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

---

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 character-
istic feature of bubonic plague was the development of buboes or boils, an inflamma-
tory 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 termin-
ology may become formula and hence the severity of the calamity not very con-
vincing.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

6. Novgorodskaja pervaja letopis' starshego i mladshego 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.]