

Economics of History Activity

Medieval Europe

Lesson 5 *The Late Middle Ages*

Famine and Plague

Background Information

The Black Death was a plague that reached Europe in 1347. Within four years, the disease had killed millions of people. England lost nearly half its population, including a third of London's residents. Other areas of Europe lost up to one-third of their populations. The plague affected every level of population. Kings, queens, and church officials as well as peasants died. The population of Europe would not reach pre-plague levels for nearly a century.

What effect did the Black Death have on the economy of Europe? Crusades stopped being fought for a short time because there were not enough healthy soldiers. Yet the Hundred Years' Wars between France and England continued. The economic effect was mostly felt by people living and working on manors and in towns.



After the plague, there were not enough people to work on the farms. Nobles now had to pay peasants. Many peasants could then buy their freedom from service. As a result, nobles found themselves growing poorer. Many gave up their lands or leased them to farmers. Feudalism began to break down.

In villages, towns, and cities, many businesses were ruined by the plague. Without customers to buy goods many businesses closed. Specialized workers, like millers, were also now scarce. Without them, food could not be harvested and stored. Without the tools for farming and trade, people had trouble making money.

For workers who survived, there were benefits to the plague. Wages went up, and the prices of food and other goods went down. The shift of wealth to the working people led to the breakdown of feudalism. The class system that had been in place for centuries began to change.

Economics of History Activity *Cont.*



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Directions Answer the following questions.

1. Explaining Why did many nobles become less wealthy after the plague?

2. Comparing and Contrasting What effect did the plague have on farm workers? What effect did it have on business owners in villages and towns?

3. Describing How did most workers' lives improve after the plague?

Critical Thinking

4. Making Generalizations In your own words, tell how the economic changes in Europe after the plague affected medieval society.

5. Predicting How do you think the decline of the feudal system would affect European society?
