with maintaining trade.

**Simone Dandolo:** Venetian merchant, active in Europe port trading and in implementing early quarantine measures in Venice.

\*note: not all of these characters were alive at the exact same time. For the purpose of this committee, delegates will act as if these characters existed at the same time.

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