Taxation, Warfare, Social Unrest and Economic Decline in Fourteenth Century England

Dr. Abdeldjebar BOUKHAKHAL

Tahri Mohamed University
Bechar, Algeria

boukhalkhal.abdeldjebar@univ- bechar.dz

Received: 01/12/2020 *Accepted*: 03/30/2021

Abstract:
The aim of the present article is to explore the relationship between taxation, warfare, social unrest and economic decline in fourteenth century England. The main causes behind such tumultuous period, such as labour shortage caused by the Great Famine, the ensuing Black Death and the landowners' refusal to pay higher wages, which was the natural outcome of the increase in demand for labour. It also describes in detail the strategies adopted by the villeins and free labourers to counter the lords' attempts to keep the pre-plague wages. The strained relationship between the lords and the peasants culminated in the revolt of 1381 whose colossal character supports the idea of a class-conscious movement against the tyranny of the upper class.
***Key Words*:** Economic decline, England, Taxation, Wages, Revolt.

JEL Classification : N13, H22

* Corresponding author: Abdeldjebar Boukhakhal (*boukhalkhal.abdeldjebar@univ- bechar.dz*)

Introduction

The interminable struggle between the ruler and the ruled in Late Medieval England was interrupted by a phenomenon known as the Black Death. The coming of the plague to the Island was a landmark for a new and even fiercer strife between the two classes. When this plague came, it found the population weakened by famine, and burdened with never-ending war taxation. What were the causes and effects of the catastrophes that stroke England? How did they contribute in turning English society from one of servitude to one of revolt?

I. The Great Famine, 1315–1317

In the mid-1310s, the climate saw extreme disturbances, and it rained heavily and constantly for much of the summer of 1314 and most of 1315 and 1316. This torrential rain caused floods, the result of which crops rotted and livestock drowned in the wet fields. The result was the Great Famine, which is estimated to have killed at least five per cent of the population of England (Bruce, 2010).

The *Sempringham Annals* say that there were great floods of water throughout England, and the wheat and hay were destroyed. There was great

famine and great shortage of wheat throughout the land. The price of a quarter of wheat rose to twenty-four shillings and more, a quarter of barley cost sixteen shillings and a quarter of oats cost twenty shillings, many times the usual price. The available bread could not appease the hunger of the English people. Soaked from the unending rain, grain contained far less nutrients than ordinary one (Childs, 2013).

In March and April 1315, King Edward II attempted to alleviate his subjects' misery by ordering the regulation of the price of basic foodstuffs. According to the *Anonimalle*, King Edward passed these regulations without the approval of the magnates who were apparently indifferent to the lower classes' grievances if not opposed to any kind of concession given to them. An opposed version in the *Vita* [198] claims that it was the earls and barons who developed the regulations, 'looking to the welfare of the state' (Maddicott, December 2005). These attempts resulted in traders refusing to sell the few goods they had at a low price (Childs, 2013).

The *St Albans Chronicler* states that when King Edward visited St Albans in 1315, he had difficulties even providing food for his household. Still, the King was in a better situation than the majority of his subjects: in Northumbria, already weakened and despoiled by Scottish raids, animals like dogs and horses were eaten. Its warden, Maurice Berkeley, sent letters to King stating that 'no town was ever in such distress', that the garrisons were deserted, dead of hunger or reduced to eating horses, and that if the latter did not send help straightaway, 'the town will be lost by famine (Stephen T. Driscoll, 1997).

For other regions, starvation drove people to far worse horrors than eating domestic animals. Reports of cannibalism were common, and the St Albans chronicler even states that some people resorted to eating children. After the food shortage, came a 'severe pestilence' that had many more victims. The important number of bodies made it difficult to burry them. Many people begged for food, stole whatever they could, and even killed others for little food.

The level of poverty and starvation was unprecedented; 'Such a scarcity has not been seen in our time in England, not heard of for a hundred years', says one chronicler. Others talk of misery 'such as our age has never seen' and 'such a mortality of men in England and Scotland through famine and pestilence as had not been heard of in our time.' The vain regulations concerning the price of foodstuffs were annulled at the Lincoln Parliament of early 1316. The Bridlington chronicler contentedly states: 'How contrary to reason is an ordinance on prices, when the fruitfulness or sterility of all living things are in the power of God alone, from that it follows that the fertility of the soil and not the will of man must determine the price' (Keen, 2003). In 1317, the weather finally improved and the famine gradually loosened its hold.

However, the worse was to come: the outbreak of the Black Death was three decades away. This catastrophic period in the history of England was the first of a series of large-scale crises that struck the country in the fourteenth century. It caused millions of deaths and signaled a clear end to an earlier period of growth and prosperity during the previous two centuries (Aston, 1987).

1. Consequences of the Great Famine

The famine is called the Great Famine not only because of the number of people who died, the vast geographic area that was affected, or because of the length of time it lasted. It is named so because of its lasting consequences. A major consequence was for the Church. In a society where the final recourse to all problems had been religion and where Roman Catholicism was the only tolerated faith, no amount of prayer seemed effective against this calamity, which undermined the institutional authority of the Catholic Church. This helped pave the way for later movements that were deemed heretical by the Church because they opposed the Papacy and blamed the failure of prayer upon corruption within the Church (Ronald H. Fritze, 2002).

Moreover, there was an increase in criminal activity. In the fourteenth century, medieval Europe had already experienced widespread social violence, rape and murder were demonstrably very common. With the famine, even those who were not normally disposed to criminal activity would opt for any means to feed themselves or their family. After the famine, England took on a tougher and more violent stroke; it had become an even less amicable place than during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The Great Famine marked a clear end to a period of unprecedented population growth that had started around 1050. Finally, the Great Famine had consequences for future events in the fourteenth century such as the Black Death when an already weakened and vulnerable population would be easily struck. The effects of the Great Famine were long lasting on the English society as well as on the feudal system itself. Having severely checked the number people among the lower class, the supply and labour prices skyrocketed; a result of both the awareness of the labour force of its central role in society, and competition between landowners for working hands (Bridbury, 2009).

Although the decline of the feudal system did not take shape until about the end of the sixteenth century, the origins of the whole process of this colossal societal and economic change can be traced back to this period. The Black Death found the English population weakened by malnutrition and unhygienic conditions caused by wet weather and repeated crop failures and epidemics that undermined the country's livestock.

2. Causes of Food Shortage

The Great Famine began with bad weather in spring 1315, widespread crop failures lasted through until the summer of 1317, and the country did not fully recover until 1322. It was an epoch marked by extreme levels of criminality, disease, mass death and, as mentioned above, some say even cannibalism and infanticide. It had consequences for the Church, state, society and future calamities to follow in the fourteenth century. A poem entitled *Poem on the Evil Times of Edward II*, composed by anonymous authors around 1321 describes the situation as divine punishment for people's over-pride: "When God saw that the world was so over proud, He sent a dearth on earth, and made it full hard. A bushel of wheat was at four shillings or more, of that man might have had a quarter before.... And then they turned pale who had laughed so loud, And they became all docile who before were so proud. A man's heart might bleed for to hear the cry of poor men who called out, 'Alas! For hunger I die!" (Greentree, 2001).

Famines became familiar in Medieval Europe. In England, famine struck in 1315–1317, 1321, 1351, and 1369. There was often not enough to eat for most people, and life expectancy was relatively limited. The average life expectancy in 1276 was about 35 years. Between 1301 and 1325 during the Great Famine it fell to 29, while between 1348 and 1375, Black Death and subsequent plagues, reduced it to only 17 (Rodrick, 2004).

During the period prior to 1300, the population of Europe had exploded, reaching levels that were not reached again until the nineteenth century. However, the wheat yield had been dropping since 1280 and prices had been rising. For every seed planted, only two were harvested; one was used as seed for the following year, and one for food. Modern farming ratios reach up to thirty seeds or more for each one planted (Cantor, 2001).

The arrival of the Great Famine coincided with the end of the Medieval Warm Period. Between 1310 and 1330, northern Europe witnessed some of the worst periods of bad weather in the entire Middle Ages, characterized by severe winters as well as rainy and cold summers. Changing weather patterns, the incompetence of medieval governments in dealing with such disasters, all along with high population level made things even worse (Cantor, 2001). In the spring of 1315, abnormal heavy rain began to fall. During the following spring and summer, it continued to rain and the temperature remained cool. These conditions caused pervasive crop failures, which meant scarcity of food for both animals and the cattle. The price of food began to augment. Food prices in England doubled between spring and midsummer. Salt, which was the only way to preserve meat, became difficult to obtain due to the fact that was more difficult to extract the wet weather; its price went from 30 shillings to 40 shillings (Wood, 2002). Because of the general poverty, the low amount of harvests meant some people

would starve to death. Stores of grain for long-term emergencies were restricted for the use of the lords and nobles. People began to eat wild edible roots, plants, grasses, and nuts they found in the woods (Hewitt, 2014).

In the spring of 1316, it continued to rain on a population destitute of energy and reserves to sustain itself. All sections of society from nobles to peasants were affected, but especially the peasants who formed the majority of the population and who had no reserve food supplies. To provide some measure of relief, dead animals were butchered, grain for seed was consumed, children were abandoned, and some elderly people are said to have voluntarily refused to eat in order to provide nourishment for the younger to survive. The climax of the famine and continued bad weather were reached in 1317. Finally, in the summer of the same year, the weather returned to its normal patterns. However, people had become weak because of diseases such as pneumonia, bronchitis, and tuberculosis. Additionally, much of the seed stock had been eaten. It was not until 1325 that the food supply returned to relatively normal conditions and the number of people began to rise again. Death toll probably reached 10–25% of the population in many cities and towns. While the Black Death (1338– 1375) killed more people, it lasted for no more than months. The Great Famine, however, lasted for years (Hewitt, 2014).

II. The Black Death: Origins of the Epidemic (1348-49)

Added to the series of climate fluctuations that medieval England witnessed, famine made the population of England weak and vulnerable to disease. Such an unhealthy environment and the unhygienic life led by the people of the period were typical for the spread of any epidemic. It was under such conditions, that the Black Death found the English population. The first occurrence of plague swept across England in the years 1348-49. It travelled across the south in bubonic form during the summer months of 1348, before mutating into a more deadly pneumonic form in winter. It reached London in September 1348, and spread along the coast early during the year 1349. By spring, it was devastating Wales and the Midlands, and by late summer it leaped across the Irish Sea and penetrated the north (Cowan, 2013).

Indeed, the onset of the plague created panic all over the British Isles. An account of the plague's journey across Britain is described below:

> ‘Sometimes it came by road, passing from village to village, sometimes by river, as in the East Midlands, or by ship, from the Low Countries or from other infected areas. On the vills of the bishop of Worcester's estates in the West Midlands, they (the death rates) ranged between 19 per cent of manorial tenants at Hartlebury and Hanbury to no less than 80 per cent at Aston.... It is very difficult for us to imagine the impact of plague on these small rural

> communities, where a village might have no more than 400 or 500 inhabitants. Few settlements were totally depopulated, but in most others whole families must have been wiped out, and few can have been spared some loss, since the plague killed indiscriminately, striking at rich and poor alike.' (W. M. Ormrod, 1996)

The Black Death could spread very rapidly under these conditions. Contemporary writers give a frightening account of its effects. Chronicler Henry Knighton states that:

> 'Almost the whole strength of the town perished.' A contemporary calendar said that: 'The plague raged to such a degree that the living were scarce able to bury the dead.... At this period the grass grew several inches high in the High St and in Broad St; it raged at first chiefly in the centre of the city.' (Gottfried, 1983)

Another chronicler, Geoffrey the Baker, described the plague's arrival:

> 'The seventh year after it began, it came to England and first began in the towns and ports joining on the seacoasts, in Dorsetshire, where, as in other counties, it made the country quite void of inhabitants so that there were almost none left alive. From there it passed into Devonshire and Somersetshire, even unto Bristol, and raged in such sort that the Gloucestershire men would not suffer the Bristol men to have access to them by any means. But at length it came to Gloucester, yea even to Oxford and to London, and finally it spread over all England and so wasted the people that scarce the tenth person of any sort was left alive.' (Bascome, 1851)

A mass grave has been uncovered at Spitalfields, a district in east London, containing the remains of victims of the Black Death, which confirms the account below:

'The pestilence arrived in London at about the feast of All Saints [1st Nov] and daily deprived many of life. It grew so powerful that between Candlemass and Easter [2nd Feb-12th April] more than 200 corpses were buried almost every day in the new burial ground made next to Smithfield, and this was in addition to the bodies buried in other graveyards in the city (Horrox, 1994).

The new Smithfield cemetery was hurriedly opened, but became so swamped that a local landowner, Sir Walter Manny, donated land nearby at Spittle Croft for a second cemetery (Highfield, 2008). London, the country's

largest city, had all the related problems of overpopulation and poor hygiene. The Thames was a polluted mess and pits within the city were a constant source of pollution. Attempts to solve the sanitation problem were hindered by the Black Death itself. In 1349, the King blamed the town council about the state of the streets. The council replied that it could do nothing because many of street cleaners had died of the plague. What made things worse was the fact that London was almost certainly hit by a combined attack of pneumonic and bubonic plague. Robert of Avesbury says describes the severity of the disease:

> 'Those marked for death were scarce permitted to live longer than three or four days. It showed favour to no-one, except a very few of the wealthy. On the same day, 20, 40 or 60 bodies, and on many occasions many more, might be committed for burial together in the same pit' (Arnold, 2006).

In January 1349, Parliament was prorogued because the plague had hit the place in which the meeting was to be held: *'[the plague] had suddenly broken out in the said place and the neighbourhood, and daily increased in severity so that grave fears were entertained for the safety of those coming here at the time.'* (Arnold, 2006)

The plague did not reach London until the spring of 1350, and it is generally presumed to have killed between one third and half the inhabitants. In Durham, the Bishop's rolls records that *'no tenant came from West Thickley because they are all dead.'* (Shrewsbury, 2005) Overall, between 30 and 45% of the population died in the Black Death of 1348-50. In some villages, 80% or 90% of the population died. Young people were the ones mostly hit. Modern research shows that it was very probable that the plague had profound consequences for the reproductive cycle of the population. By the 1370s, the population of England had been halved and it was not recovering.

1. Labour Shortage and the Issue of Wages

Among the immediate consequences of the Black Death in England was a shortage of farm labour, and a corresponding rise in wages. The medieval world-view did not interpret these changes in terms of socio-economic development, and blamed degrading morals instead. The landowning classes saw the rise in wage levels as a sign of social upheaval and insubordination, and reacted with force. Hence, in 1349, King Edward III passed the Ordinance of Labourers, fixing wages at their pre-plague levels. The ordinance was reinforced by Parliament's passing of the Statute of Labourers in 1351. The labour laws were enforced over the following decades. These legislative measures proved largely inefficient to regulate the market, but the government's brutal measures to enforce these laws caused public apprehension. The plague's greatest effect on the government was on war as no significant

campaigns were launched in France until 1355 (James Bothwell, 2000).

Another noteworthy consequence of the Black Death was the raising of the real wage of England. The higher wages for workers combined with sinking prices on grain products led to a problematic economic situation for the gentry. As a result, they started to show an increased interest for offices like justice of the peace, sheriff, and Members of Parliament. The gentry took advantage of their new positions and organised corruption spread. As a result of this, the gentry as a social class became highly disliked by commoners (Allen, 2001). This situation widened the gap between the working and the upper class, and enforced a feeling of antagonism especially on the part of the ruled class. However, the effects of the plague did not end here as explained in the following section. The Church, as well as the cultural life of the English people were subject to radical change.

The Black Death also promoted the use of vernacular English, as the number of teachers who were proficient in French dropped. This, in turn, contributed to the late-fourteenth century flowering of English literature, represented by writers such as Geoffrey Chaucer and John Gower. The series of *unlucky* events did end in famine and plague. Politics too was a major actor of change on the English scene, and had a more or less direct impact on class conflict, and hence the rise of class-consciousness on the part of the working class.

III. The Unsuccessful Turning Point of the Hundred Years War: 1360

Medieval people glorified kings who defeated the enemies at war, and victory meant plunder of the defeated and full coffers, which meant less taxation and the gentry's purses even better off. Barons and the higher clergy alike willingly financed foreign wars in the hope to have their share after victory is achieved. This was the case with the Hundred Years' War until a series of defeats were inflicted on the English armies, and war was not as rewarding as it used to be.

The first sign of general decadence was the downfall, in the later years of King Edward III, of the military and naval power. When in the year 1360 the Treaty of Brétigny (1360) made over to the English Crown a third of France, English seamanship held supremacy in Western waters. No harbour-master dared to steal or annoy the traders who brought the English wool, no foreign craft dared board the vessels that sailed under the English flag. Throughout the whole of Europe, no chivalry was able to contend with the archers of England. The English were the governors of Southern France.

The English supremacy, which lasted for many years, was destined to perish rapidly. The political changes in Spain were the immediate cause of Continental revolt against the English domination. In 1369, King Henry of Castile, having been restored to his throne by French arms in the face of

English opposition, entered into a naval alliance with France, which secured to the confederates the mastery of the Channel. The English importance in the European political scene, the prosperity of the English commerce and the English military hold over France, depended on naval superiority. That superiority was quelled by the unified fleets of Castile and France (Allmand, 1988).

The English position in Aquitaine was at the same moment being undermined even among the English soldiers, whose discipline proper to an army of occupation was wanting. The regiments, or 'companies' as they were called, were officered by soldiers of fortune who had not scrupled, when active employment was wanting in the English service, to follow Du Guesclin over the Pyrenees and help the French to turn the English ally off the throne of Castile. The only means, by which King Edward held these men in hand, was paying them higher wages.

In order to keep his soldiers, the King oppressed his subjects with heavy taxes. When at last the companies began to make unauthorized raids into the territory of the French King to obtain compensation for their arrears, the opportunity most desired by the latter monarch had arrived. He had now the justification for declaring war against the English. In the spring of 1369, French armies invaded the isolated English possession of Ponthieu in the north of France. The loss of the province was the responsibility of the ministers who had failed to garrison it during the winter as had eventually happened in Aquitaine.

However, for the simple peasant or worker, and members of the lower class in general, the real causes of the defeats in the war with France, as mentioned above, were not very far to seek. Under a King too old to govern by himself, and his heir, the Black Prince abroad, the opportunity was offered to swindlers and embezzlers to fill their purses even by betraying their own country (Barnie, 1974).

1. The First Poll Tax (1377)

King Edward III's continuous demands for economic support during the Hundred Years' War left the government with exhausted reserves and angered his subjects whose confidence in his government was waning as he became influenced by unpopular advisers, especially John of Gaunt. The 1371 Parliament was called to avoid a revolt among merchants in London and Norwich who had been overtaxed. At this time, lay ministers who became in a stronger position replaced clerical ones in a real rivalry between the Bishops and the financiers. The Good Parliament of 1376 denounced the corruption of Gaunt and the administration that closed its eyes to the actions of men like Richard Lyons who was impeached because he charged usurious interests on his loans to the King and found means to be repaid far more than he had lent. The Parliament then led by Peter de la Mare refused to

grant further funds. More importantly, it accused the King's advisers of being the cause of the royal poverty, leading to the need for more taxes.

By the arrival of King Richard II (Dictionary, 2010)to the throne in 1377, the problem of government was primarily how to finance war. Consequently, a four pence poll tax was levied that year. The question was whether the impoverished populations were ready to ruin themselves to finance a war from which they had no benefit, knowing that young King Richard I was surrounded by people they described as thieves and swindlers (Allmand, 1988). Were the peasants and other people of the lower classes aware of what was happening in the political scene? The 1381 insurgents' demand for the heads of Gaunt and other people accused of corruption is a sign that they were, and their demands as the following sections show strengthens the idea of the existence of labour class-consciousness among them.

2. The Second Poll Tax (1379)

As mentioned earlier, in the last year of Edward III's reign (1377), a poll tax had been imposed by the nobles through Parliament on all people above the age of fourteen to finance an unsuccessful, and thus, very unpopular war against France. In 1379, a tax proportional to wealth was passed. The need for funds was greater than ever, and this led the government to resort once more to a poll tax. The tax was collected from the whole population, regardless of the bewildering news about the wealth of its instigators. These two taxes were graduated, according to people's properties and issued on every English adult. Added to the other customary dues, the tax became a heavy burden on the shoulders of the populace. If they could not pay in cash, they paid with anything else such as seeds, tools, and other vital belongings that were supposed to help them subsist in those years of unfavourable climate and poverty. Parliament stood against further taxing trade and property to finance war. In fact, the Members of Parliament were defending the interest of the upper class they originated from and represented in the Commons. As a result, commissioners were sent to make sure everyone, save for known beggars, and pay the poll tax. Those who refused to pay were arrested (Hilton, 2003).

The peasants who yielded to their lords' demands at first, started to question the utility of their taxation when no improvement was seen on the battlefield as well as in their living conditions. Suspicion on the competence and fidelity of the King's councillors was another matter of concern to them. Such concern explains the accusation of the Kings' advisors of being 'traitors' (Hilton, 2003). Peasants did not consider tax evasion as a sin but rather as the only means by which people could defend themselves from powerful thieves.

3. The Third Poll Tax: March (1380)

The living conditions of the English lower class during the period prior to the revolt do not explain the reason for its outburst precisely in the summer of

1381. The existence of combustible material does not justify its explosion without a sparkle that provoked it. The sparkle in the case of the revolt of 1381 was directly linked with the perpetual struggle of the English serf for freedom and his continuous attempts to resist war taxation. In February 1381, the ministers set to work to collect a poll tax, which had been raised in January. The method adopted was to appoint a small body of collectors and sub-collectors for each shire, to make sure that as many shillings as there were adults over fifteen years of age from each place were paid. The grievance that became apparent at once was that this form of levy bore most severely on the poorest places. In poor villages, where there was no moneyed resident to compensate for eventual insufficiencies in tax collection, every villein and cottager had to pay the full amount of money (Guest, 1888).

The remedy for this inequitable taxation was to make false returns to the commissioners of the poll tax. The result was that every shire of England returned an incredibly small number of adult inhabitants liable to the taxation. This can be proved with absolute certainty by comparing the returns of the earlier one-groat poll tax of 1377 with those of the one-shilling poll tax of 1381. To the former tax, all persons over fourteen had to contribute, to the latter all persons over fifteen, so that there should have been a small, but still perceptible falling off in the returns. Instead of the slight diminution in taxable persons expected, the commissioners of the poll tax reported that there were only two-thirds as many contributories in 1381 as in 1377. The adult population of the realm had ostensibly fallen from 1,355,201 to 896,481 persons (see Table below). These figures were the proof of a colossal and deliberate attempt to evade taxation by a general falsification of figures.

Table 01: Number of taxable population registered in 1377 and 1388

	1377	**1388**
Number of registered taxable population	1, 355, 201	896, 481

Source: Petit Detaillis, Charles, studies and notes supplementary to stubbs constitutional History, Longmans, green and Co London, 1915, p. 28

On February 22, 1381, the King's Council issued a writ to the Barons of the Exchequer stating that instant efforts must be made to collect the whole poll tax, as the sum received was far below what had been expected. On March 16, an additional directive was issued declaring that ample evidence proved that the collectors and constables had behaved with shameless negligence and corruption. A fresh body of commissioners travelled round the shires to compare the list of inhabitants returned in the first list with the actual population of the townships, to compel payment from

all persons who had evaded, and to imprison all who resisted their authority. It is said that John Legge, one of the King's sergeants-at-arms, suggested this commission to the ministers. The reputation of having done so cost him his life (Rosenwein, 2013).

The commissioners were directed to set to work on fifteen shires only, including all those of the southeast in addition to Somerset, Devon, Cornwall, Gloucestershire, and the West Riding of Yorkshire. The second roll of commissioners began to work in April and May. Their reports sufficed to show that the ministers had been right, and that wholesale fraud had been practised against the Government during the first levy of the poll tax. In Norwich, 600 persons were discovered to have evaded the original collectors, in Norfolk about 8,000, but still more striking was the case of the county of Suffolk, where no less than 13,000 suppressed names were collected in a few weeks. Nevertheless, the revision had not gone far when a full-scale explosion of popular wrath occurred.

The explanation of the outburst is simply that the countryside was seething with discontent since the poll tax had been imposed. The poll tax itself was so heavy for the poorest classes that they unanimously tried to defend themselves by the simple device of false returns. The Government wanted to chastise tens of thousands of people, and had entrusted it to commissioners with no armed force, except half a dozen clerks and sergeants. Their task was so revolting, their compelling power so weak, that after a month of friction when thousands of shillings had been extorted from the needy evaders of the tax, trouble commenced (Liddy, 2005).

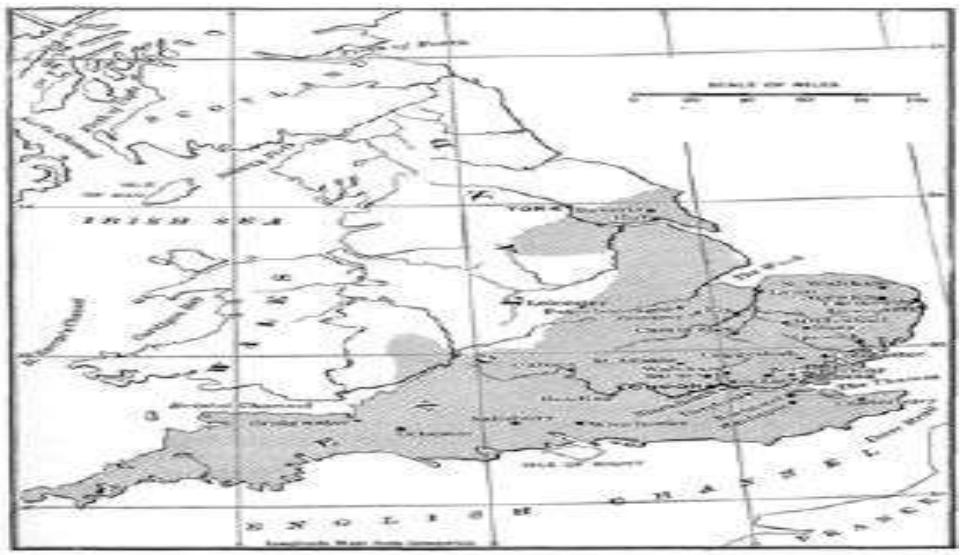
Massive tax evasion for the above-mentioned reasons might be considered as the proof that people of the same class suffered the same grievances, whose natural outcome was a sense of unity due to a common interest being threatened by a now rival class seeking to secure its wealth and position regardless of the economic changes that followed the Black Death. The natural outcome of this common feeling of objection was expressed in the spontaneous aspect of the English Rising of the same year.

If today's trade unions and other working class association go on strike or boycott regulations that do not appeal to them, the Late Medieval labourer expressed his discontent through quite different means such as revolt and bloodshed. Below is the most outstanding instance of such outbursts of anger that might show how aware these people were in defending their common interest.

IV. The English Rising of 1381

The Rising is debatably known as the Peasants' Revolt, but which in fact involved peasants as well as craftsmen and London citizens without whose help, the Essex and Kentish men would never have entered the well protected town. Another reason for objection to this appellation is that 60% of the English population was composed of peasants. Therefore, the large number of peasants among the rebels is natural. The Rising started in Essex on 30 May 1381, when a tax collector tried, for the third time in four years, to levy a Poll Tax. The war against France had taken an unsuccessful turning and the government's reputation was damaged. The 1381 tax was the spark that set fire in almost the whole country.

Figure 1: Extension of the Revolt of 1381 in England



Source: R.B. Dobson. Peasants' Revolt of 1381, p. 100

The rebels were not just protesting against the government. Since the Black Death, poor people had become increasingly angry that they were still serfs. They were demanding freedom and equality to all men, less harsh laws, and a fairer distribution of wealth. Soon both Essexand Kent were in revolt. The rebels coordinated their tactics by letter. They marched on London, where they destroyed the houses of government ministers. They also had a clear set of political demands. On 15 June, the 14-year-old King, Richard II, met the rebels' leader Wat Tyler. William Walworth, the Lord Mayor of London, attacked and killed Tyler. Before the rebel army could retaliate, Richard stepped forward towards them and promised to abolish serfdom. The peasants went home, but later government troops toured the villages hanging men who had taken part in the Revolt. Although the Revolt was defeated, its demands – less harsh laws, money for the poor, freedom and equality – all became part of our democracy in the long term (R. H. Hilton, 1987).

1. Causes of the Revolt

Historians have identified a number of factors that caused the Rising. Three hundred years after the Norman Conquest, peasants were still villeins who belonged to their lords under the feudal system. As stated above, the Black Death (1348 - 1350) had killed many people. This meant there was a shortage of workers and wages went up. Parliament passed the Statute of Labourers (1351), which set a maximum wage and warned that people would be punished with prison if they refused to work for that wage. Since 1360, an itinerant priest called John Ball had been preaching that class differences were groundless. His famous motto '*when Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman*?' has been a source of inspiration to levellers of all kinds. After 1369, the war against France began to go badly. This would have made people despise the government who had been accused of corruption and of robbing both the King and the people of their money to fill their purses instead of financing the war against France (Fiona Somerset, 2003).

In 1377, Richard II became King at the age of ten, and his uncle, John of Gaunt, ran the country. As mentioned earlier, series of poll taxes to pay for the war against France were levied. The taxes had to be paid by everyone over the age of 15 no matter how much money they earned. In March 1381, the government demanded a third poll tax in four years. When people refused to pay, Parliament appointed commissioners to compel them to do so. On 30 May 1381, Commissioner Thomas Bampton entered the village of Fobbing in Essex. The brutal methods used by this latter made the villagers angry. Following his attempt to arrest the villagers' spokesperson, the angry masses started a riot, and the tax collectors were put to death. Soon both Essex and Kent were in revolt.

The rebels marched on London. The leader of the men of Essex was called Jack Straw. On 7 June 1381, the Kentish rebels asked an ex- soldier named Wat Tyler to be their leader. John Ball who had been imprisoned by the Archbishop of Canterbury for heresy, was freed by the rebels. Soon, people resentful of the government practices and the hardships of serfdom joined the rebels. Fiery letters were soon sent round the countryside, calling people to join them. On 13 June, supporters of the rising opened the gates of London to the rebels who entered the city and attacked the houses of Richard's advisers, including John of Gaunt and Simon Sudbury, the Archbishop of Canterbury.

On 14th June, Richard called the rebels led by Richard Wallingford for a meeting at Mile End and met a group of rebels. There, the insurgents demanded that the King dismiss some of his advisers and abolish serfdom. Richard agreed and many of the rebels went home. During the talks, a group of rebels broke into the Tower of London and beheaded Archbishop Sudbury. On 15th June, Richard went to Smithfield to meet Wat Tyler, the military leader of the revolt, and probably a veteran of the war with France. The latter had refused the deal with Wallingford, and came with an even longer list of demands including that the Church be disendowed of its properties, in addition to lower rents of land.

One account of the meeting says that during the meeting William Walworth, the Lord Mayor of London, attacked and killed Tyler. Soon, Richard stepped forward telling the rebels: 'I will be your King and leader'. Tyler's mysterious death marked the end of the revolt, and the beginning of the Government's retaliation. It was claimed that King Richard would not keep promises made under duress. Therefore, rebel leaders like John Ball and Jack Straw were tried and beheaded, and a massive campaign to put down the rebellion all over the country began (Larson, 2012).

2. The Aftermath of the Revolt

Contemporary chroniclers of the events in the revolt have formed an important source for historians. The chroniclers were biased against the rebels' cause and typically portrayed the rebels as 'beasts, monstrosities or misguided fools'. London chroniclers were also unwilling to admit the role of ordinary Londoners in the revolt, preferring to place the blame entirely on rural peasants from the southeast. Among the key accounts was the anonymous Anonimalle Chronicle, whose author appears to have been part of the royal court and an eyewitness to many of the events in London. Chronicler Thomas Walsingham was present for much of the revolt, but focused his account on the terror of the social unrest and was extremely biased against the rebels. The events were recorded in France in Jean Froissart's Chronicles. He had well-placed sources close to the revolt, but was inclined to elaborate the known facts with colourful stories (Copeland, 1996).

At the end of the 19th century, there was a surge in historical interest in the Peasants' Revolt, spurred by the contemporary growth of the labour and socialist movements. By 1907, the accounts of the chroniclers were all widely available in print and the main public records concerning the events had been identified. Some researchers began to use the legal indictments that had been used against suspected rebels after the revolt as a fresh source of historical information, and over the next century extensive research was carried out into the local economic and social history of the revolt, using scattered local sources across southeast England.

Interpretations of the revolt have changed over the years. Historians of the centuries to come established the idea that the revolt had marked the end of unfree labour and serfdom in England. Others describe it as 'one of the most portentous events in the whole of our history'. In the 20th century, this interpretation was increasingly challenged by historians who revised the impact of the revolt on further political and economic events in England. Mid-20th century Marxist historians were both interested in, and generally sympathetic to the rebel cause, a trend culminating in Rodney Hilton's 1973 account of the uprising, set against the context of wider peasant revolts across Europe during the period. The Peasants' Revolt has received more academic attention than any other medieval revolt, and this research has been typically interdisciplinary in nature, involving historians, literary scholars and international collaboration.

The Peasants' Revolt became a popular literary subject. Geoffrey Chaucer used the rebel killing of Flemings as a metaphor for wider disorder in The Nun's Priest's Tale part of The Canterbury Tales. William Langland, the author of the poem Piers Plowman, which had been widely used by the rebels, made various changes to its text after the revolt in order to distance himself from their cause. The 1381 Rising would have been called the 1381 Revolution, and the English would have forerun the French by centuries.

Conclusion

Whatever their causes, war, famine and food shortage led to higher prices among a growing population, which logically led to discontent, and even to heresy among the demeaned class whose unhealthy and precarious living conditions made the English vulnerable to disease, but marked the beginning of the decline of the feudal system. When the Black Death entered the scene in 1348-49, it was met with a malnourished society, with unhealthy living conditions. A helpless church was accused of corruption, and of being one cause of such a divine punishment. Economically speaking, the Black Death led to labour shortage and increase in demand for working hands.

References

- Allen, R. (2001). The Great Divergence in European Wages and Prices from the Middle Ages to the First World War. *Explorations in Economic History*, 411–47.
- Allmand, C. (1988). *The Hundred Years War: England and France at War, c.1300-c.1450.* Cambridge University Press.
- Arnold, C. (2006). *Necropolis: London and Its Dead.* New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Aston, T. H. (1987). *The Brenner Debate Agrarian ClassStructure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe.* Cambridge: CambridgeUniversity Press.
- Barnie, J. (1974). *War in medieval English society: social values in the Hundred Years War 1337-99.* New York: Cornell University Press.
- Bascome, E. (1851). *A History of epidemic pestilences, Researches into their Nature, Causes, and Prophylaxis.* London: John Churchill.
- Bridbury, A. R. (2009). *Medieval England: A Survey of Social and Economic Origins and Development.* Leicester: Troubador Publishing Ltd.
- Bruce, S. G. (2010). *Ecologies and Economies in Medieval and Early Modern Europe.* Boston: Leiden.
- Cantor, N. L. (2001). *In the Wake of the Plague: the Black Death and the World it Made.* New York: Free Press.
- Childs, W. R. (2013). *The Anonimalle Chronicle 1307 to 1334: From Brotherton Collection MS 29.* New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Copeland, R. (1996). *Criticism and Dissent in the Middle Ages.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Cowan, M. (2013). *Death, Life, and Religious Change in Scottish Towns c. 1350-1560* (Vol. Vol. 1350). Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Dictionary, O. A. (2010). Oxford University Press.
- Fiona Somerset, J. C. (2003). *Lollards and Their Influence in Late Medieval England.* Woodridge: Boydell Press.
- Gottfried, R. S. (1983). *The Black Death, Natural and Human Disaster in Medieval Europe.* New York: Macmillan.
- Greentree, R. (2001). *The Middle English Lyric and Short Poem.* Cambridge: D. S. Brewer.
- Guest, M. J. (1888). *Lectures on the history of England.* London: Macmillan.
- Hewitt, M. (2014). *A Most Remarkable Family: A History of the Lyon Family from 1066 to 2014.* Warrington: Author-house.
- Highfield, R. (2008, Jan 28). *Science Editor*. Récupéré sur http://www. telegraph.co.uk/ science/ sciencenews/3323344/Black-Death-targeted-the-weak.html
- Hilton, R. H. (2003). *Bond Men Made Free, Medieval Peasant Movements and the English Rising of 1381*. London: Maurice Temple Smith Ltd.
- Horrox, R. (1994). *The Black Death.* Manchester : Manchester University Press.
- James Bothwell, P. J. (2000). *The Problem of Labour in Fourteenth-Century England.* Woodbridge: York Medieval Press.
- Keen, M. (2003). *England in the Later Middle Ages.* London: Routledge.
- Larson, P. L. (2012). *Conflict and Compromise in the Late Medieval Countryside: Lords and Peasants in Durham, 1349–1400.* New York: Routledge.
- Liddy, C. D. (2005). *War, Politics and Finance in Late Medieval English Towns: Bristol, York, and the Crown.* Suffolk: Boydell Press.
- Maddicott, J. (December 2005). Vita Edwardi Secundi: The Life of Edward the Second. *English Historical Review*, 1421-1422.
- R. H. Hilton, T. H. (1987). *The English Rising of 1381*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rodrick, A. B. (2004). *The History of Great Britain.* Connecticut: Ann Baltz Rodrick.
- Ronald H. Fritze, W. B. (2002). *Historical Dictionary of Late Medieval.* Connecticut: Greenwood Press.
- Rosenwein, B. H. (2013). *Reading the Middle Ages, Volume II: Sources from Europe Byzantium, and the Islamic World.* Ontario: University of Toronto Press.
- Shrewsbury, J. F. (2005). *A History of Bubonic Plague in the British Isles.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- W. M. Ormrod, P. L. (1996). *The Black Death in England,*. Stamford: Paul Watkins.
- Wood, A. (2002). *Riot, Rebellion and Popular Politics in Early Modern England.* Palgrave: New York.