

Western University
Department of History
2017-2018

History 2186B
Zombie Apocalypse: Panic and Paranoia
in Human History

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Thursday 2:30 – 4:30
Natural Science 1

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 reason to fear – and so the less we fear. But mass panic is just as prevalent today as it has ever been. The object of this course is to explore episodes of mass panic throughout human history. 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? Why have panics provided the justification for attacks on immigrants, women, the disabled, minorities, and any other group that could be construed as a threat? Panic, as we will see, has always been about much more than just panic.

The course will consider a number of themes in the context of different panics through history:
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 mass panic?

Assignments:

In-class primary source assessment	20%
Mid-term examination	30%
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.

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Learning outcomes:

By the end of this course, students should:

- understand the impact of fear on human society through history
- be able to see trends in responses to events over time and space
- appreciate how changes in communications over time have affected the spread of panic
- be aware of the challenges that emerge as we try to make rational sense of fundamentally irrational human behaviours
- 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:

11 January - Introduction

Why do zombies scare us so much?

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

18 January

Disease panics in the old world: the plague, cholera, and smallpox

Reading:

John Kelly, *The Great Mortality: An Intimate History of the Black Death, the Most Devastating Plague of All Time* (2005), chapters 4 & 5

25 January

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

Reading:

Thomas Abraham, *Twenty-First Century Plague: The Story of SARS* (2004), chapters 3 & 4

“There’s a run on the bank!!!” – Threats to the Home

1 February

Financial panics: from the Tulip Mania to the Global Meltdown

Reading:

Maury Klein, *Rainbow’s End: The Crash of 1929* (2001), chapters 10 & 11

8 February

** in-class primary source assessment

The Enemy among Us – Threats to the Community

15 February

Revolutionaries and rebels: from the Great Fear to the Indian Uprising

Reading:

Kim A. Wagner, *The Great Fear of 1857: Rumours, Conspiracies and the Making of the Indian Uprising* (2010), chapters 8, 9 & 10

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22 February - no class - Reading Week

1 March

Communists and terrorists: from Red Scares to the War on Terror

Reading:

Michael Barson and Steven Heller, *Red Scared!: The Commie Menace in Propaganda and Popular Culture* (2001), chapters 5 & 6

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

8 March

Invasion scares: from the Spanish Armada to Adolf Hitler

Reading:

I.F. Clarke, “Before and After *The Battle of Dorking*”, *Science Fiction Studies* 24/1 (March 1997): 33-46

15 March

** mid-term examination

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

22 March

Witches, dancing mania, and demonic possession

Reading:

Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbours: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft* (1996), chapter 5

29 March

Space invaders, Martian attacks and alien abduction

Reading:

You should listen to the original broadcast of Orson Welles’ *War of the Worlds*, available on-line – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xs0K4ApWl4g>

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

5 April

Armageddons and apocalypses: nuclear annihilation, Doomsday cults, and the End of Days

Reading:

Joanna Bourke, *Fear: A Cultural History* (2005), chapter 9