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The Medieval Holocaust: The Approach of the Plague and the Destruction of Jews in Germany, 1348-1349

by Albert Winkler

The Jews of Germany have suffered a great deal from persecutions over the centuries. The Holocaust of the 1940s, for example, ranks among the most brutal events in recorded history, but there were many other instances of oppression in German history, many of which date from the Middle Ages. During the Medieval period, the Jews were subjected to numerous attacks, and they often faced periods of devastation and mass murder. Likely, the most brutal of these were the severe pogroms unleashed on the Jews in association with the advance of the Black Death in 1348 and 1349. Perhaps only ranking behind the annihilations by the Nazis, the ravaging of the Jewish communities at the time of the Plague was the most extensive oppression the Jews ever faced in the history of Germany. The persecutions of Jews at the time of the Black Death in Germany started with the advance of the disease towards the southwestern areas of the German Empire. The communities in these regions essentially started the process and precedence of attacks that were soon followed in many other German cities.

Despite the attention which has been paid to the Jewish experience in history, the topic of the early persecution of Jews in Germany has been the subject of some controversy among scholars. For instance, the exact role of the pestilence in the outbreak of hostilities towards the Jews has never been fully clarified. The attacks might have been triggered by the fear of approaching doom, or they may have started at the time of the Black Death only by coincidence. Clearly, the issue is more complicated than a simple cause and effect relationship because numerous factors came into play in the decisions to attack Jews. A vicious and pervasive anti-Jewish sentiment led many Christians to believe that the members of this often-victimized religion must be responsible somehow for any malady, social problem, or disaster that befell society. When no hard evidence was available to support accusations, as was almost always the case, then myths and unfounded rumors were used as evidence. Other factors contributing to the tragedy include the uncertainty associated with political realities in the cities of Germany at this time. Many social and economic groups vied for power in the communities. Economic competition between Jews and Christians was clearly involved, as well as greed and jealousies by many people in the Christian community. This article will address the issues surrounding the destruction of the Jews of Germany at the time of the Black Death and attempt to shed light on the controversial aspects of the persecutions. This work will concentrate on the attacks on Jewish communities in the cities and towns of the southwest German Empire because these were the locations of the first outbreaks of these pogroms and became the model of similar oppression in other areas.

Jews in Germany during the Middle Ages

According to the available information, Jews have lived in what is now Germany starting in Roman times. There was a community of Jews in Cologne during the Roman era indicated by the remains of their synagogue, which has recently been unearthed. However, the existence of Jews in Germany might not have been continuous because scholars have been unable to find evidence that indicated the Jews were in that region in the following centuries. During the Middle Ages, Jews came to Germany largely as merchants, and they most often lived in the towns along the rivers which were the major avenues of trade. During much of that age, many Jews served in important positions as doctors and merchants. Very early in their existence in Germany, the Jews faced prejudice and persecutions. Some early Church Fathers, most notably St. John Chrysostom, condemned the Jews largely for religious reasons. Somehow, he argued, all Jews bore collective guilt for the execution of Jesus of Nazareth, even though the event occurred hundreds of years before any the contemporaries of Chrysostom were born. Additionally, the Jews were denigrated for rejecting the teachings of Christianity and its new concept of salvation. The Gospel of John, for example, has Jesus condemning the Jews because they refused to believe that he was sent by God. In John 8:44 Jesus said, “Ye are of your father [who is] the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do.” The book of Revelations 2:9 expressed a similar sentiment, “Jews ... are the synagogue of Satan.” All of this demonstrated a basic paranoia of many Christians. The fact that the Jewish people, who were well versed in the culture and ethics of the Hebrew Bible, would reject the teachings of Jesus forced many insecure Christians to question the efficacy of their own religion. This was too disturbing for many of them to bear, and they frequently lashed out at the Jews, who viewed the evidence of Jesus differently.

Many Christians believed that the sin of killing Jesus, the consequences of which the Jews had somehow inherited from their ancestors, clearly made the Jews unable to attain salvation, and their punishment by divine actions continued to show how the Lord held them in disfavor. This was demonstrated by the dispersal or diaspora of the Jewish people starting during the Roman era. Some Christians justified their persecution of the Jews because deity was punishing them already, and the continual mistreatment of those people was a means of showing devotion to their Lord and doing his will. Often, the Christian teachings of love, charity, and an unwillingness to judge others were simply set aside when the treatment of Jews was concerned. Christians viewed Jews as having every demonic proclivity, and they often bore the stigma of being the adversaries of all peoples.
Many calamities that fell on society were blamed on the Jews. When fires broke out in cities, the Jewish community was repeatedly held responsible even when the conflagration started in a part of the town away from Jewish neighborhoods. Diseases and maladies were often blamed on the Jews, whom many Christians believed used sorcery or any kind of collaboration with evil to cause these unfortunate events to take place. The Jews again and again were seen as poisoners seeking to kill Christians by the use of hazardous substances. Supposedly, the Jews frequently desecrated the Holy Eucharist, murdered children in some kind of lust to kill, and then used their blood in a degraded ritual or means of worship. These accusations had little or no evidence to support them and were clearly absurd, but even the most unreliable rumors could be used as excuses to persecute Jews. Joshua Trachtenberg, an eminent scholar of anti-Jewish ideas and practices during the Middle Ages, has observed, “Nothing was too monstrous to be told about a Jew.” Many of these unfounded allegations were used against the Jews when the Christian communities feared the approach of the Plague.

The pogroms associated with the Crusades were among the most brutal persecutions of Jews during the Middle Ages. When Urban II called for the First Crusade at Clermont, France, in 1096, he ignited a fervor among many Christians to go on campaigns to take the Holy Land from the Muslims. Many of the forces assembled in France and Germany, and they followed the routes through the German Empire to advance through Eastern Europe to the Near East. When these armies marched to the cities of the Rhineland and other areas, they fell upon the Jewish communities found there. Many Crusaders clearly reasoned that they were justified in attacking infidels in Europe as well as in the Middle East. In either location, they were doing the work of their faith. As a contemporary Jewish chronicler explained, the Crusaders reasoned, “Behold the time has come to avenge him who was crucified [Jesus], whom their [the Jews’] ancestors slew. Now let not a remnant or a residue escape; even an infant or suckling in the cradle.” Forces struck at Jewish communities from northern France to Prague and deep into Hungary. The armies massacred Jews in the larger cities of Germany including Metz, Trier, Mainz, Cologne, Worms, Rothenburg, and Regensburg, and many other smaller settlements as well. The knights forced some Jews to convert to Christianity, but they also killed many. Clearly, thousands of Jews were murdered at that time, but the estimates of 20,000 or more victims are probably exaggerations.

A new element of the persecution of Jews during the Middle Ages seemed to be added at the time of the Crusades. While the Jews had long been oppressed for religious reasons, the Christians began to mistreat them for economic motives as well. Apparently for the first time, the Jewish communities were believed to control much wealth that could be stolen and used by those who oppressed them. In fact, greed would become such a strong motivating factor that persecutions were often unleashed for little reason other than to steal the property of Jews whom many Christians believed to be wealthy.

During the Middle Ages, Jews were barred from entering many occupations, so their economic activities were restricted to a relatively small number of ways to make a living. The Catholic Church’s condemnation of loaning money at interest, called usury, gave a few Jews the opportunity of making a living by providing credit. Despite the Church’s restriction on lending practices, funds were often available from Christians to those who needed cash, and banking firms prospered in the Lombardy area of Italy during the Middle Ages. Also, money was available on the local level as well. However, many borrowers found Jewish money lenders to be a convenient source of funds because other means of obtaining funds were not always available. Lending money was a risky enterprise during this era because many clients tried to evade repaying their debts. The amount of risk involved often meant that interest rates had to be high, and the terms of the agreement had to be harsh in the opinion of borrowers. Additionally, the price of doing business was often high for Jewish money lenders. The Jews were frequently subject to special taxes, and often Jewish communities had to pay bribes to local leaders to avoid persecutions. Frequently, law courts inadequately protected Jews and often sided unjustly with Christian claimants. The insecurity that the Jews faced forced them to charge high amounts for the use of their funds. The question of how much interest could be charged for loans was addressed and limits were placed on them. As stated in 1255 in an imperial decree, Jews could charge no more than 43.3% interest per week on short-term loans. The interest on debts of one year could go no higher than 33.3%. These strictures were largely enforced in the western areas of Germany and were still in use during the next century.

No doubt, this meant that the Jewish money lenders had a very bad reputation among Christians in Germany during the Middle Ages. They were resented by those who owed them money and by many others who thought them wealthy. Even the apparent poverty of many of the Jews was often not
taken at face value. Many believed this impoverishment was a sign that the wealthy in the Jewish community were hoarding funds and were cruel to their own people. Frequently, Christians believed that the rich Jews were tightfisted when it came to helping the poor among their own community or offering relief to impoverished Christians. In reality, few Jews loaned money. By far most of the people in the Jewish communities survived by dealing in second hand materials, and they often traded rags and junk for a living.\(^9\) Many survived only because of the handouts from more fortunate members of their faith. Money lenders were resented by people who thought that gaining wealth by loaning money was disreputable because it exploited the desperate people who took such loans. Also, many believed that the people who loaned money were getting funds from interest received without labor. Many Christians referred to the Jewish money lenders as \textit{Wucherer}, which meant usurer or profiteer, and they had a negative opinion of them just as many people regard modern loan sharks and racketeers with disdain.

While the ghetto or sections of the city where Jews were forced to live had not yet developed, members of that faith often confined themselves to areas of the towns known as \textit{Judengassen} (Jewish streets). These sections were not occupied by Jews alone because many Christians lived there as well.\(^10\) The laws and courts which administered justice in Germany often failed to protect Jews adequately, and members of the Jewish community were often victims of random violence. Yet in these neighborhoods, not only could the Jews more easily associate with other members of their religion but were also more convenient locations for protection and mutual cooperation.

The Jews faced persecutions in almost all locals where they resided during the Middle Ages. In fact, most of the areas which failed to molest Jewish communities in the later Middle Ages were places from which the Jews had already been expelled. In 1290, King Edward I of England ordered all the Jews in his kingdom to leave by the end of the year. Many of these refugees went to France and other areas of Northern Europe. However, the kingdom of France was only a short-term location for those fleeing England because King Philip IV (Philip the Fair) ordered them removed in 1291 and 1299, though the king’s edicts were not enforced at that time. Finally in 1306, Philip issued yet another decree to expel the Jews, and he made sure this was a serious attempt to have them removed. At that time, the kingdom of France had not yet reached the boundaries associated with that state today because the nation would only acquire them, mostly in the south and east in the following centuries. While they were expelled from the kingdom at that time, many Jews still lived in areas later associated with France. Large numbers of the fugitives fled to Spain, but clearly the populations in the Jewish communities of Germany were increasing at exactly the same time, meaning that some of the refugees went to the German Empire as well.\(^11\)

**Persecutions of Jews in Germany shortly before the Black Death**

In the half century preceding the advance of the plague, two major persecutions of Jews originated in Germany. The outbreak of hostilities followed a number of accusations that Jews had killed Christian children to use their blood in some kind of fiendish religious practice, and pogroms took place in Mainz in 1281 and 1283, in Munich in 1285, and in Oberwesel in 1287. No doubt also contributing to the hysteria of the time were the accounts that Jews had desecrated the Holy Eucharist in Paris in 1290.\(^12\)

In April 1298 the Rindfleisch persecution broke out. The movement was named for a knight or nobleman named Rindfleisch or Rintfleisch.\(^13\) This name was unusual for a Medieval German nobleman because it has no \textit{von} in it, which was often a designator of origin and nobility. The name also may betray another possible origin because it meant “beef” or “cattle flesh,” which was an unusual name for upper-class persons.\(^14\) This designation led some to call him a “butcher” (\textit{Schlächter}) because someone of that occupation would more likely use a name associated with beef. But in his case the term “butcher” carried a certain irony because it may be a more appropriate description of these actions, especially when this meant the murder of Jews.

On 20 April 1298 the massacres of Jews began in the small town of Röttingen in the area of Franconia on the borders between the modern sates of Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria. There had been an accusation that Jews had stolen a wafer from the Holy Eucharist in a church, and Rindfleisch and his followers began to attack Jews in...
Fig. 3 - Map identifying Jewish settlements along the Rhine before the spread of the Black Plague in 1349. From Monumenta Judaica: 2000 Jahre Geschichte und Kultur der Juden am Rhine. Bd. 3: Catalog. Köln (1963)
retribution. These groups earned the name of Judenschächter, which means those who slaughtered Jews. This persecution was in reality a mob action with various groups striking at Jewish communities in all directions. The gangs hit many towns at approximately the same time, meaning that there were a number of mobs attacking the Jews simultaneously. Likely, the residents of some Christians cities were swept up in the fervor of persecution and joined the gangs. In all, Rindfleisch and his followers probably struck 130 communities or districts in Franconia leaving a trail of destruction and death among the Jews. Some estimates place the number of dead at twenty thousand or higher, but a more reasonable conjecture of the tally of the victims would be several thousand. The massacres continued until October when the Emperor Albert I of Austria (Albrecht von Habsburg) was victorious over his rival, Adolf of Nassau, in a civil war in the Empire and was able to turn his attention to the protection of Jews and the reestablishment of tranquility. He declared a Landfriede or “general peace,” and ordered all the attacks to stop. The Emperor punished a few of the cities and towns, whose citizens had participated in the uprising, by placing fines on them.15 These punishments were not severe, and they clearly provided small deterrents for attacking Jews, because such persecutions continued to be a problem in the Empire.

Another important uprising against the Jews took place decades later. The lower classes and peasants of Germany were restive in the late Middle Ages and were seeking more freedoms and political power. Some of the animosity shown to the Jews clearly also had political and social ramifications. The Armleder persecution and uprising was well within these categories. On 29 June 1336, violence broke out when a knight, Arnold von Uissigheim, proclaimed himself to be rex Armleder or king of the Armleders. The term came from the practice of lower-class warriors to wear leather on their arms for protection in battle. This was in contrast to more reasonable conjecture of the tally of the victims would be a problem in the Empire.

The advance of the plague

The exact nature of the Black Death has been the subject of debate among scholars in recent years. The traditional view stated that the pestilence was a bacillus, bubonic plague (Yersinia pestis), which was a disease in black or house rats (Rattus rattus), that could be transferred to humans when a flea from a dead rat bit a person. Another variety of the disease was the pulmonary or pneumatic plague. While the bacillus involved was the same, the means of contracting the infection could be the bite of a flea or by inhalation of the germs in the air. The theory that the disease was bubonic plague alone has been challenged recently, and Joseph P. Byrne has argued that there were three possibilities for an explanation of the pestilence. Certainly, it may have been bubonic plague, but it might also have been something entirely different, or it may have been a combination of bubonic plague and other pathogens. Possible contagions that might have been involved were typhus, smallpox, and illness caused by anthrax, because they have similar symptoms as those described by contemporary accounts of the Black Death.18 But the theory that the pestilence was almost entirely the bubonic plague still has many supporters. Recently, in his study of the Black Death, Ole J. Benedictow has accepted the theory that the Yersinia pestis was likely the most prevalent disease involved.19

The fact that the Black Death devastated the population of Europe has been well established. While the exact mortality caused by the pestilence may never be known, all estimates on the percentage of deaths point to a huge
catastrophe. Most rough calculations state that from 1347 to 1352, between twenty and fifty percent of the European population died. Some have gone so far as to suggest that the population of Europe declined by three quarters before the end of the century because the plague became endemic and minor outbreaks occurred locally almost every year, and major outbreaks every few decades.20 Clearly, the disease continued to ravage the peoples of that continent for generations to come. This was a catastrophe on an unprecedented scale, and contemporary observers had difficulty making any sense of it. Most importantly, many people tried to find a reason for the contagion, and they also tried to uncover a means of mitigating its ferocity or turn it back. Under severe duress and the fear of imminent death, these efforts led to a hysteria that became aimed at the Jews who were viewed as outsiders and heretics by many of the Christian community.21

While the plague may have existed in many areas of Africa and Asia long before the major outbreak swept into Europe, the strain that invaded that continent most likely originated in China. That country had long been commercially active, and the pestilence soon followed the major trade routes west and was noticed by European sources when it struck Kaffa (Caffa) on the Crimean Peninsula in 1347. Once again following the trade routes across the Black Sea and eastern Mediterranean, the disease appeared in various port cities of southern Europe including Messina, Genoa, and Marseilles, late in the same year.22 From November through December, the disease advanced up the Rhone River Valley and soon reached Avignon, the residence of the current pope, Clement VI. Since the popes resided at Avignon from 1309 to 1378 (antipopes were there starting in 1378), their influence was more strongly felt at that time in the areas now associated with the south of France than was the case of Rome.23 The leader of all Western Christendom tried to lessen the impact of the advancing epidemic by the use of religious processions to gain the Lord’s mercy, but these activities had no clear effect. Perhaps the Holy Father was skeptical about the contagion being of divine origin because he took practical, not just spiritual, efforts to avoid catching the disease. On the advice of his physician, Guy de Chauliac, Clement retreated into the inner rooms of his residence where he sat between fires and refused to see anyone.24 In the case of the Pope, the practical measure of isolation proved to be effective, which probably prevented him from catching the disease. But for the masses of common people, such an option was impractical. These persons took other more drastic measures of stopping the contagion, including killing Jews.

The attacks on the Jews begin

The Black Death continued to move up the Rhone River Valley in 1348, and the first recorded burning of Jews took place in an unnamed city of Provence between 11 and 17 May. While severe, these pogroms were relatively minor compared to those soon to break out in Germany.25 Following the lead of the town in Provence, the first persecutions of the Jews took place in Spain in June and July of 1348, because they were believed to have been somehow involved in the spread of the plague. In most cases, the perpetrators of the pogroms seemed to be looking for scapegoats or someone to blame for the devastations of the disease. If they could identify culprits and bring pressure on them to stop, then the plague might abate. As was the case in most acts originating from extreme emotionalism and hysteria, the most disliked, mistrusted, and weakest persons in society were the most easy to blame and to persecute.

In France, for example, among those abused as perpetrators of the crime of causing or spreading the Black Death were lepers and other unfortunate impoverished people. Guy de Chauliac, a physician, reported that accusations fell not only on the Jews but on the poor and nobles as well. “In some [areas] the poor were maimed [broken by torture], and they ran away. In other [areas] the nobles” were treated in a similar manner (In aliquibus pauperes truncatie et effugiebandt eos. In alis nobiles). While many of the nobles were disliked, they were seldom weak, and they likely suffered little from persecutions. In the German empire the accusations of causing the plague were directed almost entirely against the Jews.26

Andre Benezeit, a prominent citizen of Narbonne, wrote about how confessions of wrong doing were extracted from the poor who had been accused of spreading the plague in April 1348. “Many beggars and mendicants of various countries were found and arrested” for the crime of spreading a “potion or poison.” This was “powdered substances which they were putting into rivers, houses, churches and foodstuffs to kill people.” The examinations were designed to illicit confessions rather than find the truth because torture was applied to many of the accused persons. The use of physical or psychological pain to get people to confess their guilt meant that the information gathered in such a manner was highly questionable. Clearly, when people were being tortured, they said whatever they thought necessary to get the torment to stop. No doubt this included giving false testimony, which meant saying anything their torturers wanted to hear. “Some of them have confessed as much of their own free will,” Benezeit maintained, “others under torture.” The punishment for their supposed crimes was severe. “Those who confessed in Narbonne were torn by red hot pincers, disemboweled, their hands cut off, and then burnt.”27 The Jews faced similar treatment as well.

When the accusations against the Jews led to their persecutions, Pope Clement VI intervened to stop it. On 5 July 1348, the Holy Father presented the bull Sicut Judeis, which restated that the church would continue to protect Jews. Later, on 26 September of the same year, he presented another statement concerning Jews, reissued on 1 October. The Pope clearly continued to “abhor the deceit of the Jews,” but he maintained that they must be defended. “We have taken the Jews under the shield of our protection,” he declared, “ordering ... that no Christian presume in any wise to wound or kill Jews, or take their money or expel them from his service before their term of employment has
expired, unless by the legal judgement.” Clement stated that the Jews were not responsible for the pestilence because “the plague . . . with which God, provoked by their [humanity’s] sins, has afflicted the Christian people.” The Holy Father further stated that the Christians must not blame the Black Death on “poisonings carried out by the Jews at the instigation of the devil.” He said additionally that Christians had “impiously slain many Jews, making no exception for age or sex.” The Pope clearly stated that anyone who persecuted Jews for the plague “shall lose his title or office, or suffer the ultimate penalty of excommunication.”

Clement’s protection of the Jews was most effective in the areas of his greatest influence, which was in the region around Avignon, and he probably saved many lives because of his moral leadership. But many Christians failed to follow Clement’s example when the plague hysteria spread to areas beyond his immediate control.

The throne of Germany was claimed by Charles IV. Günther of Schwarzburg challenged his position, and Charles was unable to assert his authority until May 1349 when he defeated Günther at Eltville. The effort of making his throne secure kept Charles occupied with other matters, and he was unable or unwilling to come to the aid of the Jews during the severe persecutions when they most needed it. But the Emperor probably made it possible for the attacks to continue when he told the city of Nuremberg that any Jewish property seized by the people need not be returned, and he allowed them to build two market places and a church on stolen land. In essence this legitimized any mistreatment of the Jewish community that might occur.

In the areas that later were part of the French-speaking areas of Switzerland, the plague advanced in the summer and fall of 1348. The pestilence reached Geneva probably sometime shortly before 10 August, and it seemed to follow the main roads on the northern shore of Lake Geneva, arriving in Lausanne about ninety days later on 10 November. The disease likely progressed roughly 0.66 kilometers per day on the average. Since human traffic on the roads traveled much faster than this, word of the approach of the plague preceded the actual advance of the disease, often by months. The warnings of the Black Death’s progress clearly gave the authorities of Chillon, roughly thirty kilometers from Lausanne on the eastern shore of Lake Geneva, time to react and take desperate measures to prevent the arrival of the pestilence.

The warden of the castle of Chillon described how the Jews were examined for duplicity in a plot to poison Christians. The Jews were accused of poisoning wells and other sources of drinking water, and they were brought to the fortress and began making confessions starting on 15 September 1348. The examinations ran at least until 18 October. Many of them were “put to the question” which was a euphemism for the use of torture. This was a practice taken from Roman legal procedures where “tormentum [torture] became almost synonymous with quaestitio.” While the means of torment was not described in the account, it had the desired effect of eliciting admissions of duplicity from the victims. Clearly, confessions given under torture were unreliable at best, but the officials at the court proceedings used it extensively no doubt to get the desired statements most efficiently. Most likely, these officials planned to find the accused guilty no matter what the evidence suggested, and even these forced confessions probably eased the conscience of the examiners. Perhaps they reasoned that if the accused stated their guilt, then the original charges had to be justified.

Under these circumstances, the Jews confessed to a plot to poison wells in many areas. Jews supposedly had been given some poisonous powder in bags of leather. The amount of poison varied in size from that of a nut or large nut to that of an egg. One Jew stated that the amount of powder had the same volume as two fists. The supposed criminals received this poison from other Jews who were clearly

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Fig. 4 - Jews being tortured and killed (woodcut, 1475)
involved in a vast conspiracy. Supposedly, many leaders of the Jewish communities were duplicitous and over a dozen names of Jews were presented who advocated the use of poison to kill Christians. The poisons were described as a “red and black,” or “green and black.” One man who claimed he used the poison, probably forgetting he should be consistent with the others who confessed, said its color was white. The virulence of the substance was supposedly demonstrated when a Jew named Musses [Moses?] reportedly placed poison in a public fountain in the village of Chillon. As stated in the account, the poison was retrieved and given to an unnamed Jew who promptly died from its effects. The means of distribution was placing the pouch of poison under a rock in a source of water presumably, so the material would seep into the water supply and kill whoever drank it. Many of the Jews who gave confessions were condemned to be burned for their supposed crimes. When Christians were also found to be involved, they were “put to the wheel and tortured” which meant they were strapped to a wagon wheel while their limbs were broken.35

Perhaps the most damaging aspect of these forced confessions was the statements which accused all Jews as being involved in the crime who were old enough to realize the implications of poisoning water supplies. “All of this [the following] had the Jews sworn by their law before their execution” (Dies alles haben vorgemelten Juden vor ihrer Hinrichtung bey ihrem Gesetz behaben). “That it was true that all Jews from the age of seven years—and therefore [they] could not be excused—because they all had knowledge of the science and of the commerce [of well poisoning] and were guilty” (dass alle Juden von sieben Jahren und darum nicht zu entschuldigen waren/dann sie all durgehendes darvon Wissenschaft und an diesem Handel Schuld hätten).36 This supposed admission meant that all the Jews were involved in some kind of universal plot to kill Christians meaning that everyone in the Jewish communities were potential murderers, and, therefore, the authorities could justify persecuting and killing them.

Recent scholarship has been very critical of the confessions forced from the Jews regarding the poisonings of wells, and there was likely little if any truth to the accusations. Even some Medieval contemporaries were highly skeptical of the allegations. When the historian, Konrad von Megenberg, referred to the accusations that Jews had poisoned all the wells (all prunnen heten vergift) everywhere in German lands (überol in dütschen landen), he admitted that he could not judge if they had committed this crime (waerleie, ob etleie juden das taeten, das waiz ich nicht). But Megenberg quickly added that the Jews died in such large numbers in Vienna from the plague that they found it necessary to enlarge their grave yard a great deal by buying two additional houses (vil weteren muosten und zwai häuser dar zwo kaufen) probably to use the additional land to bury their dead. The historian had to admit that if the Jews had poisoned themselves it would have been a foolish act indeed (haeten si in nu selber vergeben, daz waer ain törhait gewesen). The author was quick to add that he had no respect for the Jews, meaning that he made the admission of the absurdity of the charges grudgingly at best. “But I do not want to color [falsify] the evil of the Jews because they are enemies to our Lady [Mary the Mother of God] and all Christians. (Jedoch will ich der juden pöshett nit värben, wan sie sint unser unferen vient und allen christen).”37

The concept that the plague could have been caused by natural forces, and, consequently, needed no human agent developed slowly. These ideas first developed when some supposed that earthquakes may have contributed to the origins and the spread of the pestilence. Southern Europe was hit by a series of earthquakes in the middle of the fourteenth century, and on 25 January 1348, a tremor struck the area of the southern Alps. Heavy shocks and noticeable aftershocks hit Germany from 2 February to 3 August 1349 at about the same time that the Black Death was advancing in that country. The second great outbreak of the pestilence took place in Germany in 1356 in the same year as a major earthquake that destroyed Basel on 18 October. The chronicler, Tilemann Elhen von Wolfhagen, placed these two events together in his Limburger Chronik.38 The fact that these two events occurred close together helped influence later writers to view the two events as having a cause and effect relationship, and some believed that the earthquakes caused the plague. These historians tended to state that the outbreak of the Black Death began on 25 January 1348, and some suggested that the shaking of the earth may have been the cause of the great mortality.39 The supposition that the pestilence was somehow connected with natural phenomena came much too late to help the Jews who were soon persecuted for the approach of the plague and as killers of Christians at a much earlier date.

Persecutions in the Swiss areas of the southwest German Empire

The news of the plague followed the roads from Lausanne to the east and northeast. The first town in the French-speaking areas of Switzerland to persecute Jews was the town of La Toru de Peilz on the shores of Lake Geneva northwest of Chillon where the Jews were burned on 13 October 1348.40 Soon the areas later associated with the German-speaking districts of western Switzerland learned that the disease was on its way. As Konrad Justinger, an early chronicler of Bern, stated, “there [came] the greatest cause of death in all the world of which has ever been known. The cause of death came from the [direction of] sunset and went towards the [direction of] the sunrise” (was der grösste sterbot in aller der werle, der von oder sider je gehört wart. Der sterbot kam von der sunnen unergang und gieng gegen der sunnen ufgang).41 The persecutions of Jews in the Swiss areas also seemed to start in the west and go to the east. The attacks on Jewish communities took place in locations such as Solothurn, Bern, Zofingen, and Basel relatively early and later in Zurich and St. Gall which were farther east.

Solothurn was the first community in the German speaking areas of Europe to maltreat its Jews in connection to the approach of the Black Death. According to Heinrich
Truchsess von Diessenhofen, a contemporary chronicler, “In the year 1348 in the month of November began the persecution of the Jews. For the first time in Germany, in the fortress of Solothurn, all the Jews were burned” (Annō predicto XL octavo mense novembris inceptit persecutio Judenorum. Et primo Alamanna in castro Solodorensi cremati fuerunt omnes Judei).42 This persecution was probably set in motion by the reports from Bern. In November 1348 the city council of Bern wrote to Strasbourg in response to that city’s enquiry on what was known about Jews poisoning fountains, which were often the main water sources in towns. The “mayor, [city] council, and citizens” of Bern responded that a Jew had claimed he saw (sach) two other Jews, Köppli and Kûrsner, place poison in a public fountain in Solothurn (... ein jude, do er verteilt wart, ofenlich verjach, das er zegegen was und sach, daz Köppler der jude und Kûrsner der jude gifft leiten in den brunned ze Solottern).43 These men had reportedly given orders to other Jews to poison water sources in many areas. Of course, the city council of Bern sent this seemingly vital information to Solothurn as well, and that city probably took immediate action against the Jews in their community.44 When a Jew was thrown into the flames for his supposed crimes, probably in Bern, he made a startling confession before he was consumed by the conflagration and died. He called out “and spoke publicly to all who were present ... Know [this] that all Jews in all the lands know about the poison” (und sprach öffentlich ze allen, die da waren ... wissent daz all juden in allen landen umbe die gifft wissen).45

The accusation that two men were involved in a poisoning plot was very dangerous because it implied a conspiracy among, at least, a few Jews, but the following statement of a wider duplicity was much more damaging. If all the Jews everywhere knew about the conspiracy to poison wells, they were cooperating in the crime and, therefore, shared guilt for it. This made all Jews accessories to the misdeed, and clearly such conspirators could be punished. This was the main excuse to persecute Jewish communities on a wide scale.

Jacob Twinger von Königshoven, a contemporary chronicler who was born in a village near Strasbourg in 1346, wrote about the torture that forced the Jews to confess to supposed crimes in Bern and Zofingen. “Afterwards some Jews in Bern and Zofingen were tortured by the use of thumb screws. They confessed that they had placed poison in many fountains” (dennoch dûmalte [use of thumb screws]...
man etliche Juden zu Berne und zu Zofingen die verhohent das su vergift hettene in vil burnen geton.).  

Once again torture had elicited the response which the city wanted.

In November the town of Zofingen persecuted its Jews, but the exact nature of the pogrom is still obscure. The following month, the mayor and city councilors of the town wrote to Strasbourg further justifying the action they had taken. The civic leaders even sent samples of the poison they claimed that “we have found the poison among the Jews in their houses.” They took the unusual step of testing the substance to make sure that it was lethal. “We also let you know that we have tested the poison on pigs, on dogs and chickens. And therefore they all died because of the poison” (daz wir die gift funden handt hinder unsern juden in iren schlossen. Wir lassen uch och wissen, daz wir die die gift versucht han an hunden, an schwinen und an hunred, also daz si von der gift ellu tot sint). They then described the punishment they had meted out to those “whom our messenger had seen [with the poison].” The civic leaders executed “three Jews with the wheel and a woman [as well]” (daz wir drie juden geredert hant und ein wip, und daz uwer botten gesehen hant). The city council realized that their report seemed to be extraordinary, so the members stated that they stood by their report which was spoken under oath and the written accounts were accurate (disu vorgeschiben ding ellu war sint). This was probably just a turn of phrase, and many official documents of the era use similar statements for authenticity. But the suspicion must remain that in their elaborate claims for accuracy the city council was trying to maintain the truth of a highly questionable account by overstating its authenticity.

The persecution of Jews in Basel demonstrated that important social, political, and economic factors may have been involved in their maltreatment. Also the persecutions in Basel were the earliest for which modern scholarship has evidence of the wider context of the killings. Jews had lived in Basel at least as early as 1213, and the community had grown to include nineteen houses and a synagogue by the middle of the fourteenth century. After attacking their Jewish communities, other cities wrote to Basel “that they should also burn their Jews.” (Das sie ire Juden auch solent verburnen). No doubt the stories of Jews poisoning wells also contributed to the anti-Jewish sentiment in the city, but the immediate background to the persecution related to social and political problems. A number of nobles in the city had recently been banished on the basis of what some believed to have been false testimony given by the Jews. “And by this means were some nobles of Basel banished for a time by the word of the Jew which caused injustice” (Ac quibusdam eciam nobilibus Basileae pro quandam iniura Iudeis illata ad legum tempus bannitis). The collusion between the workers in Basel and the nobles was unusual for this time frame. In most of the cities of the German Empire, the lower classes were contending with their political enemies over who would control the government of the towns. In many cities, this struggle for power often placed the nobles and workers, commonly represented by guilds, in contention with each other. Very likely, this competition was a major factor in the hatred the lower classes had for the Jews. The workers knew the Jewish communities often loaned money to the nobles, and the upper classes often enhanced their wealth and power through the use of these funds. When the lower classes agitated for the destruction or banishment of the Jews from their communities, they often saw these people as allies of the nobles. This was probably the case in Basel as well. The fact that the common people rallied to support the banished nobles probably indicated the complexity of the social structure in Basel. Most likely, some of the men who had some claim to nobility, supported the working classes as was frequently the case in many of the cities. Likely, the artisans and day laborers were trying to come to the aid of the faction of nobles who supported their political aspirations.

Members of the guilds stormed the city hall of Basel and demanded that the banished nobles be allowed to return. The frightened city council immediately complied with the demand and stated that they would no longer allow Jews to reside in the community. These councilors were clearly intimidated, and they additionally swore that no Jews would be allowed to return to the city for 200 years. The city officials ordered the Jewish community exterminated without bothering with a trial or any kind of legal investigation. A house was constructed on an island or a sand bank in the Rhine River for the purpose of burning the Jews in it. On 16 January 1349, all of the Jews in Basel were brought to that location and burned alive. The date was doubtlessly not picked at random, and it clearly had religious aspects because it was a Friday. Clearly, many Christians believed that the Jews were somehow responsible for the death of Jesus, who was executed on a Friday as well. Killing Jews on a Friday meant that the Christians were using these murders in what they considered to be a retaliation for the death of their Lord. In a number of matter-of-fact statements the chronicler, Matthias von Neuenburg, described their deaths. “Therefore all the Jews of Basel, without a legal sentence [being passed] and because of the clamor of the people, were burned on an island in the Rhine River in a new house” (Cremati sunt igitur absque sentencia ad clamorem populi omnes Judei Basilienses in una insula Rheni in domo nova). The recently constructed domicile was probably built for the purpose of killing Jews in it.

The number of Jews killed at this time has never been known with certainty. Many years later in a list of Jewish martyrs, the number of 600 deaths was given, but the source also stated that 130 children were baptized Christians by force and allowed to live. These numbers appear to be inflated because so many people could hardly have lived in only nineteen houses. Also, the issue that many Jewish children were baptized must come into question because of a lack of contemporary sources which indicate this forced conversion took place on a large scale. Writing over two centuries later, Christian Wurtissen stated that “Many small children were removed from the fire and were baptized against the will of their parents” (Viel junger Kinder wurden
Having been written so long after the event described, this source must be considered less reliable than contemporary accounts, but there was some evidence that at least a few Jews were forced to convert at this time. But even the act of forsaking their religion was insufficient to save some of them.

The city council of Basel wrote to Strasbourg on 4 July 1349 describing what happened to some of these converts. The officials in Basel had placed judgement on “some baptized Jews” (etlich getoften juden) and had followed up by arresting all baptized Jews. On 4 July, four of these people were tortured on the wheel and had “openly confessed in court and said, that they had poisoned some of the fountains in our city” (öffentlich vor gerichte verjahen und seitew, das si die brunnen ze unserre stat etlich vergift hettent). Apparently, the poison had also killed some of the citizens, which made the execution of the Jews seem more justified.

Most of the actions against the Jews seemed to have been planned, and there appeared to have been a collusion or conspiracy among many of those who persecuted the Jews of the city. The mob formed from members of the guilds, who accosted the city hall of Basel, was displaying banners meaning that the strategy of marching on the council was thought out in advance. Also, the execution of the Jews was planned because it took time to construct the building that was used to send the victims to their deaths.

The persecution of Jews in Zurich appears to have been connected with the murder of a young boy. The Jews supposedly killed the four-year-old son of a man named Zur Wyden, and the Jews supposedly murdered the child with nails because he was “pushed [hammered] to death” (zu tod gestumpft). The child was buried by his murderers in the Wolfbach (Wolf brook) where a boy, walking on stilts in the water sometime later, found the corpse. Suspicion immediately fell on the Jews, and the accused persons were brought to court. Those believed to be guilty were burned to death, and their supposed accomplices were banished from the city. Soon after, the Jews were accused of poisoning the town’s fountains, and the city council ordered the Jews to be burned. Also on a religious holiday, 21 February 1349, a
Saturday, the Jews were burned in Zurich. “From the birth of God 1349 [years] the Jews of Zurich were burned on St. Matthias’s eve” (Do von Gots geburt 1349 do brand man die Juden Zürich an sant. Mathis abend). A number of Jews fled to the nearby castle of Kiburg, hoping to be protected there, but they were killed anyway. According to one account 330 Jews were burned to death in the fortress.

The examples of the destruction of Jews in Bern, Zofingen, Basel, and Zurich demonstrated that the hysteria to persecute the members of the Jewish communities had been unleashed, and many cities soon followed these and other precedents. As an important scholar of the Black Death in Germany, Robert Hoeninger, wrote rather poetically, “Just like a slap in the water, the waves [of persecution] went out always wider, in this manner the movement in the southwest borders of Germany progressed over the areas of the Empire” (Wie ein Schlag ins Wasser immer weitere Wellenbogen zieht, so pflanzt sich die Bewegung von der Südwestgrenze Deutschlands her über das Reichsgebiet fort).

The destruction of Jews in Strasbourg

Modern researchers have been very fortunate in studying the persecution of Jews in Strasbourg because the event was relatively well documented. Contemporary historians who detailed the destructions of the Jews included Mathias von Neuenburg, Fritsche (Friedrich) Closener, and Jacob Twinger von Königshoven. Mathias von Neuenburg (ca. 1300-ca. 1370) was a cleric who was a lawyer for the Bishop of Basel. He later worked for Berthold von Buchegg, the Bishop of Speyer and Strasbourg, and accompanied his employer mostly when he traveled in Alsace. He wrote his chronicle in Latin. Fritsche (Friedrich) Closener died in 1373, and he was probably an adult when the Jews were attacked. He worked for the city council of Strasbourg. In many respects, he was a careful observer of much he described, and he wrote in German. Jakob Twinger von Königshoven (1345-1420) was a student of Closener. Following his teacher’s lead, he wrote in German, but his work was less reliable that those of Closener. In fact, Twinger von Königshoven’s account of the persecutions of 1348-1349 were probably taken from the history by Closener and some of his observations came word for word from his teacher, but Twinger modified the material and expanded it. In addition, the city of Strasbourg kept many sources, including edicts and correspondence, that relate to the attacks on Jews.

A Jewish community had existed in Strasbourg since the twelfth century, and it was probably the largest in the German Empire. This was demonstrated in 1242 by the fact that the city paid a larger sum of Jewish taxes than any other city in the Empire. In the first half of the fourteenth century, the Jewish community in Strasbourg probably numbered from 250 to 300 people, and the leaders of 41 Jewish families or households were listed in 1334. The Jewish neighborhood had a synagogue and also a grave yard outside of the city. As was the case in other parts of Germany, the occupations of Jews that tended to impact on the Christian community were their jobs in medicine and as money lenders. This was despite the fact that rich Christian money lenders operated in the city as well. These included Heinrich von Müllenheim and Johannes Merswin. The Armleder movement of 1336 to 1339 was centered in the Alsace area near Strasbourg showing that there had recently been a considerable erosion of relations between Jews and Christians.

There were often years between the major outbreaks of violence against the Jews, but the decades before the approach of the Black Death often witnessed sporadic attacks and persecutions. Probably in 1330, the body of an eleven-year-old boy was found under the wheel of a mill in the town of Mutzig in Alsace west of Strasbourg. Reportedly, the side of the corpse was covered with “innumerable wounds” (vulnera infinita). For no stated reason, the people of the town were sure that the Jews had murdered the child, and they demanded revenge. Under torture, several Jews confessed to the crime, and three were tortured on the wheel, which meant that their limbs were smashed while they were tied to a wagon wheel. Then they were killed. “Which, following the clamour of the people against the Jews, the breaking [of the Jews] by the wheel was begun” (... qui post clamorem populorum contra Iudeos sub rota molendini inventus est). Some wealthy Jews, who just happened to be in the area when the boy disappeared, were banished from the city. Still others were arrested, and the remainder fled to the city of Colmar in Alsace. Berthold von Buchegg, Bishop of Strasbourg took advantage of the situation and forced the Jews to pay 6,000 silver marks as a fine, which was a huge sum. But, during the court proceedings, he also forced the Jews to pay an additional 2,000 marks.

In the first decades of the fourteenth century, Strasbourg was one of the largest cities in the German Empire, and it was a very important center of trade and manufacture located on the Rhine River. It was particularly known as a commercial center for wine, and it was also locally significant for cloth manufacture. An important social and political revolution was taking place at this time because the laborers and guild members were competing with the knights and noble factions over the control of the city. The importance of this movement for the Jews was the fact that contention and uncertainty placed them in a potentially dangerous position. The members of the Jewish community could be used as scapegoats for other issues and punished by any faction of the city.

The first risings of the guilds and laborers took place at the turn of the fourteenth century. Clearly in the following decades the competition between factions in the city continued, but the lower classes achieved a major concession when they won twenty-five permanent seats on the city council. Previously, the ruling council had been composed of twenty-four members, all from the upper classes. “And there should also be each year twenty five members of guilds placed on the city council” (Unde sullent...
baptized Jews. These were probably persons whom the some of the records also included indictments against other accounts of a Jewish conspiracy to kill Christians, but the approach of the plague. The reports were similar to the clearly demonstrated the extent of the hysteria surrounding additional proof of the veracity of their reports. All of this different cities. Reportedly, the councilors of Bern had even reached Strasbourg starting in the fall of 1348 when the city 1348 with the intent of protecting Jews were often easily control. The edicts of the Holy Father issued in the fall of immoral activities in regions beyond the Pope's personal effectively removed Church censure as a means of inhibiting learned that this punishment could be tolerated. This Middle Ages which meant that many communities, regions, and persons had felt the bite of official sanction and had learned that this punishment could be tolerated. This effectively removed Church censure as a means of inhibiting immoral activities in regions beyond the Pope’s personal control. The edicts of the Holy Father issued in the fall of 1348 with the intent of protecting Jews were often easily ignored.

The reports that the Jews were poisoning water sources reached Strasbourg starting in the fall of 1348 when the city council received letters that were sent from at least nine different cities. Reportedly, the councilors of Bern had even sent one of its captured Jews to Strasbourg probably as additional proof of the veracity of their reports. All of this clearly demonstrated the extent of the hysteria surrounding the approach of the plague. The reports were similar to the other accounts of a Jewish conspiracy to kill Christians, but some of the records also included indictments against baptized Jews. These were probably persons whom the Christians believed had only converted to avoid execution. “They both [two Jews] admitted in court, that they had carried the poison and had poisoned many fountains ...You should also know that he [a Jew] warned me and Christianity, that no baptized Jew should be trusted” (Si beide verjahent öffentlich vor gerichte, das si die gift getragen hand und etwe mengen brunnen vergift hant ... Ir son och wussen, das er mich hies die kristanheit warnen, daz nieman kein getoffen juden solle getrunen). Despite these reports of the duplicity of Jews in spreading poisons in water sources, still some city councils clearly believed that the accounts were questionable and warned against taking them seriously. For example, Cologne wrote to Strasbourg calling for reason to prevail and restrain to be practiced in the mounting hysteria. It warned that a persecution of Jews could lead to wider disturbances. “If a massacre of Jews were to be allowed in the major cities ... it could lead to the sort of outrages and disturbances which would whip up a popular revolt among the common people. And such revolts have in the past brought cities to misery and desolation.” Cologne further called for restraint. “You should make the decision to protect the Jews in your city, and keep them safe ... until the truth is known ... It therefore behooves you and us and all the major cities to proceed with prudence and caution in this matter.” Unfortunately, a series of events led the citizens of Strasbourg to ignore such advice.

In its report of the investigation concerning the Jews, Kenzingen, a town south of Strasbourg, stated that the Jews of Strasbourg were implicated in poisoning water sources and “befouling” (beschissen) them in various locations. These Jews, no doubt after being tortured, stated that the “Jews, who were in Strasbourg” were clearly involved. “And [they] named names ... Jacob the Rich and Süsekint and Abraham, Jews from Strasbourg” (juden, die zu Strasburg waren, und nanten dise mit namen, ... Jacob den richen und Süsekint und Abraham, juden von Strasburg). No doubt, such accusations helped the people of Strasbourg become increasingly mistrustful of the Jews in their city. But the actual outbreak of the persecution in Strasbourg probably had little to do with accusations of well poisoning. One contemporary historian, Mathias von Neuenburg, stated that the Jews were executed to satisfy the outcry of the people in such haste that their misdeeds were never fully revealed. “However in Strasbourg, to calm the clamor [of the people, the Jews] were placed over the torture wheel and killed so quickly that they were not able to say anything about the great accusations [made against them]” (Autem Argentine, ut sedaretur elamor, sund positi super rotis statimque necati, ne super reos viventes quid dicere possent; ex quo contra maiores maior suspicio est suborta). Another contemporary historian, Fritsche Closener stated that the Jews were executed for the prosecution of other crimes. Some Jews were tortured for confessions “with thumbscrews” (mit dümende), “yet they never confessed that they were guilty of the poisonings” (doch verjohten sü nie, daz sü an der vergift schuldig waren). When the city leaders of Strasbourg initially protected the Jewish community in their city, they maintained that
their Jews were not guilty of the crimes which were ascribed to them in other towns. There was a sense that the powers in Strasbourg were not completely honest when they made this assertion. A council was held in the town of Benfeld in Alsace south of Strasbourg, in January 1349, and it was attended by the bishop of Strasbourg, nobles, barons, and representatives from the various cities in the region. When the emissaries from Strasbourg asserted that they knew of no conspiracy among their Jews, the other representatives questioned them. “However, the Nuncios of Strasbourg were asked: if they knew nothing bad about their Jews, then why is it that their water jars have been removed from their wells?” (Nuncius autem Argentinensisus dicentibus se nil male scire de Iudeis suis, quesitum est ab eis, cur urne de eorum puteis sint sublate?).

Perhaps as a precaution, the city of Strasbourg had taken the buckets away from their wells to discourage citizens from using the water in them. Clearly, the leaders of the community were still fearful that the water sources might be poisoned.

The council at Benfeld apparently met to decide what to do with the Jews of Alsace. Since the entire people clamored against the Jews (Omnis enim populus clamabat contra eos), the bishop of Strasbourg, the lords of Alsace, and the representatives from the imperial cities refused to tolerate the Jews any more (Convenerunt autem episcopus, domini Alsacie et civitates imperii de non habendis Iudeis). The highest powers in the region then gave official sanction for the destruction of the Jews. The most important leaders in Alsace had clearly withdrawn their protection from the Jews, which meant that attacks would likely follow. The main motive for this shift in position probably had little to do with the outcries (clamabat) of the people. The men at the council of Benfeld knew that they would be able to liquidate their debts to the Jewish moneylenders if their creditors were eradicated.

Clearly, the removal of protection of the Jews invited attacks on a large scale, and many places probably took advantage of this vulnerability to strike out at the Jewish communities in their areas. Soon in one area after another, the Jews were burned. In some regions, they were driven out, but the people apprehended or overtook the fleeing Jews and burned them, killed them in other ways, or drowned them in swamps. (Quos vulgus apprehendens hos cremavit, aliquos interfecit, alios in paludibus suffocavit). An example of how some areas responded to the council might be Basel which has already been described. Since the attack on the Jews in Basel took place on 16-17 January 1349 at the same time as the assembly, some of the excuse to destroy the Jewish community there probably came from the council at Benfeld.

The lack of confessions regarding the poisoning of water supplies did little to mollify the fears of the Christians in Strasbourg, and many started agitating for the destruction of the Jews. The threats against the Jewish community were so extensive that the access to the houses on the Jewish street (Juden gasse) was barricaded by the city council probably to keep mobs from attacking them, and armed men were dispatched to protect the Jews. But hysteria had clearly broken out, and many wanted to see the Jews killed. “The common people ... had become so furious with them [the Jews] that they would happily have seen them killed” (das gemeine volke ... uber sü ergimmet worent und sü gerne hetten gesehen töden).

The lower classes were unhappy about the “Letter of Consolation” (Trostbrief) that had been issued in 1334 which obligated the city of Strasbourg to protect its Jews. The workers were equally angry that the leaders of the city continued to protect the Jewish community in 1349. In that year, the mayor of Strasbourg was Peter Swarber, and his assistant mayors were Konrad von Winterhur and Gosse Sturm. Once again, the issue of political power in Strasbourg probably was a factor in the persecution of Jews. The distrust for Swarber might have been a factor in attacking those whom he protected. The mayor was probably accused of abusing his position because the dislike of the citizens was directed at him more than at his assistants. As stated by Mathias von Neuenburg, both the people and the nobles hated Swarber because of his power (exosus propter potenciam suam). These leaders of the city attempted to protect the Jewish community, and the workers in the city aimed some of their hatred against the mayor and his assistants. Many of the people believed that these men had received bribes from the Jews to buy protection. “The three mayors must have taken payment from the Jews” (Die drei meister müßtend han guot von den Juden genomen).

Mathias von Neuenburg observed in his history that the noble factions in Strasbourg wanted to see a return to the city government as it was before the successful grab for power by the lower classes in 1334. The fact that some nobles were involved as leaders in the uprising against the Jews seemed to confirm this opinion. It was also a possibility that the attack on the Jewish community could cause a breech between the city government and the guilds. The protection of the town government for the Jews could have been used as a means of breaking the cooperation between the council and the workers that would create a gap in power that could be filled again by the faction of nobles. These issues were probably factors in the attack on the Jews, but a number of matters were involved which made any simple explanation behind the attacks on the Jews unlikely to be completely convincing.

The people who wanted to destroy the Jews had to overthrow the city government as well, so the mayor and his assistants would no longer protect the Jewish community. On 8 February 1349, the Sunday before St. Valentine’s Day, the bishop of Strasbourg and nobles were again meeting to decide what to do about the Jews. What the meeting had to do with the agitation for the destruction of the Jews on the following day was unclear, but the decision of these same leaders no longer to tolerate the Jews a few weeks earlier probably was also a factor at this time. On 9 February the guilds marched to the cathedral in the center of Strasbourg where the administrative power was located. This was hardly a rash act or a gathering of a mob because the
movement showed signs of careful planning. The citizens “advanced armed [and carrying] their banners” (zogetent geweefent mit ieren bannern).\(^{85}\) They apparently deployed in much the same way as when the city militia was called out for a campaign. At those times, the men also came armed and were marching behind their guild and city banners. Clearly, these men threatened war or military action unless their demands were met.

The principal sources on the action of that day, Neuenburg and Closener present different scenarios of what happened. According to Neuenburg, the agitation was started by the butchers (carnifex in Medieval Latin) of the city. The men of the butcher’s guild probably believed that the Jews were competing unfairly against them and hurting their business. Apparently, the Jewish butchers only used the part of their slaughtered animals, which was ritually acceptable or kosher, for their use. They sold the remainder of the animal, which included the sinew in the thigh near the hip joint and any fat, at a low price.\(^{86}\) The butchers resented what they considered to be unfair price cutting, and they believed the Jews were undercutting their business. This may explain why the butchers were prominent in this protest against the Jews. The guild members came to Peter Swarber, mayor of the city, on 9 February and demanded some of the money supposedly given to him by the Jews probably as bribes to protect them. When the mayor, who clearly felt threatened, retreated to his house, the people in the street called out “to arms” (ad arma). Then the workers marched to the main church with their banners, and the nobles and their friends armed themselves as well.\(^{87}\)

Both Mathias von Neuenburg and Closener agreed that the workers and guild members were trying to remove Peter Swarber and his assistant mayors from office. The armed men protested that they no longer wanted to have these men as mayors because their power was too great, and they wanted to replace the three-man council on which these men sat. The rabble also demanded that these leaders in those positions no longer serve for life, meaning that the mayor would be elected yearly and his four assistants would each be elected for one fourth of a year one after the other.\(^{88}\) The mayors met with the leaders of the guilds and nobles in a drinking establishment to see if some kind of resolution to the situation could be achieved. Peter Swarbar asked the logical question regarding what he had done wrong. A knight, “the great” Hans Marx (der grosse Hans Marx), answered him stating that the mayor had secretly revoked the rights that had been handed down to the workers. (Ir besendet ... die antwerke heimliche, mit den widerrueffent ir was men vormals ist ... gemeinlich überkumen).\(^{89}\)

Peter Swarber had made no adequate reply when his assistant, Gosse Sturm admitted that he and the other assistant mayor, Conrad von Winterthur, were the guilty party. Perhaps, Sturm realized that their fate was already sealed, and they were better off bowing to the inevitable rather than by contesting the accusations. The guilds and the nobles deposed all three men from their positions, and the mayors gave them the seals of the city, which were their symbols of authority. The workers allowed these men to go home, but the forces remained on the guard at the cathedral all night. Some of them later went to Swarber’s house and to arrest or otherwise accost him, but they were unable to apprehend him. The chronicler, Closener, speculated that if they had caught him only bad would have come of the affair because the man was much hated. (Ubel ergangen, wande er was sere verhasset).\(^{90}\)

Probably in fear of his life, Peter Swarber escaped from the city. On the next Friday, all of his wealth, including his money, was seized, divided up, and handed out to various people. Apparently, half of his wealth was retained by the new leaders of the city, and the remainder was given to the former mayor’s sons. The removal from office was more difficult for Swarber than for his assistant mayors. He never again served in another city office, and he probably died soon after leaving office, but the date of his death was uncertain. By contrast, his assistants, including Gosse Sturm, later held important civic offices.\(^{91}\)

On Tuesday 10 February 1349, the day after the deposition of the mayors, new leadership was chosen for the city. The new mayor, who was selected to serve for an entire year, was Johann Berscholt, a butcher by occupation. This meant that his guild had achieved much because of the overthrow of the former government.\(^{92}\) The butchers were prominent in starting the uprising, and they had successfully gained greater authority by their actions. But power was largely meaningless unless used, and the new leaders of the community wielded it immediately against the Jews. In fact, the destruction of the Jewish community took place very soon after the replacement of the government probably meaning that the overthrow of the government was planned with the destruction of the Jews in mind. Within days of their triumph over the former government, the new leaders moved against the Jews because those who protected them had been removed from power.

On Wednesday and Thursday 11 and 12 February the citizens swore oaths to support the new council. Shortly thereafter, on Friday, 13 February, the Jews were arrested, and on Saturday, 14 February, which was St. Valentine’s Day, they were burned. (An deme fritage ving man die Juden, an dem samestage brante man die Juden).\(^{93}\) There was no contemporary evidence that a trial or any kind of formal procedure took place before the Jews were condemned to death. In 1350, the city stated that the Jews had been executed after a correct judgement (mit rehten gerichte und verurteilet), but the evidence was of doubtful credibility. In all likelihood, the statement that the Jews were given the benefit of some kind of legal proceedings was fabricated later to cover up the fact that the Jews were condemned with no evidence having been presented to indicate any malfeasance by them.\(^{94}\) In this case, no formality was necessary to convince the people of the community relating to some kind of guilt of the members of the Jewish community. No doubt, there were a number of suppositions that were fed by prejudice and hatred which led to the summary executions. By the broad consensus of the
people in the city, the Jews were responsible of something meriting death, though no one knew specifically what that was. Apparently, simply being Jewish was proof enough.

As Mathias von Neuenburg described, on 14 February the Jews were brought to the Jewish cemetery where a wooden house had been constructed in which to burn them. (ad eorum cimiterium in domum combustioni paratam). On the way, the common people or rabble (per vulgum) stripped them of all their clothing in the search for money, and reportedly many coins were found. (multa pecunia est reperta). The scene has many disturbing similarities with the Nazi Holocaust centuries later when Jews were also robbed, then marched naked to their deaths. A few people were saved from the flames when they chose to become Christians and were baptized into that faith. This incident was curious in at least one respect. If the Jews were being executed for any crimes committed by them, then accepting Christianity would not absolve them from their misconduct. Perhaps, joining Christianity was seen as a step towards repentance because the Jews could then accept the saving grace of Jesus. However, if their real crime had nothing to do with misconduct and was simply the fact they had a different religion, then the baptism of Jews would potentially cleanse them of this sin. Most likely, their only real fault was the fact that they were Jews. Some attractive women were plucked out of the group, as were many children, and they were all baptized against their will and saved from being executed at that time. (ab invitis sunt baptizati). “All the rest were burned alive, and the many, who jumped out of the flames, were [also] killed” (Omnes alii sunt cremati, multique mosilientes de igne sunt interfecti). A later source, Heinrich Truchsessen von Diessenhoven, stated that the execution of the Jews took six days starting with the slaughter on 14 February. No doubt if the number of victims was large, a longer time frame than one day might have been necessary in the slaughter on such a big scale.

The contemporary chroniclers gave little indication of how the Jews conducted themselves on the way to execution in Strasbourg, but there was a description of how they acted when they were brought to the house in which they were to be burned at the town of Constance on 3 March. In defiance of their murderers, “some [of Jews] were dancing, others were singing psalms, and some were crying when they went to the flames” (quorum pars tripudiendo, altera psallendo, tercia lacrimando ad ignem processerant). In other locations, the Jews burned their own houses and all their property rather than let all their wealth fall into the hands of the people who persecuted them.

The scene of the murders at Strasbourg might have been ugly indeed. The Jews were brought to the place of...
execution, and may have been attacked by mobs who tore their clothes off them in an attempt to rob and humiliate them further. Apparently, a few, in a desperate attempt to save themselves from a terrible death, gave up their faith and became baptized. The lurid stares of some of the Christian men probably fell on the attractive, naked Jewish women, and some of them were retrieved from the execution. But it may be impossible to tell if the motive was compassion or a desire to abuse the women in other ways. Perhaps the unwillingness of some women to be saved from the flames may not only have demonstrated the strength they had in their faith, but it also could have reflected their desire to escape the hands of lecherous men. However, there was information on what happened to one of these women. In an undated letter by Hanes Jtel Rosheim to Hannes Ecken, the author stated that a baptized Jewish woman was taken out of the fire by an elderly man from Trubel (or named zu dem Trubel) (der alte Zuodem Trúbel) and sent to a cloister in the Rhine River Valley where he supported her financially. (Ein gedöiffete judin ... unde nam sú der alte Zuodem Trúbel us dem füre und det sú gen Rindal in daz kloster und also versorgete er sú). 99 Apparently, few other Jews were treated with such compassion.

Burning a person alive may be considered among the most painful of all deaths, and no doubt, many Jews would have desperately tried to avoid such horrible suffering. These people were clearly given little mercy when they attempted to escape, and were murdered. But the contemporary historians made no mention of how these people were actually killed. It was entirely possible that this means of death, from stabbing to beheading, may have been more merciful than being consumed in the flames.

The contemporary historian, Closener, described the scene similarly, including the saving of “many small children from the flames” (vil junger kinde von dem fur genomen). But this author stated that it was against the will of the parents that the children were baptized. (Uber irre müter und irre vetter wille). Closener also gave the number of executed as 2,000 (wol uffe zwei tusent alse man ahtete). Königshofen agreed with that number (der worent uf zwei tusent). 100 This total was probably high because the population of the Jews in Strasbourg was likely only 250 to

Fig. 8 - Burning of Jews. From Hartmann Schedel’s Liber Chronicaram (1493)
following decades, a few Jews were allowed to return to leave, or they simply had to flee for their lives. In the and cities, and the uncounted victims probably numbered

sünüt gebrant worden). 104 (that proved to be the real poison that got them condemned of the Jews and divided it between the mayor, city leaders, and the guilds. Money went to the mayor “Just as if it went to the mayor “Just as if it belonged to him” (als ob er dot were). When he described the division of Jewish property, Closener added laconically that it was the Jewish wealth and the indebtedness to them that proved to be the real poison that got them condemned (daz was ouch die vergift die die Juden dote). 101 Finally over time, all of the baptized Jews were burned because they had also been forced to confess their supposed guilt. (Unde successive omnes quasi baptizati Iudei sunt cremati, quia fato bantur eos omnes culpabiles). 102

Every debt owed to the Jews was immediately made invalid, and all records and letters relating to such bills were seized. The city officials also took the money and property of the Jews and divided it between the mayor, city leaders, and the guilds. Money went to the mayor “Just as if it belonged to him” (als ob er dot were). When he described the division of Jewish property, Closener added laconically that it was the Jewish wealth and the indebtedness to them that proved to be the real poison that got them condemned (daz was ouch die vergift die die Juden dote). 101 Königshofen presented a more elaborate opinion on the persecution of the Jews. The destruction of the Jewish community was little more than an attempt to seize their property and invalidate debts. “Money was also the reason why the Jews were killed” (das gelt was ouch die sache davon die Juden gedöted wurdent). He stated directly: “If they had been poor, and if the nobles had not owed them debts, then they would not have been burned” (wan werent süt arm gewesen und weren in die landesherrn nüt schuldig gewesen, so weren süt nüt gebrant worden). 104

The Jews were attacked in hundreds of German towns and cities, and the uncounted victims probably numbered well into the thousands. The survivors were often forced to leave, or they simply had to flee for their lives. In the following decades, a few Jews were allowed to return to some of these communities, but their numbers were not as large as before. In fact, only several significant Jewish centers existed in Germany later in the fourteenth century. In the case of Basel, Jews were only allowed to return after the devastating earthquake of 1356 because the city needed the loans and additional funding to rebuild their city. Jews again lived in Basel starting in 1361, but they only remained until 1397 when the accusations of well poisonings were renewed. The Jews again fled and city decrees stated they may not return. This ended the existence of Jews in Basel for the next four centuries. 105 Many Jewish refugees fled to lands in the east that were willing to give them protection and allow them to stay. In many areas that were either relatively underpopulated or in need of an economic boost, the Jews found new homes. The Duke Albrecht von Österreich accepted Jews on his lands. Also, the March of Brandenburg in eastern Germany welcomed Jews, guaranteeing them trade privileges and legal protection. Additionally, Poland allowed many Jews to settle there. 106

The Flagellants

One of the cultural phenomena that was clearly associated with the coming of the Black Death was the cult of the Flagellants. These fanatics believed that the cause of the plague was God’s displeasure with his people probably because of disobedience or some sins that had not been cleansed from the population. Rather than view the problem of rebellion against the will of deity as a personal matter subject to personal penance, the Flagellants believed that they could turn away the wrath of the Lord by torturing themselves in public. Called either “Brotherhood of the Flagellants” or “Brethren of the Cross” by contemporaries, groups of these desperate people soon went from region to region and town to town putting on displays of self torment. Even though the pestilence clearly threatened all areas of Europe, the German Empire seemed to be the most susceptible to this form of fanaticism. As explained by an eminent historian of the Black Death, “It was in Germany that the Flagellant movement really took root.” 107

The Flagellants usually came in groups of two or three hundred, but they often numbered in the thousands. The townspeople often turned out in large numbers when the Flagellants approached. They frequently went to the churches, town squares, and market places to perform their self torment. Often, the members of the group would lay on the ground where they were beaten by one of their leaders. They would then stand up, stripped to the waist, and whip themselves with four leather straps on which metal studs had been attached. Then, in a rhythmic cadence, they struck and lacerated themselves on their chests and backs leaving much blood. The orgy of torment often continued until one of the sufferers died. 108 Even though the members of the movement came to Basel after the murder of the Jews but before the arrival of the Black Death, which was the case almost everywhere in the Empire, but the movement clearly demonstrated that many Germans had taken fanatical and extreme measures to turn away God’s wrath. It is also

FEFFHS Journal Volume XIII
noteworthy that the Flagellants were largely active in the exact same places where the Jews were persecuted. The persecution of Jews may well be another example of these kinds of radical activities that were irrational and immoral.

Many of the dates of the killing of the Jews in Germany are uncertain, and modern scholarship often cannot be sure on exactly which day they took place. But enough dates are known which demonstrate a certain pattern when it came to burning Jews. Often the members of the Jewish community were killed in association with important Christian holidays and religious observances. For example, persecutions took place on dates commemorating St. Nicholas; the Conception of Mary, the Holy Virgin; the feast of St. John, the Apostle; St Bartholomew’s day; the feast of St. Matthew; and the feast of the Circumcision of the Lord. Also, many cities murdered their Jews in association with Lent including the first Sunday associated with that commemoration and the night of Shrove Tuesday. In addition, many communities killed their Jews on Sundays or Friday evenings. The persecutions of Jews on Fridays may have taken place for two reasons. Clearly, this was the day on which Jesus was executed, but also, Friday evening was the begging of the Jewish Sabbath. Clearly the executions which took place on Saturday also corresponded with the Jewish holy day.

The persecution of Jews and the Black Death

Mathias von Neuenburg summed up the reasons why he thought the Jews had been persecuted. “Because [the Jews] had killed many Christians they realized the impossibility of escaping [their fate]” (et occisis multis Christianis per eos videntes se non posse evadere). Despite Neuenburg’s assertion that the Jews were responsible for killing many Christians, there was little evidence to support this claim. Regardless of the numerous accusations of well poisoning made against the Jews, there were few accounts of Christians dying from the effects of the toxins. Even though poisons were supposedly placed in various water sources, there was little evidence that these substances did much harm. Clearly, the outbreak of the plague swept away many more people than had been attributed to the poison in the wells.

No doubt, conspiracy to commit a crime was a serious matter, but there is little evidence that Jews had murdered Christians in Germany. Apparently, many people believed at this time that deaths associated with the plague elsewhere was sufficient evidence to condemn Jews everywhere in some kind of grand conspiracy. This problem was confounded by the fact that no one knew what the approaching pestilence was, and contamination of the air, food, or water often appeared to be as logical an explanation as anything else. In fear of their lives, the Christians desperately tried to find any probable or possible cause for the contagion and deal with it as rapidly as feasible.

Even though contemporary chroniclers had a tendency to blame the persecution of Jews on the outbreak of the plague, careful analysis of the dates of arrival of the pestilence and the killing of Jews has revealed that the Jews were destroyed often many months before the appearance of the Black Death. In virtually every case in Germany, the Jews were destroyed before the plague took its toll. Since the Jews were persecuted before the arrival of the Black Death, scholars have argued that there was no cause and effect relationship between the pestilence and the pogroms. Steven Rowan has pointed out that the persecutions of Jews in 1348-1349 did not fit “the classic ‘scapegoat’ type” of attacks that were in response to a specific disaster or misfortune because the maltreatment took place before the arrival of the plague. He added “that the specific form the violence took was shaped by social and political conditions which had long been in the making.”

More recently, the German author, Iris Ritzmann, has argued that the maltreatment of the Jews had nothing to do with the plague, and the murders of those people can best be understood as a continuation of abuse starting decades earlier. Ritzmann also stated that the destruction of the Jews was a planned act by city councils and had nothing to do with the hysteria of the people, excesses demonstrated by the Flagellants, or the approach of the Black Death.

The views that the attacks on the Jews in 1348 and 1349 were either caused by the fear of the pestilence or had completely different origins are too simplistic. There were numerous factors involved in the persecution of the Jews including economic competition, cultural jealousies, religious animosities, the precedence set by earlier attacks, and a vicious anti-Jewish attitude held by many. While the...
outbreak of the Rindfleisch and Armleder persecutions apparently were not started by the fear of an approaching calamity, the factor of the advancing plague should be considered as a major motivator in the attacks starting in 1348. Even though the pestilence had not yet arrived in the cities that tormented Jews, those communities knew of the approach of the disaster and took what they thought were appropriate responses to the potential catastrophe. The fear of the Black Death, which was clearly on its way, reinvigorated old hatreds, resurrected old animosities, and reinforced old prejudices to the point that the cities struck out at the object of these numerous biases, the Jews. No doubt, many factors were involved in the destruction of the Jewish communities, but, clearly, the advance of the plague was the factor which instigated the most vicious persecution of Jews in Germany during the Middle Ages.

The fact that the destruction of Jews in many cities at the approach of the Black Death had a number of causes was demonstrated by the example of Strasbourg. Important social, economic, and political factors were involved, as well as long-standing religious prejudices and ethnic bigotry. Additionally, the legal system failed in a dramatic fashion to protect the weak and innocent because it was severely biased and used improper methods in examining witnesses. In fact, the courts were so inept as to distort rather than to find the truth, and many people were found guilty of the most absurd accusations. For example, the use of judicial torture was so irresponsible that no evidence gained by that means was reliable, and many people who were tortured would say anything to get their tormenters to stop.

At critical junctures, the powers that traditionally defended Jews proved to be too weak, inept, or immoral to stop what was happening. The Church, which provided much of Europe with its moral compass, proved to be inadequate to the task of defending innocent people. While few if any priests were involved in the attacks on Jews in Strasbourg, few actively defended them. Even when Clement VI tried to stop persecutions against Jews, he started his papal encyclical by stating that he still held them and their religion in revulsion. The state was equally unsuccessful in defending Jews. Mobs and guild members soon removed those city councils who tried to protect the Jewish communities, and the Emperor proved to be ineffective in defending them. With all their traditional protection removed and with the hysteria brought on by the advancing Black Death, the Jews fell victim to a severe persecution not matched in intensity in the Middle Ages.

Endnotes

7. Ludwig Rosenthal, How was it Possible? The History of the Persecution of Jews in Germany from the Earliest Times to 1933 as Forerunner of Hitler’s “Final Solution” to the Jewish Problem, Berkley, California: Judah L. Magnes Memorial Museum, 1971, 5.
13. English works refer to this character’s name as Rindfleisch, while Medieval and modern German sources spell his name Rintfleisch.
27. Benezeit as cited in Horrox, Black Death, 223.
32. The castle was made famous by Lord Byron in his poem The Prisoner of Chillon.
33. Horrox, 211.
38. Tileman Elhen von Wolffhagen, Limburger Chronik Jena: Diederich, 1922, 24-5.
42. Diessenhofen as in Graus, op. cit. 161. Translation by the author.
43. 23 Dec. 1348. Urkundenbuch der Stadt Strassburg, 5: 166. Translation by the author.
46. Jacob Twinger von Königshoven, op. cit., 293.
48. Jacob Twinger von Königshoven, op. cit., 293.
49. Mathias von Neubenburg, Die Chronik, 265.
50. Graus, Judenmorde, 168.
52. Matthias von Neuenburg, op. cit., 266.
53. Ginsburger, “Juden in Basel,” Basler Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Altertumskunde, 8 (1909): 344. The author was “Rabbiner Mose” and the source is found in Salfeld’s Martyrologium Berlin: op, 1898, 245.
54. Christina Wurstisen, Basler chronick ... Basel: Sebastian Henricperti, [1580], 170.
56. Graus, Judenmorde, 169-70.
60. Strassburg und die Judenverfolgung 1348/9, 24, 75-6, 84-5, 100. See also Urkundenbuch der Stadt Strassburg, 5: 1-225.
61. A list of these heads of households are found in “Die Strassburger Judengemeinde verpflichtet sich auf bestimmte Forderungen des Rats, die Geldleihe betreffend.” 26 Oct. 1334, Urkundenbuch der Stadt Strassburg, 5: 45. See also Strassburg und die Judenverfolgung, 8.
62. Strassburg und die Judenverfolgung 1348/9, 9-11.
73. Mathias von Neuenburg, 267.
74. Closener, 127.
75. Mathias von Neuenburg, 265.
77. Graus, 180.
78. Mathias von Neuenburg, 266.
79. Closener, 127. See also Mathias von Neuenburg, 267-8 and the German translation of Neuenburg by Grandaur, 175.
82. Closener, 127-8.
83. Mathias von Neuenburg, 266-7 and Grandaur’s translation 174. Neuenburg referred to the city government as it was established seventeen years (*XVII annis*) before 1349. He was probably mistaken because the government had changed in 1334 not 1332.
85. Closener, 128.
87. Mathias von Neuenburg, 267. See also the German translation by Grandaur, 175-6.
88. Closener, 128.
90. Closener, 129.
91. *Strassburg und die Judenverfolgung 1348/9*, 29, 113-4. See also Closener, 126; Mathias von Neuenburg, 267.
92. Twinger von Königshoven, 2: 763; Closener, 130; and Neuenburg, 267-8.
93. Closener, 130.
95. Mathias von Neuenburg, 268. See also Closener, 130.
96. Mathias von Neuenburg, 268, note 5. See also *Strassburg und die Judenverfolgung 1348/9*, 28, note 50.
98. Mathias von Neuenburg, 269.
99. Hanes Jtel Rosheim as cited in Graus, 185, note 96.
100. Closener, 130 and Königshofen, 763.
103. Closener, 130.
106. Hoeniger, 9-11 and Steinberg, 134.
111. Mathias von Neuenburg, 269.
112. Hoeniger, 39 and Graus, 166.

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