

LAWRENCE N. LANGER (Storrs, Conn., U.S.A.)

*The Black Death in Russia:
Its Effects Upon Urban Labor**

The Black Death has been the subject of many studies as historians have attempted to determine the plague's multitudinous effects upon European society. Controversy has raged over whether or not the plague facilitated the commutation of labor services into monetary terms, forced wages up because of the lack of labor, drove grain prices downward and generally undermined the economic position of many of the nobility. While not all historians believe that the economic recession in agriculture was primarily determined by the recurring cycles of pestilence, it has been nevertheless recognized that the population declined catastrophically (estimates vary from one-quarter to one-third of the European population) and that such a severe reduction in numbers must have had important economic consequences. Many have noted the accelerated migration from the countryside to the towns, the decimation of the Church and monasteries which brought in clerics and mendicants who lacked discipline and faith, and who often joined with those who sought to gratify their most immediate desires in the wake of the plague, and the fluctuations of personal wealth. Although historians may differ on the extent to which the Black Death transformed or simply heightened existent trends in the social, economic and indeed artistic life of medieval Europe, few would ignore the Black Death entirely. Yet, this has been the general result of scholarship on Russian society in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, despite the fact that many, such as the nineteenth-century historian S. M. Solov'ev, have recognized that the Black Death was a calamity from which Russia did not escape.¹

Two relatively recent catalogues of natural calamities in Russia have been compiled by V. T. Pashuto² and Arcadius Kahan,³ but both historians are primarily interested in an analysis of crop failures and they discuss the plague in terms of its effects upon Russian agriculture. In addition their studies have a different chronological focus; Pashuto stresses the Kievan period and the thirteenth century (his catalogue of natural calamities stops at 1352), while Kahan analyzes the food supply from 1801 to 1914. Kahan does give a full listing of calamities from 867 to 1965, but unfortunately he does not present the specific plague years except to note the total number of epidemics in any one century and their coincidence with other calamities such as famine. There has not yet been a systematic study of the Black Death in Russia and it

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1. S. M. Solov'ev, *Istoriia Rossii s drevneishikh vremen*, 15 vols. (Moscow, 1959-1966), II, 543-546.

2. V. T. Pashuto, "Golodnye gody v drevnei Rusi," *Ezhegodnik po agrarnoi istorii Vostochnoi Evropy*, 1962 g. (Minsk, 1964), pp. 61-94.

3. Arcadius Kahan, "Natural Calamities and Their Effect upon Food Supply in Russia (An Introduction to a Catalogue)," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, (September 1968), pp. 353-377.

is hoped that this essay may facilitate future studies on this subject. To this end some remarks on the effects of the Black Death upon Russian towns in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries are presented.

The Black Death, which may have originated in China or among Tatar tribes of Central Asia, eventually reached the Golden Horde and the Crimea in 1346. That year the Tatars attacked Genoese merchants at Tana and then moved onto Caffa where the plague erupted among the troops. Dead bodies were catapulted over the walls and in turn the Genoese threw the corpses into the sea. But as the Genoese fled the city in their galleys, they carried the dreaded disease with them and within two years brought the plague to Constantinople, Sicily, Genoa, Venice, Pisa and then much of Europe. According to Vernadsky 85,000 people died in the Crimea.⁴ The plague traversed Europe and Russia in three forms: bubonic, pneumonic and septicaemic. The characteristic feature of bubonic plague was the development of buboes or boils, an inflammatory swelling of the glands. Once the buboes appeared in the groin or armpit death would ensue within four or five days if they did not suppurate. The deadly bacillus was carried by fleas or the bloodstream of a rodent. Often the flea travelled in the hair of a rat. The pneumonic form was far more deadly and highly contagious. Victims were known to have died in a matter of a day or two. The septicaemic form was even quicker. Once one was bitten by an infected flea death could result within twenty-four hours.

The absence of any tax rolls or hearth counts makes it extremely difficult to determine the numbers killed by the Black Death. What one has are descriptive accounts in the Russian chronicles and as Kahan has noted, how is one to estimate the extent of the calamity by such phrases as "very severe," "people died" or "many died." Kahan also notes that not only is the terminology imprecise but given the lack of our knowledge of the tolerance to human suffering over the centuries, the terminology may become formula and hence the severity of the calamity not very convincing.⁵ While this admonition poses problems for calculating the severity of natural calamities over a span of centuries, on close examination it becomes obvious that as far as the Black Death is concerned the chroniclers record a new and terrible tragedy.

Occurrences of plague are recorded in the chronicles for Novgorod in 1158, Vladimir-Suzdal' land in 1187, Smolensk and Novgorod in 1230, northeastern Russia in 1278, Pskov in 1299, northeastern Russia in 1309, Tver' in 1318, Pskov in 1341 and Tver' in 1344. The plague in 1158 affected both men and beasts in Novgorod and the chronicler believed it to be a punishment from God. But the plague seems to have killed mostly animals leaving a stench throughout the town.⁶ The plague of 1187 did not cause many casualties and the chronicler only notes that many people were ill.⁷ Similar laconic statements are recorded for the plagues in northeastern Russia in 1278 when "many people died by different ailments,"⁸ Pskov in 1299, which simply notes

4. George Vernadsky, *The Mongols and Russia* (New Haven, 1953), pp. 204-205.

5. Kahan, "Natural Calamities," p. 354, n. 1.

6. *Novgorodskaiia pervaiia letopis' starshego i mladshhego izvodov*, ed. A. N. Nasonov (Moscow-Leningrad, 1950), p. 217. [Hereafter *NPL*.]

7. *Polnoe sobranie russkikh letopisei*, 31 vols. (Moscow and St. Petersburg-Leningrad, 1841-1968), XXV, 94. [Hereafter *PSRL*.]

8. M. D. Priselkov, *Troitskaia letopis'* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1950), p. 336. [Hereafter *TL*.]

the appearance of a plague,⁹ and in 1309, when a pestilence struck both men and beasts throughout the "Russian Land."¹⁰ This latter pestilence was accompanied by a severe famine which claimed many lives and was also deemed a punishment from heaven. In 1318 the chroniclers record "a plague fell upon the people" in Tver' but there is no discussion of any casualties.¹¹ Yet when the tragedy results in many deaths the chroniclers are moved to record the event beyond the simple recitation that a plague appeared or that many died. Thus the pestilence of 1230 in Smolensk has the chronicler note that four mass graves were dug: two of which contained a total of 16,000, while a third contained 7,000 and a fourth held 9,000 bodies. In Novgorod famine perhaps accompanied by plague forced many people to eat leaves, cats and dogs; others sold their children for grain and some even resorted to cannibalism. A mass grave was also dug for over 6,000 people.¹² The plague in Tver' in 1341 did not take many lives but to the chronicler this was only because the bishop, Fedor, rallied the Church and the populace to fervent prayer and averted a possible disaster as God ended the plague.¹³ Similarly the plague in Pskov in 1341 doubtlessly took many lives. Graves of seven or eight people, often including entire families, were commonplace.¹⁴

Natural calamities, particularly famines which occurred on the average once every 7.5 years,¹⁵ were certainly well known by the chroniclers and were recorded. Epidemics, which primarily affected people, were relatively rare in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, but by the late thirteenth century they become more frequent, especially in Pskov and Tver'.

The havoc wrought by the Black Death in Russia was certainly an extraordinary occurrence and as one might expect it was described, sometimes at great length, in the chronicles. The notation of the Black Death's appearance in Central Asia and the Crimea was an unusual event and impressed itself upon the Russian chroniclers. In the chronicler's words it was a "punishment from God on the people in the Eastern lands." As the plague swept into southern Russia killing Moslems and Tatars in Astrakhan' and Sarai, and Armenians, Jews, Italians (*Frazy*, probably Genoese) and Cherkasy in the Caucasus and Crimea, the chronicler likened the destruction to the ten plagues of Egypt.¹⁶

Although the initial impact of the plague was largely confined to Italy, France and England in 1348 and did not reach Scandinavia and Eastern Europe until 1350, the Pskovite chronicler was aware of an "evil plague" (*mor zol*) which had struck foreign lands.¹⁷ In 1349 the epidemic appeared in Polotsk¹⁸ and two years later the *Nikonovskaia* chronicle has an entry that in that year (1351) God brought a plague to chastise mankind. The chronicler emphatically warns against sin and that only God can

9. *Pskovskie letopisi*, ed. A. N. Nasonov, 2 vols. (Moscow-Leningrad, 1941), I, 14. [Hereafter PL.]

10. TL, p. 353.

11. PSRL, X, 181-182.

12. *Ibid.*, XXV, 125; NPL, pp. 69-70.

13. PSRL, XV, 55.

14. PL, I, 19-20.

15. Pashuto, "Golodnye gody," p. 65.

16. PSRL, X, 217; XXV, 175.

17. PL, I, 21.

save man from famine, plague, illness, misfortune, grief and sorrow, all of which are just punishments from heaven. Thus the chronicler records the beginning of the Black Death in Russia.¹⁹

In 1352 the Black Death struck Pskov killing many townsmen and then spread into the countryside. Those who began to cough up blood died within one to three days. Many townsmen fled to the monasteries and after taking holy orders awaited there the coming of death, while others gave away their property to the Church monasteries or the poor, and having thus cleansed their souls prepared for death in their homes. So terrible was the death toll in Pskov that the chronicler notes that the clergy could not come to the homes for the dead. Instead they were brought to the local churches at night and by morning more than thirty bodies were heaped in piles by each church. Common graves of three to five were dug but soon there were not enough plots and grave sites were sought some distance from the churches. Usually entire households succumbed to the plague and the nearest relatives fearing that the movable goods might carry the infection refused to accept anything from the contaminated home. As the number of dead continued to grow, the Pskovites requested that the archbishop of Novgorod, Vasilii, come to the stricken town, but Vasilii could do little except to offer prayers. While returning to Novgorod the archbishop fell ill and died.²⁰ One can only speculate as to the numbers killed but that the chroniclers were moved to give such a vivid description of the calamity obviously implies that the death rate was exceedingly severe.

The epidemic quickly spread to Novgorod and here too the generally laconic chronicle described how the victims perished within three days and that there were countless casualties (*mnozhestvo beshchisleno liudii dobrykh pomre*).²¹ From Novgorod the plague swept into the countryside and soon appeared in Smolensk, Kiev, Chernigov, Suzdal' and "all the Russian land." At Glukhov and Beloozero no one is said to have survived.²² By 1353 the plague reached Moscow and within one week the metropolitan, Feognost, Grand Prince Semen Ivanovich, his two sons and soon after his brother, Andrei, perished.²³

The precise path of the plague is unclear although it is apparent that Novgorod, Pskov and Polotsk received the pestilence from Germany. Given the fact that this was a time of increased commercial contact between Russia and the Crimea, historians have been puzzled as to why the Black Death reached Russia from the west instead of from the south. Vernadsky's explanation is that the Russian steppe was thinly populated and hence acted as a buffer zone between the Golden Horde and north-east Russia.²⁴ Yet it is still quite possible that the path of the Black Death along the Dnepr river may have originated in the Crimea or possibly from Lithuania. Curiously, the chroniclers describe the epidemic in Pskov as having originated in India.²⁵ At any rate the Black

18. *PSRL*, X, 221.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 222-223.

20. *PL*, I, 21-22; *NPL*, pp. 362-363; *PSRL*, X, 223-224.

21. *NPL*, p. 363.

22. *PSRL*, X, 224.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 226.

24. Vernadsky, p. 205.

25. *PL*, I, 22; *PSRL*, X, 224.

Death, whether it reached northeastern Russia from Novgorod, Lithuania or the Crimea, did travel along established commercial routes.

In 1360 the Black Death erupted in Pskov once again. The Pskovite chronicler clearly differentiated between the Black Death and earlier plagues by noting the chronicle entry as a "second terrible plague."²⁶ As with the pestilence in 1352 the Pskovites sent for the archbishop of Novgorod, Alexius. Arriving in Pskov, the archbishop walked around the walls, blessed a frightened population and held three masses, and according to the chronicler, God showed mercy and the plague abated.²⁷ Apparently the plague of 1360 was confined to Pskov but in 1364 it reappeared in Nizhnii Novgorod and soon spread to every major town in northeastern Russia. The plague originated in Sarai and was probably brought to Nizhnii Novgorod by one of the many caravans of Russian or Moslem merchants. The chroniclers note the symptoms and the onslaught of death within one to three days. The death toll reached fifty, one hundred and more a day and soon overwhelmed the town's capabilities to quickly bury the dead. In Pereiaslavl' the chronicler describes the excruciating pain, fever, perspiration and shivers which each victim suffered, and the death toll also exceeded one hundred a day. The Black Death swept throughout the countryside of Pereiaslavl' infecting both urban and rural monasteries. From Nizhnii Novgorod the Black Death spread to Riazan' (it is possible that Riazan' contracted the disease directly from Sarai) and then to Kolomna, Pereiaslavl', Moscow, Tver', Vladimir, Suzdal', Dmitrov, Mozhaik, Volokolamsk and all the towns of northeastern Russia. The plague reached northern Beloozero which was once more devastated. As in 1352 the chroniclers note that Beloozero's entire population perished, but this is simply a repetition of an earlier entry. Although the formula is an exaggeration, it is nevertheless evident that the loss in population throughout Russia was severe. Common graves of seven, ten or twenty victims marked the urban and rural landscape and the entire Russian land was in the chronicler's words laid waste.²⁸ In 1365 the plague appeared in Rostov, Tver', Pskov and Torzhok;²⁹ and in 1366, in Moscow, which according to the chronicler suffered as greatly as had Pereiaslavl', Vologda and Lithuania.³⁰ Thus the Black Death raged for over two years in Russia and when one considers that this was also a time of famine and drought, the toll must have been staggering.

In 1374 a plague struck the "entire Russian land" and the Golden Horde and two years later an epidemic appeared in Kiev.³¹ Smolensk was devastated by plague in 1386, which according to Solov'ev left only five survivors.³² However, at most this chronicle hyperbole may represent a temporary flight of the population. The Black Death appeared again in Pskov in 1389 leaving behind graves of five to ten people. Once more the Novgorodian archbishop journeyed to Pskov to perform the same litany and intercede with God. But the pestilence spread to Novgorod and caused such havoc that the dead lined the streets. In an attempt to placate God the church of Afanasiia

26. *PL*, I, 22-23.

27. *NPL*, p. 367.

28. *PSRL*, XXV, 182; XI, 3: "I byst' skorb' velia vsei zemli, i opuste zemlia vsia. . ."

29. *PSRL*, XI, 4.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 21, 25.

32. *Ibid.*, XXV, 212; Solov'ev, II, 545.

was constructed within one day and soon after the plague is said to have abated.³³

Approximately ten years later the pestilence reappeared in Smolensk (1401), and then in Pskov (1403) via Dorpat and once again in Pskov from 1406 to 1407.³⁴ In 1408 plague devastated the rural districts (*volosti*) of Rzheva, Mozhaïsk, Zvenigorod, Pereiaslavl', Vladimir, Iur'ev Pol'skii, Riazan' and Tarusa but spared Moscow.³⁵ The fact that it was confined to the countryside may imply some effort to quarantine the town from travelers arriving from plague-infested areas. In 1414 a pestilence struck the "entire Russian land" and three years later a severe eruption of the Black Death occurred in Novgorod, Ladoga, Staraiia Rusa, Porkhov, Torzhok, Dmitrov and Tver'. The chronicles record that for every healthy person ten to twenty were ill and the villages, towns and suburbs (*posady*) suffered huge losses in life. Once again the chronicles describe the physical characteristics of the plague and the sense of overwhelming disaster as holy icons bled and the population in Novgorod, Pskov, Torzhok and Tver' built churches within one day in an effort to placate God.³⁶ The geographic area of the 1417 plague encompassed the trade routes linking Tver' to Novgorod and Pskov, and except for Dmitrov did not penetrate further south. However, two years later there began a series of terrible disasters which took countless lives. From 1419 to 1420 plague raged throughout Kiev, Novgorod, Pskov, Torzhok, Kostroma, Iaroslavl', Iur'ev Pol'skii, Vladimir, Suzdal', Pereiaslavl', Galich, Pleso and Rostov.³⁷ Plague and famine stalked the Russian land from 1421 to 1424. In Novgorod people were reduced to cannibalism, while grain prices were greatly inflated in Moscow, Kostroma and Nizhnii Novgorod.³⁸ Plague and famine were particularly severe in Pskov, Novgorod, Tver' and Moscow. In 1425 the pestilence erupted in Moscow, Pskov (via Germany), Novgorod and Tver' and then spread throughout Russia. While it abated in Novgorod, the plague remained virulent for another two years and was likened in the chronicle to a great flood.³⁹ Thereafter the incidence of plague declines: 1442 (Pskov), 1448 (all of Russia but primarily affecting animals), 1466 (severe plague with mass graves in Pskov), 1478 (severe plague in Novgorod).⁴⁰ We can now catalogue the plague years in Russia from the early twelfth century to the end of the fifteenth century. In the following table the plague years to 1344 are drawn from Pashuto's compilation and the listings of famine and drought are taken from both Pashuto's and Kahan's tabulations. The plague years from 1346 to 1488 are set off in a different font to distinguish my additions from those of Pashuto and Kahan. Those plagues which are clinically described in the chronicles as the Black Death are listed as such. Otherwise the entries read simply plague, but I have added in parenthesis those epidemics which were probably the Black Death, such as the years 1425 and 1426. This would seem to be a reasonable assumption since both 1424 and 1427 are clinically described as years of the Black Death, and the geographic area of the pestilence was primarily the towns from Pskov to Moscow linking Russia with Germany. For convenience I have added the chronicle sources for each of my plague entries.

33. *NPL*, p. 384; *PL*, I, 24.

34. *PSRL*, XXV, 231; *NPL*, p. 398; *PL*, I, 27, 28-29.

35. *PSRL*, XI, 204-205.

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 232-233; *NPL*, p. 408.

37. *PSRL*, XI, 236.

38. *Ibid.*, pp. 236-239; *NPL*, p. 414.

39. *PSRL*, XI, 239; XII, 3, 6-7; XXV, 247; *PL*, I, 35.

40. *PL*, I, 46, 71-72, 76; *PSRL*, XII, 74.

YEAR	CALAMITY	LOCATION	SOURCE
1124	Drought	Kiev land	
1127-1128	Famine	Primarily Novgorod land	
1158	Plague	Novgorod	
1161	Drought	Novgorod land	
1187	Plague	Vladimir-Suzdal' land	
1214	Famine	Vladimir-Suzdal' land	
1223	Drought	Vladimir-Suzdal' land	
1224	Famine	Pskov land	
1230	Famine Plague	All Rus' Novgorod and Smolensk	
1271-1274	Famine	Novgorod land and all Rus'	
1278-1279	Plague Famine	Northeastern Russia All Rus'	
1299	Plague	Pskov	
1309-1310	Plague Famine	Northeastern Russia All of Russia	
1314-1316	Frost and Famine	Novgorod land	
1318	Plague	Tver'	
1332	Famine	Northeastern Russia, Novgorod land	
1341	Plague Drought	Pskov Tver'	
1344	Plague	Tver'	
1346	<i>Black Death</i>	<i>Asia, Golden Horde, Caucasus, Crimea</i>	PSRL, X, 217; XXV, 175.
1349	<i>Plague (Black Death)</i>	<i>Polotsk</i>	PSRL, X, 221.
1352	<i>Black Death</i>	<i>Pskov, Novgorod, Smolensk, Kiev, Chernigov, Suzdal', Glukhov, Beloozero and all the Russian Land</i>	PL, I, 21-22; NPL, pp. 362-363; PSRL, X, 233-224.
1353	<i>Black Death</i>	<i>Moscow</i>	PSRL, X, 226.
1360	<i>Black Death</i>	<i>Pskov</i>	PL, I, 22-23.
1361-1362	Famine	Parts of Western Russia	
1364	Plague and Famine <i>Black Death</i>	<i>Sarai, Nizhnii Novgorod, Riazan', Kolomna, Pereiaslavl', Moscow, Tver', Vladimir, Suzdal', Dmitrov, Mozhaisk, Volokolamsk, Beloozero</i>	PSRL, XI, 3; XXV, 182.

YEAR	CALAMITY	LOCATION	SOURCE
1365	<i>Plague (Black Death)</i>	<i>Rostov, Tver', Pskov, Torzhok</i>	PSRL, XI, 4.
1366	<i>Plague (Black Death)</i>	<i>Moscow, Vologda</i>	PSRL, XI, 6; XXV, 183.
1364-1366	Famine	All of Russia	
1367-1368	Drought and Famine	Tver' and Central Russia	
1371	Famine	Novgorod	
1374	<i>Plague</i>	<i>All of Russia, Golden Horde</i>	PSRL, XI, 21.
1376	<i>Plague</i>	<i>Kiev</i>	PSRL, XI, 25.
1386	<i>Plague (Black Death)</i>	<i>Smolensk</i>	PSRL, XXV, 212.
1389	<i>Black Death</i>	<i>Pskov</i>	PL, I, 24.
1390	<i>Black Death</i>	<i>Novgorod</i>	NPL, pp. 383-384.
1401	<i>Plague</i>	<i>Smolensk</i>	PSRL, XXV, 231.
1403	<i>Plague</i>	<i>Pskov</i>	PL, I, 27; NPL, p. 398.
1406-1407	<i>Plague</i>	<i>Pskov</i>	PL, I, 28-29
1408	<i>Plague</i>	<i>Volosti of Rzheva, Mozhaisk, Zvenigorod, Pereiaslavl', Vladimir, Iur'ev Pol'skii, Riazan', Tarusa</i>	PSRL, XI, 204-205.
1409	Famine	All of Russia	
1414	<i>Plague</i>	<i>All of Russia</i>	PSRL, XI, 225.
1417	<i>Black Death</i>	<i>Novgorod, Ladoga, Staraia Rusa, Porkhov, Pskov, Torzhok, Dmitrov, Tver'</i>	PSRL, XI, 232-233; NPL, p. 408.
1419-1420	<i>Plague (Black Death)</i>	<i>Kiev, Novgorod, Pskov, Torzhok, Tver', Kostroma, Iaroslavl', Iur'ev Pol'skii, Vladimir, Suzdal', Pereiaslavl', Galich, Pleso, Rostov</i>	PSRL, XI, 235-236.
	Famine	Novgorod	
1421-1423	Famine	Novgorod, Moscow, Kostroma, Nizhnii Novgorod and all of Russia	
1423	<i>Plague</i>	<i>All of Russia</i>	PSRL, XI, 239.
1424	<i>Plague (Black Death)</i>	<i>Germany, Lithuania, Pskov, Novgorod, Tver', Moscow and all Russia</i>	PSRL, XI, 239.
1425	<i>Plague (Black Death)</i>	<i>Pskov, Novgorod, Tver', Moscow and all Russia</i>	PSRL, XII, 3.
1426	<i>Plague (Black Death)</i>	<i>Abates in Novgorod but spreads to Pskov, Torzhok, Tver', Vologda, Dmitrov, Moscow and all Russian towns and villages</i>	PSRL, XII, 6.

YEAR	CALAMITY	LOCATION	SOURCE
1427	<i>Black Death</i>	<i>All Russian towns and countryside</i>	PSRL, XII, 7.
1430-1431	Famine	All of Russia	
1436	Famine	Novgorod	
1438	Famine	Smolensk	
1442-1445	Famine	Tver' and Novgorod	
1442	<i>Plague</i>	<i>Pskov</i>	PL, I, 46.
1448	<i>Plague</i>	<i>All of Russia (Primarily affecting animals)</i>	PSRL, XII, 74.
1466	<i>Black Death</i>	<i>Pskov</i>	PL, I, 71-72
1468	Famine	Pskov and much of Russia	
1478	<i>Plague (Black Death)</i>	<i>Novgorod</i>	PL, I, 76; II, 217; PSRL, XII, 188.
1485	Famine	Pskov	
1488	<i>Plague</i>	<i>Pskov</i>	PL, I, 80.

As the above table reveals, epidemics were frequent in Russia. For the period of 140 years, from 1350 to 1490, there was an epidemic once every five years in Russia. Epidemics which affected most of Russia, particularly northeastern and northwestern Russia, occurred in 1352-1353, 1364-1366, 1374, 1408, 1414, 1417, 1419-1420, 1423-1427, and 1448 or a little more than once every six years for the period 1350 to 1450. The cycles of plague in Russia were roughly equivalent to those in Western Europe. General European plagues occurred in 1348-1350, 1357-1358, 1360-1361, 1368-1369, 1374 and then slowed (as in Russia) until the next occurrence of plague in 1400, 1424 (primarily in Italy) and 1438-1439.⁴¹ The cycles of plague in England occurred in 1350, 1360-1361, 1369, 1374, 1382, 1390-1391, 1400, [1406], 1438-1439, 1464-1465, 1471?⁴² Some areas of Europe were hardest hit during short but intense periods of plague: Barcelona was struck eleven times from 1396 to 1437 (once every 3.8 years) and Paris eight times from 1414 to 1439 (once every 3.1 years).⁴³ One can compare these figures with the series of Russian epidemics from 1417 to 1427: Novgorod, once every 2.5 years; Pskov, once every 2 years; Tver', once every 2 years; Moscow, once every 3.3 years. Some plague years in Russia were accompanied by severe famines: 1364-1366, 1374, 1409, 1421-1423. Other famines occurred with minor or localized plagues or in plague-free years, but the death toll was still high: 1361-1362, 1436, 1438, 1442-1445, 1468 and 1485. Leaving aside the

41. D. Nicholas, *The Medieval West, 400-1450* (Homewood, Ill., 1973), pp. 219-220.

42. J. C. Russell, *Late Ancient and Medieval Population*, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, New Series, Vol. 48, pt. 3, 1958 (Philadelphia, 1958), p. 41; G. G. Coulton, *Medieval Panorama* (Cambridge, 1938), pp. 505-506.

43. Robert-Henri Bautier, *The Economic Development of Medieval Europe* (London, 1971), p. 186.

continual internecine wars in Russia and Mongol attacks particularly against Nizhnii Novgorod in the 1370's, the invasions by Tokhtamysh in 1382 and Edegei in 1408, the Muscovite civil wars during the reign of Vasiliï II, it is nevertheless obvious that the years of plague and famine annihilated a large percentage of the Russian population. In Europe the tendency of higher birth rates and marriages following a natural calamity occurred after the general pandemic of 1348-1350 but the recurring plagues in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries vitiated the recuperative capabilities of the population. Given the fact that the cycles and severity (judging by chronicle evidence) of plague were roughly equivalent to that of Western Europe, it would seem that Russia lost at least twenty-five percent of its population, which is the minimum figure often given for the depopulation of Western Europe.⁴⁴ As in Western Europe, Russia attained its pre-plague population by 1500, a period which marks the unification of northeastern and northwestern Russia under Muscovy, the end of the Mongol Yoke and a notable resurgence of urban life and improvement in agriculture particularly through the use of the three-field system which was not widespread until the 1460's. After 1500 the Russian population may well have been increasing at a rate of one percent a year.⁴⁵ Vernadsky has estimated that the population in the early thirteenth century was not much smaller than in the late fifteenth century, perhaps totaling some nine or ten million.⁴⁶ Vodarskii has placed the population in the mid-sixteenth century, excluding the newly conquered territories of Kazan' and Astrakhan', at only 6,700,000,⁴⁷ but whatever the estimate, the general consensus is that only by 1500 did the population recover its pre-plague level.

The most immediate effect upon the Russian towns was a scarcity of labor. The tragedy of Russian urban history in this period is that the Black Death occurred precisely at a time when the towns were slowly recovering from the effects of the Mongol invasions.⁴⁸ Skilled labor, such as stonemasons, was in short supply even before the appearance of the Black Death. The extraordinary growth of Tver' from the end of the thirteenth century until its sack by a joint force drawn from the Mongols and the Muscovite principality in 1327 at times depended upon the forcible removal of artisans from other towns. This was certainly the case in the Tverite attack upon Torzhok in 1315.⁴⁹ To implement large-scale urban projects in plague years, the Russian princes often resorted to peasant and slave labor. Thus in 1365, precisely at a time of plague and famine, Moscow began the huge task of building its stone kremlin by importing outside craftsmen and bringing stones to Moscow during the winter when sleds could be easily used and the peasants permitted to leave their villages.⁵⁰ The

44. Russell, pp. 41-43; H. Miskimin, *The Economy of Early Renaissance Europe 1300-1460* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1969), pp. 28-29.

45. R. Hellie, *Enserfment and Military Change in Muscovy* (Chicago, 1971), pp. 85-86.

46. G. Vernadsky, *Kievan Russia* (New Haven, 1948), pp. 104-105.

47. I. E. Vodarskii, *Naselenie Rossii za 400 let (XVI-nachalo XX vv.)* (Moscow, 1973), pp. 27, 36.

48. For a general study on Russian towns in the Mongol period, see Lawrence Langer, "The Russian Medieval Town: From the Mongol Invasions to the End of the Fifteenth Century," Unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1972.

49. *PSRL*, X, 179.

50. *Ibid.*, XI, 7; A. M. Sakharov, *Goroda severo-vostochnoi Rusi XIV-XV vekov* (Moscow, 1959), p. 132.

need for repairing town walls, towers, and bridges was increasingly met by forced labor (*gorodovoe delo*), a practice which became widespread in the second half of the fourteenth century and fell principally upon the peasantry.⁵¹

A large portion of the craftsmen on the urban estates of boiars were slaves. Wealthy families such as the Patrikeev, Morozov, Iarlyk and Pleshcheev owned bakers, tailors, carpenters, armorers, furriers and potters, and although much of this information dates from the second half of the fifteenth century, it is quite probable that the plague years witnessed a rise in urban slavery.⁵² What must certainly reflect a growth of bondsmen in the towns is the appearance of the *zakladni* in the treaties between the princes of Moscow, Tver', Beloozero and Serpukhov. The earliest extant treaty, which treats the *zakladni*, dates from 1367, and in general the princes enjoin one another from purchasing the *zakladni*, who were urban dwellers who had either commended themselves (or mortgaged their property) to a boiar or prince. Since they still retained the right to leave their masters, they can not be considered full slaves.⁵³ In much the same manner the princes attempted to halt the purchase of urban *dvory* (dwellings) and men from each other's towns, and the Muscovite princes placed the *ogorod'niki* (urban gardeners or perhaps craftsmen specializing in urban fortress construction) and *mastery* (craftsmen) within the Muscovite administration system of thirds, thereby insuring a degree of administrative control for the collection of taxes and the requisitioning of service over this part of the urban population.⁵⁴

Unfortunately, there is very little information which would allow an accurate assessment of wages for craftsmen. Doubtless the shortage of labor enabled many skilled workers, particularly stonemasons, to command good wages. What information we do have comes from Pskov in which the urban authorities of the Church hired craftsmen to construct churches or to repair the walls at costs ranging from as little as five rubles to as much as one thousand rubles. In the absence of pre-plague wages it is virtually impossible to gauge any increase, but what is interesting is that the figures quoted in the Pskovite chronicles begin during the plague years of 1364-1365 when 300 rubles was paid for the construction of the Church of the Trinity. From 1421 to 1424 Pskov hired 200 workers at a cost of 1,000 rubles to rebuild the town walls.⁵⁵ There are no equivalent statistics for Novgorod, but it is known that in 1391 (only one year after a recurrence of the Black Death), the Church distributed a huge sum of 5,000 rubles to the town's five boroughs (*kontsy*) in order to finance the building of the outer wall (*ostrog*).⁵⁶ Yet, even Novgorod, which possessed one of the largest numbers of craftsmen and had access to silver imports from the West, was forced to resort to

51. A. D. Gorskii, *Ocherki ekonomicheskogo polozheniia krest'ian severo-vostochnoi Rusi XIV-XV vv.* (Moscow, 1960), pp. 166-167, 220.

52. L. V. Cherepnin, *Obrazovanie russkogo tsentralizovannogo gosudarstva v XIV-XV vekakh* (Moscow, 1960), pp. 366-367; A. A. Zimin, *Kholopy na Rusi* (Moscow, 1973), pp. 273, 283-284.

53. *Dukhovnye i dogovornye gramoty velikikh i udel'nykh kniaziei XIV-XVI vv.* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1950), No. 5, p. 20. [Hereafter DDG]. See also Nos. 7, 9, 11, etc. V. O. Kliuchevskii, *Sochineniia*, 8 vols. (Moscow, 1956-1959), VI, 349-350. See also R. Howes, *The Testaments of the Grand Princes of Moscow* (Ithaca, N. Y., 1967), p. 79.

54. DDG, Nos. 13, p. 39; 27, p. 71, etc.

55. B. Rybakov, *Remeslo drevnei Rusi* (Moscow, 1948), p. 708.

56. PSRL, IV, 370.

outside peasant labor as in 1430 when the town rebuilt its walls.⁵⁷ While the information remains scanty, it is nevertheless evident that Novgorod also retained numerous slaves as well.⁵⁸ Thus, the Black Death, while it did not cause the first uses of slave labor in the Russian towns, a practice which dates back to Kiev Rus', it did, however, force the towns to take measures to insure the protection of their existent artisans from being purchased by outside princes, and to augment their labor supply by turning to the neighboring countryside.

The vast majority of artisans in the towns were free men (usually placed under the general term of taxable people, *chernye liudi*) and they produced for the local market. But although the Black Death depleted a large percentage of the urban population, thereby making skilled labor valuable and enabling craftsmen to obtain better wages, which may well have been the case in Pskov, the craftsmen of northeastern Russia were still left in a precarious position. The basic reason for this is that they lacked any protective guild organization such as existed in the West, but were rather organized within the urban administrative system of the hundred (*sto*), which essentially rested in the hands of the prince. Furthermore, though there is ample evidence that by the mid-fourteenth century the so-called "natural economy" of northeastern Russia was gradually transformed into a money economy, the fact remains that money exchange was still relatively weak even when compared to Novgorod and Pskov, and that the plentiful supply of forced labor in slaves and peasants undoubtedly acted as a depressant against any exaggerated rise in wages.⁵⁹ The problem is further compounded by the growth of monastic tax-exempt settlements (*dvory*) in the towns which attracted skilled craftsmen and traders.

Historians have generally recognized that from the mid-fourteenth century, Russia underwent a rapid expansion of new monasteries, most of which were founded not in the towns (which was the case in the period before the Mongol invasions), but in the forest hinterland. The recent study by I. U. Budovnits rejects the commonly held assumption that the monasteries colonized new lands, leaving behind them ravaged towns from the Mongol sword. He correctly notes that the mid-fourteenth century was a period relatively free from any serious Mongol incursions, but he does not explain the growth in monastic estates other than to underscore the fact that most of these monasteries tended to annex peasant lands rather than to clear new and uninhabited territories.⁶⁰ What Budovnits does not discuss is that the founding of new monasteries coincides with the Black Death and one could reasonably expect a religious response to the plague as had occurred in the West with the emergence of the Flagellants and the emphasis in painting on the sufferings of hell, a Christ angered by His sinful flock, a

57. *NPL*, p. 416.

58. L. V. Danilova, *Ocherki po istorii zemlevladieniia i khoziaistva v Novgorodskoi zemle v XIV-XV vv.* (Moscow, 1955), pp. 69, 74-79; L. V. Cherepnin, *Novgorodskie berestianye gramoty kak istoricheskii istochnik* (Moscow, 1969), pp. 197-202.

59. On the controversial problem of money exchange, particularly the imports of silver see M. Roublev, "Le Tribut aux Mongols d'après les Testaments et Accords des Princes Russe," *Cahiers du monde Russe et Soviétique*, VII (1966), 487-530 and Langer, "The Russian Medieval Town," pp. 379-407.

60. I. U. Budovnits, *Monastyri na Rusi i bor'ba s nimi krest'ian v XIV-XV vv.* (Moscow, 1966), pp. 85-86, 109-111, 182-183, 357-358.

compassionate Virgin or the triumph of death. We have already seen that the rapid construction of churches in Russia was a common response and one might note that the heresy of the *strigol'niki* in Novgorod occurred in the aftermath of recurrent plague years. In Beloozero, which was devastated by plague and forced the construction of a new town several kilometers from the old infected site, the Kirillov Belozerskii monastery, founded in 1397, began to purchase waste lands (*pustoshi*) especially after the plague years of the 1420's.⁶¹ To encourage the settlement of these emptied lands the Beloozero princes were willing to exempt monasteries from the tribute (*dan'*) and other taxes often in perpetuity, but as the incidence of plague declined by the 1430's the princes began to limit the immunities from taxation to twenty or thirty years.⁶² By the 1470's the exemptions were further shortened to five or ten years for waste lands and fifteen or twenty years for those who cleared forests and cultivated new territories.⁶³

The growth in monastic rural estates was accompanied by an expansion of urban *dvory*. The Kirillov Belozerskii monastery established *dvory* in Vladimir, Moscow, Dmitrov, Pereiaslavl', Rostov, Uglich, Nerekhta, Kashin and Tver'; while the Simonov monastery established *dvory* in Moscow, Dmitrov and Galich. The metropolitan owned numerous *dvory* including twenty-one in Vladimir alone.⁶⁴ The monasteries acquired these urban territories through purchases or inherited the property from townsmen seeking monastic prayer and intercession for their souls. These *dvory* were generally exempt from princely administration and courts (except for serious crimes such as murder when a joint ecclesiastical and princely court was convened) and from most indirect and direct taxes: *dan'*, *iam* (post tax), *tamga* (custom tax), *myt* (toll tax) and virtually every important custom duty.⁶⁵ The monastic *dvory* quickly attracted craftsmen and traders, who could ply their wares unencumbered by any taxation other than that imposed by the Church. The result was that in some towns, such as Beloozero, the monasteries virtually dominated the local markets and soon acquired sufficient capital to hire free labor (*naimity*) for their salt works and other projects.⁶⁶ To be sure the growth of monastic immunity charters from the mid-fourteenth century was encouraged by princes looking for the active political support of the Church, particularly during the civil wars in the reign of Vasilii II. But there is little question that the Black Death greatly facilitated the rapid expansion of both urban and rural monastic lands. By attracting traders and craftsmen to their tax-exempt urban enclaves, the monasteries placed the non-ecclesiastical townsmen in a disadvantageous position within the market. Indeed the Church became a major purchaser of slave craftsmen,

61. For example, *Akty sotsial'no-ekonomicheskoi istorii severo-vostochnoi Rusi kontsa XIV-nachala XVI v.*, 3 vols. (Moscow, 1952-1964), II, Nos. 9, 14, 22, 24. [Hereafter *ASEI*]. A few documents record waste lands as a result of plague: *ibid.*, II, Nos. 111, p. 69: (Kirillov Belozerskii monastery): "... a te dei pustoshi lezhat pusty ot moru . . ."; 404, p. 415, 421, p. 457 (both from the Simonov monastery); III, Nos. 97, p. 134 (Nikol'skii Shartomskii monastery), 239, p. 260 (charter to Ivan Kaftyrev in Kostroma).

62. *Ibid.*, II, Nos. 67, 92, 182.

63. *Ibid.*, Nos. 221, 222.

64. Cherepnin, p. 356.

65. For example: *ASEI*, II, Nos. 126, 133.

66. *Ibid.*, Nos. 77, 96, 102, 203, 271.

especially blacksmiths, gold and silversmiths, and iconographers. While it is doubtful whether the Church was permitted to own slaves, there is evidence that slaves were purchased and perhaps given personal freedom but nevertheless held in service. It is known, for example, that the Church obtained slaves to help reconstruct the Cathedral of the Assumption (*Uspenskii sobor*) in 1472.⁶⁷ In the wake of the Black Death the Church had become an important supplier of urban labor which further weakened the economic independence of the free craftsmen and traders. By the turn of the fifteenth century, when the plague had abated and the unification of the Russian lands about Moscow was nearly complete, both Ivan III and Vasilii III attempted to limit and gradually revoke the monastic immunity charters.⁶⁸ But despite the confiscation of almost one-half the land of several major Novgorodian monasteries and the efforts to limit tax immunities from 1491 to 1513, the monasteries still competed successfully within the market and the townsmen, burdened by increasing taxes and the lack of a guild structure, found themselves forced to adjust to the emerging autocratic state of sixteenth-century Muscovy.

The failure of the Russian towns in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to develop into urban communes on the Western model whose population enjoyed personal liberty within the town walls certainly cannot be ascribed to the Black Death alone. Despite periodic appearances of urban assemblies (the *veche*) in northeastern Russia, princely rule was never seriously questioned. Both the Church and the Mongols, through their recognition of legitimacy of rule by the issuance of the patent (*iarlyk*), buttressed princely governments. Furthermore the towns, even in the period of Kiev Rus', were never able to clearly differentiate in law a townsman from a peasant. The Black Death accentuated a given pattern of Russian urban development by intruding massively within the urban market slave and peasant labor and encouraging the expansion of monastic estates.

However, Russian urban life did not stagnate. Much of the archeological evidence of copper smelting, jewelry, furriers and iconography for the Mongol period dates from the mid-fourteenth century and reflects an increased demand for luxury and religious items in the wake of the plague. Craftsmen were attracted to the towns and particularly the tax-exempt monastic estates and one can discern in several minor towns in the Tverite and Muscovite principalities (Kashin, Mikulin, Zubtsov, Kostroma and others) a growth of their suburbs (*posady*). Undoubtedly, the plague aggravated an existent problem of labor supply which resulted from the Mongol invasions and slowed the evident recovery of urban life in the mid-fourteenth century. The renewal of Mongol incursions in the last quarter of the fourteenth century further impeded urban growth. Nevertheless, it is from the mid-fourteenth century that Tver' and Moscow expanded their commercial ties to the Crimea and Lithuania, and Russian furs continued to be exported through Novgorod. Indeed, the export of furs and wax may well have increased as both were in great demand in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Urban construction is evident throughout northeastern and northwestern

67. Sakharov, *Goroda*, pp. 135-136.

68. See S. M. Kashtanov, "The Centralized State and Feudal Immunities in Russia," *The Slavonic and East European Review*, XLIX, 115 (April, 1971), 235-254.

Russia by the late fourteenth century, particularly when compared to the fifty years following the Mongol invasions (roughly the 1240's to the 1290's).

To what degree rural migration to the towns and monastic *dvory* may have offset the decline in population is impossible to determine. Except for Moscow, most major towns, such as Novgorod and Tver', show no discernable increase in population. Nizhnii Novgorod's rapid growth in the mid-fourteenth century ends by the last quarter of the fourteenth century, but much of this decline is attributable to the resurgence of Mongol attacks, particularly in the 1370's and the invasion of Edegei. Nevertheless, many smaller towns continued to grow throughout the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, in spite of the fact that the plague was increasingly confined to the towns. Perhaps because historians of Russia in the Mongol period lack sufficient statistical evidence to judge the levels of the population before and after the mid-fourteenth century, the Black Death in Russia has been largely ignored. Yet the chronicles give ample evidence for its recurrent appearance and destructiveness, making demography a central economic and social problem for fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Russia. But even in Western historiography, it is difficult to gauge the precise nature of the impact of the plague. Recently, A. Bridbury has called into question the plague's purported effects upon wage-rates and prices in England by noting that both wages and prices fluctuated in proportion to one another until the late 1370's when wages rose and prices declined, ushering in the end of the manorial economy. For wages and prices to have remained in a state of equipoise after 1348 presents many problems, not the least of which is that it assumes that either the population was so dense as to easily absorb a twenty-five percent reduction or that there was an extraordinary growth in the birth-rate, one that must make up the losses in people by 1361-1362 when the second major pestilence occurred. What is striking in Bridbury's opinion is how little effect the plague had upon the economic and social life of the country despite the high rate of mortality. Bridbury even entertains the thought that the plague may have been less devastating than has been assumed, and that the later plagues may not have been the Black Death because bubonic plague requires a dense population, which presumably existed only in the towns.⁶⁹ Such questions exist, of course, for an understanding of the Black Death in Russia as well. Most plagues were indeed confined to Russian towns but several included town and countryside, particularly the plagues of 1352, 1364-1366, 1417 and the 1420's, all of which, except for 1352 and 1417, were also years of famine. Yet, it is also true that the Black Death did not radically alter the social or economic organizations of Russia but rather accented certain trends in Russian society. But before dethroning the Black Death, where in Western Europe it seemed to inaugurate a new historical epoch, it would do well for historians to recognize the prevalence of plague in Russia and to attempt to assess its ramifications in Russian history.

University of Connecticut

69. See A. R. Bridbury, "The Black Death," *The Economic History Review*, XXVI, 4 (November 1973), 557-592.