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## How Important were Religious Factors in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century Persecution of Jews?

The time of the Black Death in Europe was characterized by death and destruction. A third of the population succumbed to the disease and in the confusion that resulted in the aftermath, the Jewish populations of many towns who survived the disease were murdered. This persecution of Jewish citizens seems to be lost in the death that was the Black Plague. Little attention is given to the Jews who were wrongfully blamed and executed for crimes they did not commit. The Jewish people of Europe have had a history of facing persecution for their religious beliefs. They are routinely blamed for the tough times that people face. The reasons for the persecution tend to either be religious or economic. In this essay, I will argue that the persecution of the Jews in the fourteenth century during the time of the Black Death and the following years was carried out in the name of religion but the underlying reasons were financial and proprietorial. The religious factors in the question refer to the relationship between Jews and Christians while the persecution will refer to the acts of murder committed by Christians during and after 1348-1351.

Firstly, I will discuss how Jewish populations were structured in medieval societies. Before the time of the Black Death in the early to mid-thirteenth century, Jewish populations typically lived in ghettos that consisted of only Jews. These small communities were spread out around towns in Europe that were predominately Christian. Christian leaders and town governors protected Jewish populations and the

two religious groups lived side by side peacefully<sup>1</sup>. There was little to no persecution up until the Black Death arrived in Europe in 1348. At the time of the Black Death, Jewish ghettos did not suffer the high rates of mortality like their neighboring Christian communities did. One theory on why this occurred was because the Jewish religion states that Jews must regularly and ritually wash before meals<sup>2</sup>. This act of washing made them less susceptible to the disease which brought down death rates. The low death rates among Jews became a blessing and a curse for the community.

Since the Jews were suffering less at the hands of the disease than the Christians, Christians believed that it must be the work of the Jews making them sick. Samuel Cohn wrote 'In the case of accusations of well-poisoning, it was outsiders; Jews, Catalans, foreign beggars or simply the poor- who served as scapegoats'<sup>3</sup>. Christians began accusing Jews of poisoning food and wells, they rounded Jews up and began torturing them for information<sup>3</sup>. The common folk of Europe at the time did not understand why the Black Death occurred, they did not realize it was a disease that was out of their control. Instead, they blamed God's wrath or other religions. Cohn writes that 'the monastery of Albert in Cologne stressed the "horrible means by which the Jews wished to extinguish all of Christendom, through their poisons of frogs and spiders mixed into oil and cheese"'<sup>3</sup>. Clearly, there was a religious aspect to the persecution of Jews, church leaders expressed how Jews were trying to bring down Christendom. There are numerous accounts of accusations against Jewish populations with little

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred Haverkamp. *The Jewish Quarters in German Towns During the late Middle Ages*. (Cambridge, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Pasachoff, Naomi E.; Littman, Robert J. (England, 2005). *A Concise History of the Jewish People*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Cohn. *The Black Death and the Burning of Jews*. (England, 2007) *Past & Present*

evidence to back it up. However, Jews were caught in a very bad situation, Christians needed something to blame their struggles and while some blamed God, most chose the more vengeful path and blamed Jews. This vengefulness stemmed from religious differences with the Jews.

Most source materials and Jewish texts rely on the idea that all Christians wanted the Jews murdered. In this portion, I will discuss how there were some Christian leaders who attempted to stop the persecution of Jews at the time. Samuel Cohn writes that,

‘Duke Albrecht of Austria (at least initially) and especially Pope Clement VI, seem to have risen above the hysteria, seeing the violence against the Jews as irrational and dangerous to Christian society’<sup>4</sup>.

At the time, some Christians thought what was happening to Jewish populations was sinful. So, the question remains, why were Jews continually persecuted by Christians if the religious leaders of Christianity denounced it? One possible answer to this concludes that it was for financial reasons. The Jewish populations in many European towns and cities were wealthy and had land holdings that were profitable. Town leaders had longed after these land holdings for a long time and with the arrival of the Black Death, governors and leaders saw an opportunity to make a land grab while also eliminating any debt they had with Jewish money lenders.

The leaders in the persecution of Jews were not peasants and common folk but the top of society. In the town of Strasbourg, Bishop Berthold had a man named Agimet

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<sup>4</sup> Samuel Cohn. *The Black Death and the Burning of Jews*. (England, 2007) *Past & Present*

tortured into confession that he had been told to poison the wells by another Jew<sup>5</sup>. Hertzberg and Hirt-Manheimer go on to write that in the aftermath of the confession, Bishop Berthold ordered that all Jews must be sentenced to mass death<sup>6</sup>. Bishop Berthold had used the Black Death to wipe out the Jewish community from his town. There was a religious motivation to it but in the aftermath, Christians profited financially. Alfred Haverkamp also writes about Strasbourg stating that 'In Strasbourg, the houses belonging to the Jews who had been murdered in February 1349, had long ago passed into the hands of Burghers or been put to other uses, when in 1369 the city readmitted Jews'<sup>6</sup>. These Burghers were typically the wealthy elite of the towns. Although there was never any written evidence that this occurred, I believe that the wealthy in these towns persecuted Jewish populations not for religious reasons but for financial ones.

There was a grand conspiracy between many European towns and cities to blame the Black Death on Jewish populations. Letters were exchanged between as many as sixteen towns and cities, which provided evidence that Jews were behind the poisoning of food and wells<sup>7</sup>. The town leaders in cities such as Basel and Mainz interrogated the Jews who revealed a web of other accomplices across Europe who also poisoned wells<sup>7</sup>. However, the source for these "confessions" come from the letters that survived. These letters cannot be trusted as they were written from a biased perspective and written by city officials who wanted the Jews persecuted so that their lands would be free to own. All these letters conclude is that town officials were able to

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<sup>5</sup>Arthur, Hertzberg. Aron, Hirt-Manheimer. *Jews: The Essence and Character of a People*. (San Francisco, 1998) p.84

<sup>6</sup> Alfred Haverkamp. *The Jewish Quarters in German Towns During the late Middle Ages*. (Cambridge, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Samuel Cohn. *The Black Death and the Burning of Jews*. (England, 2007) *Past & Present*

torture Jewish citizens into confession, however these confessions came under duress and cannot be trusted. The bigger question remains though, why were all these towns working together to rid themselves of their Jewish populations?

According to sources like Cohn and Haverkamp, there was as much of a financial reason as there was a religious reason to persecute Jews. Jews tended to be money lenders in these societies, so many townsfolk, merchants, and aristocrats were indebted to the Jewish populations through loans and interests. Cohn writes that,

'According to Mordechai Breuer, these 'ordinary folk' hated the Jews because they had 'served the merchants and the aristocrats, and with their loans and with their capital, helped establish the urban economy and the city's governing political and territorial independence'. Further, the Jews had exploited artisans 'with loans at usurious rates'<sup>8</sup>.

Cohn is arguing here that religion has little reason for the persecution of Jews in the fourteenth century, it was all about economic reasons. In contrast to this argument by Cohn, Stuart Jenks argues that Jews only made loans for aristocrats and noblemen so ordinary folk would have no reason to hurt them<sup>9</sup>. It is difficult to know which source is correct in the assumption of who composed these mobs that murdered Jews. I argue that the mobs were lead by the wealthy and powerful along with Christian leaders but the majority of the members of the mobs were townsfolk. These people were the ones carrying out the murders but only through the influence of the powerful. The mob

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<sup>8</sup> Samuel Cohn. *The Black Death and the Burning of Jews*. (England, 2007) *Past & Present*

<sup>9</sup> Mark Cohen. *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages*. (Princeton, 1994).

leaders saw an opportunity to capture Jewish land holdings while the ones in the mob saw an opportunity to avenge their dead friends and family in the name of their God.

I have argued for the financial reasons as to why Jewish populations were persecuted but I do not want to underestimate the importance that religion had in the persecution of Jews. There is evidence that the persecution was religious based as well as economic based. For example, 'in Basel, without any judicial sentence, they [Christians] locked up the Jewish community, separated one hundred and thirty children from their parents, baptized them by force, and burned the six hundred adults alive on a sandbank on the Rhine'<sup>10</sup>. It cannot be clearer that Christians resented Judaism and felt that Jews were leading away from the path of the Lord. This forced baptism is a direct result of Christians attempting to turn Jews away from Judaism. Clearly, there were two sets of motivations involved with the persecution of Jews, one was to expel them and take their lands, the other was to turn them Christian. The Florence government even stated that their reasons for expelling the Jewish civilians 'was twofold: the killers of Christ were 'polluting' the countryside, and their usurious loans were detrimental to these countrymen.'<sup>8</sup> From these documents, one can gather that Christians felt threatened from Jews financially and religiously. This type of fear allowed city leaders to command a mob to burn and expel all Jews from their cities and towns.

After the hysteria of the Black Death calmed down, Jews were readmitted into society. After twenty years, towns began to allow Jewish populations to move back in and take up their usual standing in society. However, by that time, all their land holdings

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<sup>10</sup> Samuel Cohn. *The Black Death and the Burning of Jews*. (England, 2007) *Past & Present*

had been taken and the Jews were forced to start over. Further outbreaks of the Black Death never saw the same result that the initial wave of the Plague in 1348 to 1351 saw<sup>11</sup>. Instead of mass killings of Jewish populations, townsfolk rounded them up and ransomed them<sup>12</sup>. The religious bias seemed to not be as large of a factor in later episodes of the Plague. Town leaders and religious elites never again in the fourteenth century created mobs intent on killing Jews. The question remains, why did the first outbreak of the Plague cause the persecution and death of Jewish populations?

It could have been because after the initial hysteria of the Black Death, people at the time began to understand that the disease was out of their control and that even in places where Jews did not reside like London, the disease occurred so clearly the Jews were not responsible. Other sources believe that it was just a culmination of events and the climax of strife between Christians and Jews. I believe that it had more to do with economic reasons rather than religion. Sources such as Cohn and Haverkamp have written that town leaders and religious officials wanted the lands the Jews had so they ran them out of town. The death of the Black Plague simply gave them more motivation and reason to carry out these murders. The hysteria resulting from the Black Death allowed town officials and religious leaders to exterminate Jewish populations using ordinary townsfolk in the name of religion. Religion was used as the reason for the persecution of Jews in the fourteenth century and still is today but to my understanding, Jews were murdered and driven out of towns for financial reasons. Once all the Jewish

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<sup>11</sup> Catherine Porter. *The Black Death and Persecution of the Jews*. (USA, 2014)

<sup>12</sup> Samuel Cohn. *The Black Death and the Burning of Jews*. (England, 2007) *Past & Present*

lands and debts were transferred to wealthy Christians, the persecuting ceased, and Jews were reintegrated back into society.

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