

POWER, VIOLENCE
AND MASS DEATH IN
PRE-MODERN AND
MODERN TIMES

JOSEPH CANNING,
HARTMUT LEHMANN
AND JAY WINTER

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AND MODERN TIMES**

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Power, Violence and Mass Death in Pre-Modern and Modern Times

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Contents

<i>List of Figures and Tables</i>	vii
<i>List of Contributors</i>	ix

Introduction:

The Fourteenth, the Seventeenth and the Twentieth Centuries as Centuries of Violence and Mass Death <i>Hartmut Lehmann</i>	1
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PART I: Fourteenth Century

1 The Crisis of the Fourteenth Century <i>Joseph Canning</i>	9
2 Famine and Popular Resistance: Northern Europe, 1315-22 <i>William Chester Jordan</i>	13
3 The Black Death: The End of a Paradigm <i>Samuel K. Cohn, Jr.</i>	25
4 War in Fourteenth-Century Europe <i>A.D. Carr</i>	67

PART II: Seventeenth Century

5 Under the Spell of Mars: Power, Violence, and Mass Death in Seventeenth-Century Europe <i>Hartmut Lehmann</i>	93
6 The Experience of Violence during the Thirty Years War: A Look at the Civilian Victims <i>Otto Ulbricht</i>	97
7 The Atrocities of War in Early Modern Art <i>Bernd Roeck</i>	129
8 The Experience of Violence and the Expectation of the End of the World in Seventeenth-Century Europe <i>Markus Meumann</i>	141

PART III: Twentieth Century

9	Representations of War in the East, 1941-45: The German Case <i>Tobias Jersak</i>	163
10	Representations of War in Western Europe, 1939-45 <i>Pieter Lagrou</i>	175
11	Representations of War on the Eastern Front, 1914-18 <i>Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius</i>	191
12	Representations of War on the Western Front, 1914-18: Some Reflections on Cultural Ambivalence <i>Jay Winter</i>	205
	<i>Index of Names</i>	217

List of Figures and Tables

Figures

3.1	<i>Bologna, 1348. City Testaments.</i> Composer: author	55
3.2	<i>Millau (Aveyron), 1348. Testaments.</i> Composer: author	56
3.3	<i>Plague, 1348: Siena.</i> Composer: author	56
3.4	<i>The Plague, 1348: Perugia.</i> Composer: author	57
3.5	<i>The Plague, 1348: Orvieto. The Confraternity at San Francesco.</i> Composer: author	57
3.6	<i>The Plague, 1348: Rome.</i> Composer: author	58
3.7	<i>Barcelona: Vacant Benefices, 1348.</i> Composer: author	58
3.8	<i>Plague, 1363: Siena.</i> Composer: author	59
3.9	<i>Plague, 1383: Florence. The Hospital of Santa Maria Nuova.</i> Composer: author	59
3.10	<i>Plague, 1390: Arezzo. Burials by the Laici.</i> Composer: author	60
3.11	<i>Plague, 1400: Florence, Burials. Libri dei Morti.</i> Composer: author	60
3.12	<i>Bologna: Plague Years. Testaments: Libri Memoriali.</i> Composer: author	61
3.13	<i>Number of Testaments: Six Cities. Arezzo, Assisi, Florence, Perugia, Pisa, Siena.</i> Composer: author	61
3.14	<i>Dominican Friars of Florence: Plague-year Deaths, 1348 to 1437.</i> Composer: author	62
3.15	<i>Besançon, Testaments of the Officialite.</i> Composer: author	62
3.16	<i>London Wills, The Court of Husting.</i> Composer: author	63
3.17	<i>Plague in India, 1897-1907.</i> Composer: author	63
3.18	<i>Plague Mortality in India, 1939-1947.</i> Composer: author	64
3.19	<i>Testaments: Six Cities. Plague Years as a Ratio of non-Plague Years.</i> Composer: author	64
3.20	<i>Sienese Plague Burials. Plague Years as a Ratio of non-Plague Years.</i> Composer: author	65
3.21	<i>Orvieto: Confraternity at San Francesco.</i> Composer: author	65
3.22	<i>Death-Rates of Infectious Diseases in England and Wales, from Major Greenwood, Epidemic and Crowd Diseases (London, 1935), p. 181.</i>	66
7.1	Jacques Callot, <i>Die Schrecken des Krieges: Verbrennung am Pfahl, 1633-35</i> (Rogers Fund, 1922 MET), from D.J.R. Bruckner, <i>Kunst gegen den Krieg</i> (Basel, 1984), p. 24; English: <i>Art against War</i> (New York, 1984). Reproduced by permission of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York	132

7.2	Urs Graf, <i>Schlachtfeld, 1521</i> (Kupferstichkabinett der Oeffentlichen Kunstsammlungen Basel), from D.J.R. Bruckner, <i>Kunst gegen den Krieg</i> (Basel, 1984), p. 14; English: <i>Art against War</i> (New York, 1984). Reproduced by permission of the Kupferstichkabinett der Oeffentlichen Kunstsammlung, Basel	133
7.3	Christian Richter, <i>Tod der Jezabel, 1642</i> , (Veste Coburg), from: <i>1648 – Krieg und Frieden in Europa</i> , eds. Klaus Bussmann and Heinz Schilling (Muenster, 1998), p. 514. Reproduced by permission of the Kunstsammlungen Veste Coburg, Coburg	135
7.4	Hans-Ulrich Franck, <i>Zwei Soldaten verfolgen eine Frau in einem Dorf, 1634</i> (Westfaelisches Landesmuseum fuer Kunst und Kulturgeschichte Muenster), from: Herbert Langer, <i>Der Dreißigjaehrige Krieg, Hortus Bellicus</i> (Leipzig, 1978), p. 115. Reproduced by permission of Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg	139
7.5	Anonymous <i>Kriegsgott Wolf, ca. 1630</i> . (Staatsbibliothek Ulm), from: D.J.R. Bruckner, <i>Kunst gegen den Krieg</i> (Basel, 1984), p. 28; English: <i>Art against War</i> (New York, 1984). Reproduced by permission of the Stadtbibliothek Ulm, Ulm	140
11.1	<i>The Russians were here!</i> , from: Paul Lindenberg, <i>Hindenburg-Denkmal fuer das deutsche Volk</i> (Berlin, 1923), p. 64	193
11.2	<i>How the Russians Behaved!</i> , from: Paul Lindenberg, <i>Hindenburg-Denkmal fuer das deutsche Volk</i> (Berlin, 1923), p. 162	195
11.2	<i>Lonely Graves in Russia (Mass Graves)</i> , from: Paul Lindenberg, <i>Hindenburg-Denkmal fuer das deutsche Volk</i> (Berlin, 1923) p. 205	197

Table

9.1	German and Soviet War Losses on the Eastern Front, 1941-45. Composer: author based on the information from Ruediger Overmans, <i>Deutsche militaerische Verluste im Zweiten Weltkrieg</i> (Munich, 1999)	173
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Introduction

The Fourteenth, the Seventeenth and the Twentieth Centuries as Centuries of Violence and Mass Death

Hartmut Lehmann

Medieval and modern European history can be conceived as a coherent sequence of developments or transformations with a number of caesurae which were important for the whole of Europe, as for example the Reformation or the French Revolution, and a whole series a minor caesurae with specific meanings for the history of individual European countries. By contrast, if one takes greater interest in the discussions and interpretations of historical typologies, one can also distinguish between phases of prosperity and phases of depression in European history, as well as between phases of violence and war and phases of tolerance and peace. If one takes this second approach, in the course of medieval and modern European history the fourteenth, the seventeenth and the twentieth centuries not only appear to be exceptional, but also somewhat related. First, the fourteenth century can be seen as an epoch in which widespread disease caused a demographic catastrophe, in which warfare was especially bitter and could not be contained for a long period of time, and in which religious minorities such as the Waldensians and the Jews were relentlessly persecuted. Second, the seventeenth century was an era in which the triple onslaught of disease, famine, and war caused dramatic demographic decline and widespread misery in many parts of Europe. And third, the twentieth century was a century characterized not only by two world wars, but also by unprecedented violence that culminated in several cases of genocide.

The contributions to this volume attempt to test the assumption that historians may be better equipped to understand the causes of the tragic turn of events in the twentieth century if they are able to grasp the relationship of power, violence, and mass death in earlier extraordinary centuries, such as the fourteenth and the seventeenth centuries. Yet the same may also result if one reverses the perspective: An analysis of power, violence, and mass death in the twentieth century may offer us new insights into the way these factors interacted as they altered the course of events in the fourteenth or in the seventeenth century.

The differences between the three centuries singled out here as periods that had traumatic consequences for large parts of European society, should, of course,

not be underestimated. These differences did indeed exist, and it would be unwise to minimize them in order to establish a better basis for comparison. All those interested in the particulars of this research should turn to the impressive scholarly output on the “crisis of the fourteenth century”, to the no less important research on “the crisis of the seventeenth century”, and to the vast literature on the twentieth century as a “century of extremes”. However, in all this research, path-breaking as it may be from a methodological perspective, supposedly similar questions that arise through a comparison of these different centuries are not being addressed. Therefore, we have decided to raise some of these questions. Some of them may help us discover similarities between the fourteenth, the seventeenth and the twentieth centuries, while others may highlight differences and ways in which these similarities and differences might be related in various ways to social, political, intellectual, economic, and religious structures and transformations. More specifically, one should try to look into the causes of such transformations and ask whether we are able to perceive what one can call accelerated processes of transformation in areas such as population development, economic growth—or more likely decline, political stability—or rather instability, in religious commitment and in the search for new religious answers. In analysing the special character of the fourteenth, the seventeenth and the twentieth centuries, four aspects seem significant:

- the rule of violence;
- the production of new world-views; in particular
- the search for new religious answers and practices; and
- a new level of social instability and large-scale migration.

With regard to the rule of violence, one should ask which groups used their power to inflict harm, and even death, on members of other social groups. When, where and under what circumstances was violence most intense? When and where did violence culminate in massacres, and who or what was responsible for rising mortality and mass death? Further one should investigate whether violence and mass death caused widespread anxiety and fear, whether there were waves of *Angst* related to specific instances of violence, or rather if unspecified feelings of *Angst* were the daily companion of those who attempted to survive. Finally, the various attempts to overcome this *Angst*—to come to terms with the consequences of violence and mass death—need to be analysed.

Such attempts could consist foremost in the search for answers to what one experienced, in the production of new world views, that is of intellectually, philosophically and even spiritually comprehensive systems of explanation for the unexplainable, in new beliefs that in turn would influence social and political behaviour as well as in cultural practices. Such explanations could be political in essence, as for example the fascination with an absolute form of government, that is absolutism; they could be predominantly cultural, as for example the belief in the art and style of the baroque; they could be primarily economic, that is centred

around the desire to implement the principles of mercantilism in the hope that this would solve all other problems; they could be scientific and express themselves through a strong empirical and sometimes even experimental interest in solving the world's unsolved riddles; and they could even be philosophical, inasmuch as to lead to the conviction that stoicism would provide individual strategies that would help one escape from the labyrinth of contemporary misery. These examples are taken from seventeenth-century Europe. Corresponding examples could be found if one looked into the practices and minds of those who experienced the tragic events of the fourteenth and twentieth centuries.

While mass death and widespread violence caused many people to search for new strategies of survival and new answers, in the wide spectrum of new approaches taken in the fourteenth, seventeenth and twentieth centuries, nothing possessed a fascination equal to the renewed or revitalized interest in religious matters. What is the meaning of this misery and death inflicted upon us, people asked. What does God want to tell us, which message does He want to convey to us through these tribulations? Many wondered whether the end of time had begun, and whether violence and mass death should not be understood in an eschatological sense as the final raging of the devil before Christ's triumphal return. In the seventeenth century, for example, several reform movements erupted within the established churches, such as Puritanism within the Anglican Church, Jansenism within French Catholicism, and Pietism within German Lutheran Orthodoxy. These movements attracted the minds of the most pious believers. Some of them formed small elitist circles. Motives such as the omnipresent slogan of *memento mori* or the contempt of *vanitas*, coloured poetry as well as the funeral sermons becoming an art form of its own. Not surprisingly, millenarianism abounded. Again, corresponding attitudes can be found in the fourteenth and twentieth centuries, even though a rather wide definition of religion would have to be applied in the latter.

More than other epochs of European history, the three centuries which form the focus of this collection of essays were times of social unrest, social instability, and migration. Stricken by the consequences of plague and famine, devastated by violence and mass death, all three centuries were characterized by dramatic demographic turbulence. The fear of rapidly rising xenophobia was constantly on the minds of many of those who decided to migrate to other, as they hoped, more peaceful and more prosperous places.

If one takes an even closer look at the fourteenth, seventeenth and twentieth centuries, a number of themes emerge which may be useful for a comparative analysis and therefore deserve further consideration.

- Who were the agents of violence? How did they perceive their own role, and how were they seen by their victims?
- Did macro-historical conditions exist which facilitated the infection of parts of the social system with the disease of violence? And if so, should we first look into matters of power, that is at problems of power unresolved, or into

demographic, economic, or perhaps even cultural problems? Or should we turn away from macro-historical explanations altogether and concentrate on researching the growth of violence in micro-historical milieus, and in everyday life?

- We know the least about the mental and especially the religious consequences of violence and mass death. What were the strategies of those who survived? How did they deal with feelings of anxiety and fear, and in what ways did religious practices and specific religious beliefs help them to carry on in their lives? Did the experience of violence cause these survivors not only to become more religious than they had been before, but also more conservative? How many turned cynical, or agnostic? Were reactions similar among the members of dominant social groups as among members of religious, ethnic and social minorities?

Examples abound which demonstrate that the symbolic representation of the experience of violence offered a kind of therapeutic effect. Not that art was a means of explaining and therefore of rationalizing and justifying violence. Rather, symbolic representation provided ways, namely rituals, and forms, namely symbols and even monuments that helped people reflect on the causes of the terrible things they had experienced and to remember the victims. Such rituals and such symbols could be predominantly religious or predominantly cultural, as for instance in the artistic expression of the dances of death depicted in fourteenth-century paintings. Yet they could also be predominantly political, as in the case of most of the war memorials erected after 1918 and after 1945. Above all, special attention should be paid to the ways in which marginalized social groups were treated. In all three centuries under scrutiny here, they were victimized more than any others, and therefore, their exceptional suffering demanded special forms of remembrance. And in all three centuries considered here, rampant anti-Semitism and unprecedented pogroms were at the core of this suffering and mass death. Perhaps above and beyond any other point of comparison, this aspect should provoke historians to look at similarities between the fourteenth, seventeenth and twentieth centuries.

With one exception, namely the contribution by A.D. Carr, which was written especially for this book, the individual chapters were first presented in August 2000 during a session at the nineteenth International Congress of Historical Sciences in Oslo. They have been revised, and in some cases also somewhat expanded, for publication. In all cases, the objective of the authors was, first and foremost, to focus on the specific, rather than on the general. Therefore, they do not want, nor were they asked, to facilitate a comprehensive historical comparison. Rather, they seek to provide pertinent viewpoints that may be useful for those who wish to explore such a comparative approach. It is in this sense, that we invite our readers to engage with this very special kind of intellectual and historiographical experiment in a large-scale comparative project as the one we propose here. Perhaps some will become persuaded by our notion that the abuse of power, the rule of violence, and the experience of mass death were such elementary forces in the

fourteenth, the seventeenth and the twentieth centuries that a combined interpretation of these three centuries may lead us to new ways of understanding European history as a whole.

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PART I

FOURTEENTH CENTURY

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Chapter 1

The Crisis of the Fourteenth Century

Joseph Canning

The fourteenth century in Europe witnessed the impact of power, violence and mass death in particularly acute ways, so much so, that this period has entered folk memory as one of extreme devastation. Indeed, these disasters produced such far-reaching and long-term changes that the late medieval world which they helped to shape seems radically different from that of the High Middle Ages.

The catastrophes of this time were the product of non-human causes; the interaction of these with human agency; and human actions. Centuries are, of course, artificial divisions projected on to the past for the convenience of historians and their audiences, but in this case there is justification for beginning in about 1300. The previous period of the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries had experienced a warmer phase in the long-term climatic cycle, providing the conditions in which the great economic and cultural expansion of the High Middle Ages took place. The European population had doubled, supported by internal colonization with the clearing of forests, draining of fields and bringing of marginal lands under cultivation. The result was that the limits of subsistence had been reached by the end of the thirteenth century, given available technology. Any seriously adverse factor could have tipped the balance and led to a slide into disaster involving great loss of life. At the beginning of the fourteenth century that is what happened. There occurred a climate change, especially in northern Europe. The average annual temperature cooled by about 1°C. with the result that winters became colder and wetter; summers were shorter; the growing season was curtailed; and marginal lands had to be abandoned. It was in this macro-context of factors outside human control that the micro-stories of the sufferings of individual lives were played out.

The first scourge that came to afflict the land was famine. The possibility of famine was always present in the Middle Ages, but a bad harvest could normally be coped with. The difficulty emerged, if two such came in a row. In the years 1315-22 there occurred the Great North European Famine. This was primarily the product of the climate change exacerbated by human action. The repeated crop failures and associated animal diseases produced famine conditions in which starvation and death occurred on a scale unknown before in the Middle Ages. The crisis was caused by a combination of production and distribution problems. The crop failures through bad weather were made worse by inadequate storage and transportation and, in places, by the depredations of war. The weather did,

however, finally improve and a disaster on such a scale did not occur again in the remainder of the Middle Ages. In his paper, William Chester Jordan examines the reactions of different social groups to the conditions of the famine. But an intriguing question remains. Was there a link between the Great Famine and the next scourge which came to strike fourteenth-century people—the Black Death? Could the famine have so weakened the population that it was particularly vulnerable to disease? This certainly cannot be proved with one possible exception: it is arguable, as Jordan has suggested, that those who were children at the time of the Famine may have had their immune systems so damaged that they were more susceptible to infection when the Black Death struck them later as adults.¹

The Black Death which spread through Europe between 1347 and 1351 produced massive loss of life, although any attempts to reach anything like accurate demographic figures are bound to be inaccurate because of the lack of reliable statistical evidence. The pandemic was unforeseen, sudden and overwhelming in its attack: the great Italian jurist, Bartolus of Sassoferrato, for instance, saw it as evidence of “the hostility of God”.² The experience and impact of the Black Death have raised so many questions for historians. One in particular is now in the forefront of debate. It has been conventional to maintain that the Black Death had several forms: bubonic, pneumonic and septicaemic plague. This orthodoxy was questioned with the suggestion, now abandoned, that the disease may have been anthrax. The paper by Samuel Cohn casts doubt upon the identification of the Black Death with bubonic plague. He maintains that modern historians have been guilty of a fundamental mistake in arguing that the *Yersinia pestis* bacillus, only discovered in 1894, was responsible for the Black Death. The problem with the history of disease is that contemporary accounts of symptoms and the profile of epidemics cannot with certainty reveal the precise nature of a disease. Only scientific analysis of tissue or blood samples could do that. This produces huge difficulties when dealing with diseases in the past—a well-known example would be the problems faced by those trying to discover the strain of influenza which caused so many deaths in the immediate aftermath of the First World War. We may well never know, for certain, the precise nature of the Black Death and subsequent “plagues”. Ignorance in matters of hygiene almost certainly made matters worse. At the time, the possibilities of human action to protect against the disease were severely limited because of lack of medical knowledge, although draconian quarantine measures, as in Milan, could and did limit its spread.

Human action was however paramount in producing the third scourge afflicting fourteenth-century Europe: war. The Hundred Years War which broke out between England and France in 1337 is the most well-known and certainly

1 William Chester Jordan, *The Great Famine: Northern Europe in the Early Fourteenth Century* (Princeton, 1996), pp. 186-7.

2 See his commentary on *Digestum novum*, 41.3.5, fol. 100v (ed. Turin, 1577).

most prolonged. It had particularly devastating economic and social effects on the population in large parts of France. But it was only one war amongst many. A.D. Carr in his paper provides a survey of the range of conflicts which affected Europe as a whole—few areas escaped. As always, it was mainly civilians who suffered most, often in conditions of total war.

Overall, the fourteenth century does provide much evidence of mass death resulting from famine, disease and war. The immediate effects of these calamities were, of course, huge loss of life and immense human suffering—a great mass of individual tragedies. As tends to be the case with disasters, many survivors did benefit economically and socially from the deaths of their fellows, but there were long-term damaging effects for society as a whole: a deep distrust of human institutions, notably the church; profound anxiety caused by the precariousness of life; and, for many, diminished hope for the future.

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Chapter 2

Famine and Popular Resistance: Northern Europe, 1315-22

William Chester Jordan

Drawing on and expanding some already published work, I intend in this chapter to describe briefly the environment in which northern Europeans lived in the years 1315 to 1322, specifically the nature of the weather and of political conditions and the results for crops, animals and the human population in the era known as the Great Famine. Second, I sketch the reactions of superordinate groups to these conditions. Third, and at greatest length, I expand on an issue to which I did not devote sufficient attention in earlier studies, namely, the attempts of women and men of subordinate status to resist many of the policies and practices those with the greatest political and economic power established in order to protect their interests.¹

The Great Famine

It is generally agreed that enormous demographic growth and expansion of settlements into once heavily forested lands and comparable wildernesses characterized northern Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.² Field systems achieved an extraordinary complexity,³ since husbandmen laid them out in part to adjust to the physical character of the land and in part to make cultivation suitable for a wide array of crops.⁴ Probably because of the varied diet and judging in part from skeletal remains, especially the length of human leg bones, the population was also

1 Many of the points made in this paper are documented fully in my *Great Famine: Northern Europe in the Early Fourteenth Century* (Princeton, 1996).

2 See *ibid.*, pp. 27, 30, 91, 98-9, 105; Guy Bois, *La grande depression médiévale: XIVe-XVe siècles. Le précédent d'une crise systémique* (Paris, 2000), pp. 12-53.

3 See Jordan, *op. cit.*, pp. 91-2, 224 n. 30.

4 For a comprehensive study of the field systems of an English county, which reinforces this observation, see David Hall, *The Open Fields of Northamptonshire* (Publications of the Northamptonshire Record Society 38), (Northampton, 1995). *Mutatis mutandis* the complexity and variety documentable in Northamptonshire can be seen elsewhere.