

Western University  
Department of History  
2014-2015

**History 2186B**  
**Zombie Apocalypse: Panic and Paranoia from the Black  
Death to Y2K**

\*\*\* Draft syllabus \*\*\*

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Monday 10:30 - 12:30 AM

What terrifies you? Financial ruin? Global pandemic? Alien invasion? Zombie apocalypse? Do you feel more frightened when people around you are frightened?

We like to think that the more we understand about the world, the less we have to fear. But mass panic is just as prevalent today as it has been at any time in human history. The object of this course is to explore episodes of mass panic over the last thousand years. Why do concern and anxiety transform into panic and hysteria in some contexts but not in others? What do panics reveal about the societies in which they occur? Panics have provided the context to justify attacks on immigrants, women, the disabled, minorities, and any other group that could be construed as a threat. Panic, as we will see in this course, has always been about much more than just panic.

**Themes:**

Long-term preconditions – Are there underlying forces that need to be in place for mass panic to occur?

Short-term triggers – Is there a single event that sets it off?

How panic is spread – Is panic different in our modern mass-media age than it was in pre-literate societies?

Impacts of panic – Who gets hurt? Who profits?

Panic in popular culture – Why are we so fascinated by books and films involving mass panic?

**Assignments:**

In-class primary source assessment	15%
Mid-term examination	35%
Final examination	50%

**Readings:**

There are no textbooks to purchase for this course. Readings are available on the course website. You should keep up with the readings on a weekly basis, as they will be referred to in lecture. You will be responsible for **ALL** of the course readings for the mid-term and final examinations.

**Learning outcomes:**

By the end of this course, students should:

- understand the impact of fear on human society through history
- appreciate how improvements in communications have affected the spread of panic in different societies
- be aware of the challenges in seeking to make sense of fundamentally irrational human behavior
- be familiar with a variety of notable examples of mass hysteria in different societies
- understand how scholars in various disciplines interpret panic in an historical context

**Lectures:****5 January - Introduction**

Panic in ancient societies

**“You don’t look so good ...” – Threats to the Body****12 January**

Disease panics in the old world: the Black Death, the Plague, cholera, smallpox

Readings:

Philip Alcabes, *Dread: How Fear and Fantasy Have Fueled Epidemics from the Black Death to Avian Flu* (2009): ch. 2 “Plague: Birth of the Model Epidemic”; ch. 3 “Cholera, Poverty, and the Politicized Epidemic”

## **19 January**

Disease panics in the modern world: Mad Cow, SARS, and avian flu

Reading:

Samuel K. Cohn, "Pandemics: Waves of Diseases, Waves of Hate, from the Plague of Athens to AIDS," *Historical Research* 85/230 (November 2012): 535-55

## **"There's a run on the bank!!!" – Threats to the Home**

### **26 January**

Financial panics from the Tulip Mania to the Global Meltdown

Readings:

Peter M. Garber, *Famous First Bubbles: The Fundamentals of Early Manias* (2000): pt II "The Tulipmania Legend"

Charles P. Kindleberger and Robert Z. Aliber, *Manias, Panics, and Crashes: A History of Financial Crises* (2011), ch 2, "The Anatomy of a Typical Crisis"

### **2 February**

\*\* in-class primary source assessment

## **The Enemy Among Us – Threats to the Community**

### **9 February**

Revolutionaries and anarchists: from the Fifth Monarchists and the Great Fear to the Indian Mutiny

Reading:

Georges Lefebvre, *The Great Fear of 1789: Rural Panic in Revolutionary France* (1932): part III "The Great Fear"

### **16 February - no class - reading week**

### **23 February**

Communists and terrorists: Red Scares to the National Terrorism Advisory System

Readings:

Don E. Carleton, *Red Scare!: Right-wing Hysteria, Fifties Fanaticism, and their Legacy in Texas* (1985): ch 6 "The Red Scare and the Schools"

Cyndy Hendershot, *Anti-Communism and Popular Culture in Mid-Century America* (2003): ch 1 "Paranoiac Discourse and Anti-Communism"

## **“We shall fight on the beaches” – Threats to the Nation**

### **2 March**

Invasion scares from Napoleon to Hitler

Readings:

Peter Lloyd, *The French Are Coming!: The Invasion Scare of 1803-5* (1991): ch 5  
“Bonaparte may pass this way”

Martin Kitchen, “The German Invasion of Canada in the First World War,”  
*International History Review* 7/2 (1985): 245-60

### **9 March**

\*\* mid-term examination

## **“Double, Double, toil and trouble” – Threats from Other Realms**

### **16 March**

Witches, dancing mania, and demonic possession

Readings:

H.C. Erik Midelfort, “Witch Craze?: Beyond the Legends of Panic,” *Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft* 6/1 (summer 2011): 11-33

Gary K. Waite, *Eradicating the Devil’s Minions: Anabaptists and Witches in Reformation Europe, 1525-1600* (2007), ch 5, “The Devil’s Sabbat: Nocturnal Anabaptist Meetings, Hailstorms, and Witchcraft in Southern Germany”

### **23 March**

Space invaders, Martian attacks and alien abduction

Readings:

Paul Heyer, “America Under Attack I: A Reassessment of Orson Welles’ 1938 *War of the Worlds* Broadcast,” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 28/2 (2003): 149-65.

Elaine Showalter, *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture* (1997):  
ch 13 “Alien Abduction”

## **“It’s the end of the world as we know it” – Threats to Existence**

### **30 March**

Armageddons and apocalypses: Planetary alignments, Doomsday cults, and the End of Days

Readings:

Richard Landes, "What Happens When Jesus Doesn't Come?: Jewish and Christian Relations in Apocalyptic Time," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 14/1 (March 2002): 241-74

Raymond L. Sickinger, "Apocalypse Now: Magic and the Millennium," *Journal of Popular Culture* 34/4 (spring 2001): 183-94

## **Conclusion**

**6 April**

Zombies, Vampires, and Werewolves: Towards a Typology of Panic