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A Secret Plague: How the Decline of Mental Health During the Great Plague Created an
Undetected Epidemic

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Western Civilization

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In a late evening in 1665, a mother walks up the stairs to check on her young daughter. A doctor stands at her bedside and a priest sits in the chair in the corner. From her spot in the doorway, the mother can see the blackness of her daughter's fingers and the large blister-like boils on her legs. Her daughter groans in agony as a doctor attempts to pop the blister, and the mother collapses onto the ground. She begins to cry from her spot on the floor, and the priest leads her away from the room. The mother cries harder and falls onto her bed. Only one person is sick, but two people will never be the same. Although the decline of mental health during eras of plague was not as deadly as the plague itself, the deterioration of mental health created an undetected epidemic that was just as impactful on society.

The easiest way to determine the mental state of civilians at the time is to look at personal accounts, like that of Daniel Defoe. Unfortunately, the primary sources in this field are limited. This is likely due to a priority of survival over the documentation of personal experiences. Aside from mortality bills from the eras of plague, one of the greatest sources of insight into the time period is Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*. This journal, published in 1722, speaks of the era of plague during the mid-1600s. There is a new outbreak of the Black Death in Europe, this time referred to as the Great Plague. Defoe himself was four when the plague became present in his father's city of Cripplegate.¹ It must be said that—since Defoe was four at the initial outbreak—it would be impossible for his retelling of the nature of the time period to be accurate with absolute certainty. In fact, the journal is imaginary—aside from the facts pulled

¹ Sir Walter Besant, "Introduction," *A Journal of The Plague Year*, (United Kingdom, Century Company, 1900), V.

from mortality bills that Defoe dedicated his life to analyzing.² Although his work is a fictional piece that takes place years after the plague that he experienced, it is based on the loose memories from his childhood and combined with stories told by family members and neighbors. Defoe also compiles mortality rates and other facts from the bills he studied as research for his work. Defoe's piece, therefore, combines facts with creativity to construct a realistic portrayal of the plague regardless of his inability to remember it entirely himself. So much so, that a man who lived through the plague even said he would never have known that Defoe wasn't old enough to remember it himself.³

This journal makes it abundantly clear that the plague did more than just wipe out populations—it was also responsible for creating a dramatic shift in the mental health of civilians throughout Europe during the time period. According to Defoe, The plague created an intense desire for isolation as well as a deep-rooted anti-immigration mindset. From Defoe's journal, it can be determined that the proximity of the plague brought on animalistic behavior, religious conflict, and extreme paranoia and fear.

One of the most drastic impacts is the change in human behavior. With thoughts of the plague constantly on people's minds, the temperament of entire communities was greatly influenced. The most recognizable aspect of this change is its clear representation physically, as depicted in Defoe's journal: "The face of London was now indeed strangely altered... sadness

² Sir Walter Besant, "Introduction," V.

³ Sir Walter Besant, "Introduction," VI.

and sorrow sat upon every face.”⁴ Psychologically, the change in behavior is created by the realization that there is no defining characteristic that is leading to people becoming infected. Meaning, nothing prevents a person from becoming infected themselves. “[The] visual representation of literally perforated personal borders... links even the currently uninfected to the infected in a community of contagion.”⁵ The lack of separation between those who had the plague and those who didn’t created an ever-increasing sense of fear, paranoia, and hopelessness. The proximity of crisis, even when not personally infected, makes it shockingly clear to citizens that there are no boundaries between themselves and the contagious plague. This causes mental breakdowns and descent into mental chaos. The need for people to feel control over their future brings them to greatly fear the potential to not treat a disease that would quite literally kill them.⁶ The breaking down of walls creates a panic among the public. The absence of reassurance that they will be safe from the plague induces a rapid decline in the mental health of citizens in infected areas and their surrounding environments. This—even more than the deaths of citizens—causes a detrimental impact on the function of society. Even with fewer people to aid society’s processes, a community can adapt and evolve. However, if the remaining people in the community are no longer able to function with an undisturbed state of mind, the function of society as a whole crumbles.

⁴ Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year: Being Observations or memorials of the Most Remarkable Occurrences, as well Public as Private, Which Happened in London During the Last Great Visitation in 1665* (United Kingdom: E. Nutt, 1722), 26.

⁵ Kari Nixion, "Keep Bleeding: Hemorrhagic Sores, Trade, and the Necessity of Leaky Boundaries in Defoe’s *Journal of the Plague Year*," *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 14, no. 2 (2014): 66, <http://jstor.org/stable/jearlmocultstud.14.2.62>.

⁶ Kari Nixion, "Keep Bleeding," 66.

Even so, the change in human behavior can be more than the subtle changes in emotions on a person's face. The real devastation to society comes from the more maniacal behavior that becomes apparent in those who are close to the plague. For example, Kari Nixon re-analyzes a story Defoe mentions in his journal. In this story, a woman became erratic after seeing the symptoms of plague in her young daughter. "Her frenzied, aimless trek through her house, running up the stairs and back down as she screams over and over again, marks her besieged sense of selfhood after merely bearing witness to her daughter's illness."⁷ Nixon then continues by explaining how the lack of boundaries leads to breakdowns such as this one.⁸ This proves to be helpful in understanding the panic experienced by those not infected by the disease. The fear experienced by someone not personally touched by the disease—though it can be argued that loved ones of the infected are touched—emphasizes the levels of anxiety felt by all people living at the time. This also serves to be a powerful example of the impacts of the plague on the typical function of a person. Speaking scientifically, "Psychoanalysis, impressed by loss of reality-testing in the neuroses and psychoses, came to overvalue realistic and rational thinking..."⁹ In this case, the mother's exposure to her daughter's symptoms caused her brain to

⁷ Kari Nixon, "Keep Bleeding," 63-64.

⁸ Kari Nixon, "Keep Bleeding," 63-64.

⁹ Phyllis A. Perna, "Regression as Evolutionary Process: A View From Dialectics and Chaos Theory." In *The Psychological Meaning of Chaos*, ed. Frank Masterpasqua and Phyllis A. Perna, (Washington, DC, American Psychological Association, 1997), 97-116.

expel rational thinking.¹⁰ In this sense, a person so disturbed by the existence of the plague is likely incapable of contributing to society, creating a destructive effect on the community.

For those whose external behavior is still that of a functioning person, there are other internal and ideological impacts made on mental health. For example, some who realize that there is no separation between the infected and uninfected become paranoid out of fear of contracting the disease themselves. This eventually can lead to turning on family members or close friends. Defoe mentions this in his journal after the initial outbreak begins to spread, “and as we saw it apparently coming on, so every one looked on himself and his family as in the utmost danger.”¹¹ But it certainly wasn’t an unfounded fear. “According to historical accounts, the number of dead increased so swiftly that those spared could scarcely keep up with proper burials.”¹² In terms of stressors, this perfectly depicts the cause for rising feelings of anxiety and desperation in communities facing the plague. With increasing numbers of deaths in the area, civilians would begin to count down the days until they inevitably caught the plague as well. This would naturally increase stress and lead to panic in most cases. Paranoia especially would dampen the abilities of citizens to contribute to society because it would prevent them from operating with a clear head. With thoughts preoccupied with fear, a person can’t function to their full extent. Similarly to how a sick person cannot work, a mentally ill person faces the same

¹⁰ Frank Masterpasqua, “The Self-Organization of Psychological Defenses.” In *The Psychological Meaning of Chaos*, ed. Frank Masterpasqua and Phyllis A. Perna, (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 1997), 41-74.

¹¹ Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, 26.

¹² Lydia Dugdale, “The Art of Dying Well.” *The Hastings Center Report* 40, no.6 (2010): 22-24. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40928339>.

challenges This, of course, prevents large groups of people from contributing to society because of their inability to work and be productive to their full capacity.

This paranoia overall led to isolation from anyone who could be considered suspicious; the prime target being immigrants. As rumors spread about areas of infected cities, so did suspicions and paranoia: “This possessed the heads of the people very much, and few cared to go through [the rumored infected area] unless they had extraordinary business that obliged them to it.”¹³ Citizens became so worried that they would become infected, they began to believe that entering rumored plague areas guaranteed them contraction of the disease. Any rumors of plague in one part of a city prevented almost everyone from traveling there, and those who did travel were still very afraid while doing so. They began to blame poor people and migrants for the plague, creating a clear distaste and hatred for other classes and other nationalities.¹⁴ This paranoid response to other people creates an insight into the mentalities of uninfected civilians; one of fear and desperation. Immigrants or travelers to new countries were often held at an arm's length at the very least and were often prevented from entering countries altogether.¹⁵ Travelers from other cities were required to provide health certificates as proof that they weren't infected before they were allowed entry to the city—often requiring permission from the desired city's mayor as well. Those who couldn't provide proof or lacked permission were held in huts outside

¹³ Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, 3.

¹⁴ Stephen Porter, “The Plague in the Provinces” *The Great Plague*, (Chalford, Amberley, 2009), 62.

¹⁵ Stephen Porter, *The Great Plague*, 62.

of the city.¹⁶ The increasing levels of anxiety over being infected only pushed citizens further into isolation and encouraged the fear of infection. Brewing suspicion of outsiders and neighbors alike proves to be disastrous to a functioning society. “They used the idea of contagion to justify banning textiles and peoples from ‘suspected’ countries,”¹⁷ People were so desperate to create borders between infected and uninfected areas that they separated themselves even from uninfected people, regardless of the potential impact on their economy. Without the trust of others, businesses cannot be run, and decisions cannot be made. Overall, isolation and suspicion create an environment that outright prevents the growth of society.

One of the largest changes in ideology was the religious conflict and confusion caused by the outbreak of plague. Religion as a coping mechanism has been popular for centuries, but during eras of plague, became a cause for inner conflict and turmoil. Other countries experiencing plague during the same time period typically experienced a greater conflict with religion than England, but the conflict felt in the countries is much the same as England occasionally experienced. For Muslims living in the Middle East especially, religion caused dilemmas in many households. In Islam, a plague was seen as a punishment sent by God, meaning that Muslims living in the area are not allowed to flee because it would be an attempt to escape their punishment. Many faced difficult decisions when it came to protecting themselves and following their religion. “The difficulty of accepting this fearful disease as a blessing and a martyrdom, of not fleeing for protection, and of not observing contagion/infection (particularly

¹⁶ Stephen Porter, *The Great Plague*, 62.

¹⁷ Birsen Bulmuş, "Towards A New Understanding Of Plague And Quarantines In The Ottoman Empire." In *Plague, Quarantines and Geopolitics in the Ottoman Empire*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 17. www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt3fgqx4.12.

in instances where highly infectious pneumonic plague were present) made men question the wisdom of the religious precepts.”¹⁸ Overall citizens were feeling uncertainty surrounding the plague at the time, and Muslims especially faced moral drama that came along with being religious in this era. Religious contradictions often cause people to feel purposeless and disoriented, especially when a religious belief is removed suddenly by a crisis. This acts as a cause for the breakdown of mental health in the Middle East during the plague and indicates how detrimental the plague could be to entire societies and religions simultaneously.

Defoe also mentions religious conflict in his journal. Although he isn't Muslim, he also struggled with understanding God's role in the outbreak of plague. In Defoe's mentioning of his own religious conflict, he turns to the Bible for advice and ultimately comes to what he believes is the best decision after finding a verse that calls Christians to let God protect them from plagues and other dangers.¹⁹ This relation to religion makes Defoe's journal a valuable source in more than one aspect by branching into the entire philosophy of those living in crisis, rather than just their response to the plague.

It must be said, however, that religion also created a positive impact on the mental health of civilians during eras of plague. Instead of turning from religion, some—like Defoe—embraced a higher power as a savior from the plague. It can even be argued that the increase in religion served as a benefit to the community. For instance, Russia especially

¹⁸ Michael W Dols. "The Second Plague Pandemic and Its Recurrences in the Middle East: 1347-1894." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 22, no. 2 (1979): 164. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3631953>.

¹⁹ Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, 1-27.

showcased ethical improvement during the Great Plague “There was a marked upsurge of spirituality on Vologda as a result of the epidemic. As people drew closer to God and to the church, lawlessness and crime declines significantly. Sworn enemies sought reconciliation in anticipation of meeting their Maker.”²⁰ Here it becomes clear that the increase in spirituality didn’t only serve as a defense mechanism against the plague, but also a form of resurrecting the good morals of those living in Russia at the time. Reformed public behavior and disputes in an attempt to repent and live a life of Christian values before death benefited the overall values of the community, and served as a new basis for morals once the plague subsided. This created a more widely accepted moral code in the area. Although many were following this code already, a new sense of urgency in this good behavior strengthened its following in an attempt to appease an angry God.

While the massive decrease in population due to the plague had an overwhelming impact on society, Defoe’s journal suggests the steady decline of mental health in the remaining people was far more destructive. Overall, Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* provides the field with insight into the mindset and philosophy of those living in times of crisis. The personal accounts that he creates based on the real memories of neighbors and family bring a hauntingly real layer to the symptoms of those infected—and the impacts the plague has on those who aren’t infected themselves. Despite the imaginary aspect of Defoe’s journal, it brings forward real questions. The descriptions of a family member’s reaction to a loved one’s symptoms of plague bring to question the psychology behind family relations. Some family members abandoned infected

²⁰ Russell Zguta, "The One-Day Votive Church: A Religious Response to the Black Death in Early Russia." *Slavic Review* 40, no. 3 (1981): 427. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2496195>.

loved ones, while others became so overcome with grief they descended into a mental breakdown.²¹ What actually causes the difference between these reactions? His religious conflicts, too, make scholars wonder how different religions cause similar anxiety. How do Christianity and Islam differ as coping mechanisms? Do other religions face the same speculation during times of crisis? Does religion have a stronger negative or positive impact on civilians? Defoe's journal doesn't quite answer these questions on its own, but it acts as a catalyst for these questions to be researched and answered in the future. As is true with other psychological reading of historical sources, if the true result is determined, these findings can help to diagnose patients that have experienced trauma, and help them to create coping mechanisms based on what brought civilians the most peace during an extreme crisis. Defoe's research can even be used to make predictions of how the public will respond to emergencies or other troubling times in society, such as a natural disaster. This knowledge can help first responders and government leaders address a situation and assist the public accordingly. In this sense, knowledge of how people react to crisis can be used to prevent another secret plague from undermining society.

²¹ Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, 1-27.

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