**Black Death Sourcework**

The 14th Century Pandemic “The Black Death”

From: Sites of Encounter: Religions, Courtney Amaya, 2013

**History Standards: 7.6.7**

Map the spread of the bubonic plague from Central Asia to China, the Middle East, and Europe and describe its impact on global population.

**CCSS Standards: Reading, Grades 6-8**

1. Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

2. Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary specific to domains related to history/social studies.

6. Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author’s point of view or purpose (e.g., loaded language, inclusion or avoidance of particular facts).

8. Distinguish among fact, opinion, and reasoned judgment in a text.

**Guiding Question:**

What can primary and secondary sources teach us about the Black Death?

**Overview of Lesson:**

Teachers should review what the Black Death was, and the medieval European reaction to the plague. Students should also be familiar with medieval society, particularly how it ostracized those who were not Christian or not Caucasian. Teachers should then read both sources with students, highlighting vocabulary and providing explanations where necessary. Once students are able to read both sources, they should complete the 6Cs for each one. This can be done individually, in partners, in groups, or as a whole class, according to the level of your students. Once this exercise is complete, the class should share out their answers. This lesson may take more than one class period.

**Sourcework Exercise – The Black Death**

**Source 1:**Tuchman, Barbara W. ***A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century***. New York: Random House, 1978.

“The hostility of man proved itself against the Jews. On charges that they were poisoning the wells, with intent “to kill and destroy the whole of Christendom and have lordship over all the world,” the lynchings began in the spring of 1348 on the heels of the first plague deaths. The first attacks occurred in Narbonne and Carcassonne, where Jews were dragged from their houses and thrown into bonfires. While divine punishment was accepted as the plague’s source, people in their misery still looked for a human agent upon whom to vent the hostility that could not be vented on God. The Jew, as the eternal stranger, was the most obvious target. He was the outsider who had separated himself by choice from the Christian world, whom Christians for centuries had been taught to hate, who was regarded as imbued with unsleeping malevolence against all Christians. Living in a distinct group of his own kind in a particular street or quarter, he was also the most feasible target, with property to loot as a further inducement.  
 The accusation of well-poisoning was as old as the plague of Athens, when it had applied to the Spartans, and as recent as the epidemics of 1320-21, when it had been applied to the lepers. At the time the lepers were believed to have acted at the instigation of the Jews and the Moslem King of Granada, in a great conspiracy of outcasts to destroy Christians. Hundreds were rounded up and burned throughout France in 1322 and the Jews heavily punished by an official fine and unofficial attacks. When the plague came, the charge was instantly revived against the Jews:

…rivers and fountains  
 That were clear and clean  
 They poisoned in many places…

Wrote the French court poet Guillaume de Machaut.  
 The antagonism had ancient roots. The Jew had become the object of popular animosity because the early Church, as an offshoot of Judaism striving to replace the parent, had to make him so. His rejection of Christ as Saviour and his dogged refusal to accept the new law of the Gospel in place of the Mosaic law made the Jew a perpetual insult to the newly established Church, a danger who must be kept distinct and apart from the Christian community. This was the purpose of the edicts depriving Jews of their civil rights issued by the early Church Councils in the 4th century as soon as Christianity became the state religion. Separation was a two-way street, since, to the Jews, Christianity was at first a dissident sect, then an apostasy with which they wanted no contact.   
 The theory, emotions, and justifications of anti-Semitism were laid at that time – in the tirades of St. John Chrysostom, Patriarch of Antioch, who denounced the Jews as Christ-killers; in the judgement of St. Augustine, who declared the Jews to be “outcasts” for failing to accept redemption by Christ. The Jews’ dispersion was regarded as their punishment for unbelief.  
 …[Jews], as non-citizens of the universal Christian state, were not allowed to bring charges against Christians, nor was Jewish testimony allowed to prevail over that of Christians. Their legal status was that of serfs of the king, though without reciprocal obligations on the part of the overlord. The doctrine that Jews were doomed to perpetual servitude as Christ-killers was announced by Pope Innocent III in 1205…Legally, politically, and physically, they were totally vulnerable. They maintained a place in society because as moneylenders they performed a role essential to the kings’ continuous need of money.   
 The belief that Jews performed ritual murder of Christian victims, supposedly from a compulsion to re-enact the Crucifixion, began in the 12th century...Jews were believed to kidnap and torture Christian children, whose blood they drank for a variety of sinister purposes ranging from sadism and sorcery to the need, as unnatural beings, for Christian blood to give them a human appearance.  
 In the torment of the plague it was easy to credit Jewish malevolence with poisoning the wells.”

**Source #2:**   
von Kӧnigshofen, Jacob. “The Cremation of the Strasbourg Jews.” 1349.

***In their attempt to explain the widespread horrors of the Black Death, medieval Christian communities looked for scapegoats. As at the time of the crusades, the Jews were blamed for poisoning wells and hence spreading the plague. This selection by a contemporary chronicler, written in 1349, gives an account of how Christians in the town of Strasbourg in the Holy Roman Empire dealt with their Jewish community. It is apparent that financial gain was also an important motive in killing the Jews.***

“In the year 1349 there occurred the greatest epidemic that ever happened. Death went from one end of the earth to the other…And from what this epidemic came, all wise teachers and physicians could only say that it was God’s will…This epidemic also came to Strasbourg in the summer of the above-mentioned year, and it is estimated that about sixteen thousand people died.  
 In the matter of this plague the Jews throughout the world were reviled and accused in all lands of having caused it through the poison which they are said to have put into the water and the wells-that is what they were accused of-and for this reason the Jews were burnt all the way from the Mediterranean into Germany…

[The account then goes on to discuss the situation of the Jews in the city of Strasbourg.]

On Saturday…they burnt the Jews on a wooden platform in their cemetery. There were about two thousand people of them. Those who wanted to baptize themselves were spared. [About 1,000 accepted baptism.] Many small children were taken out of the fire and baptized against their will of the fathers and mothers. And everything that was owed to the Jews was canceled, and the Jews had to surrender all pledges and notes that they had taken for debts. The council, however, took the cash that the Jews possessed and divided it among the working-men proportionately. The money was indeed the thing that killed the Jews. If they had been poor and if the feudal lords had not been in debt to them, they would not have been burnt…  
 Thus were the Jews burnt at Strasbourg, and in the same year in all the cities of the Rhine, whether Free Cities or Imperial Cities or cities belonging to the lords. In some towns they burnt the Jews after a trial, in others, without a trial. In some cities the Jews themselves set fire to their houses and cremated themselves. It was decided in Strasbourg that no Jew should enter the city for 100 years, but before 20 years had passed, the council and magistrates agreed that they ought to admit the Jews again into the city for 20 years. And so the Jews came back again to Strasbourg in the year 1368 after the birth of our Lord.”

**Student Handout – Sourcework Exercise: *The Black Death***

**Source 1:**

1. Is this source primary or secondary? How do you know?
2. CITE the source (who created it and when was it written?):
3. What is the CONTENT (what is the main idea of the source?)
4. What is the CONTEXT (what is going on in the world/country/region or locality when this was created)?
5. What CONNECTIONS can you make (link the source to other things you already know or learned about)?
6. What is the author trying to COMMUNICATE to the reader (point of view or bias – is this source reliable)?

7. What CONCLUSIONS can you make (how does this source contribute to your understanding of history – big picture)

**Source 2:**

1. Is this source primary or secondary? How do you know?
2. CITE the source (who created it and when was it written?):
3. What is the CONTENT (what is the main idea of the source?)
4. What is the CONTEXT (what is going on in the world/country/region or locality when this was created)?
5. What CONNECTIONS can you make (link the source to other things you already know or learned about)?
6. What is the author trying to COMMUNICATE to the reader (point of view or bias – is this source reliable)?
7. What CONCLUSIONS can you make (how does this source contribute to your understanding of history – big picture)?