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History's Turning Points – The Black Death - II

Lead: Historical study often helps reveal twists in the human journey. Among history's turning points: Consider the results of the Black Death.

Intro: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: After the arrival of the bubonic plague in the 1340s, the people of Europe did not know what was consuming them. This ignorance spawned great acts of courage and compassion, particularly among the clergy, but also near barbaric brutality. Many people blamed the

Jews, specifically for poisoning the drinking water. Christian civility went out the window and thousands of Jews were murdered. According to one source, 16,000 were killed in 1349 in Strasbourg alone. Many fled to Poland where in the 20th Century their descendants would be consumed in another Holocaust of human origin.

Ironically, despite the suffering, Europe was a better place to live for those who survived. Before the disease, Europe was overpopulated. Low yields from over-planted fields, bad weather, and diseased livestock led to a poor harvests and a population already weakened by famine and disease. For those who were left, however, there was more food. Wages rose and

efforts to keep them down failed. Some scholars estimate that average wages were higher in real terms in the 1400s than in any subsequent century until the 20th century.

Perhaps the most significance consequence was the spiritual crisis provoked by a faceless curse about which nothing could be done. The Church could not explain what had overtaken the people and therefore a new skepticism arose. Believers began to question the comfortable assumptions and passivity of Medieval Christianity. This laid the groundwork for an intellectual awakening, the individual and cultural phenomenon of the Renaissance. Further, it bred a bitter spiritual reaction and the

destruction of Christian unity during the Reformation and opened the door to the decidedly secular spirit of the Enlightenment and the modern age. Eventually, the Black Death receded but it would be generations before Europe regained its pre-plague population. Its spiritual confidence most probably never recovered.

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Resources

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