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## Cholera revolts: a class struggle we may not like

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### ABSTRACT

Few have studied cholera revolts comparatively, and certainly not over the vast terrain from Asiatic Russia to Quebec or across time from the first European cholera wave of the 1830s to the twentieth century. Scholars have instead concentrated on the first European cholera wave in the 1830s and have tended to explain cholera's social violence within the political contexts of individual nations, despite these riots raging across vast differences in political landscapes from Czarist Russia to New York City but with similar fears and conspiracy theories of elites inventing cholera to cull populations of the poor. Moreover, the history of cholera's social toxins runs against present generalizations on why epidemics spawn blame and violence against others. Cholera riots continued, and in Italy and Russia became geographically more widespread, vicious, and destructive long after the disease had lost its mystery. The article then poses the question of why historians on the left have not studied the class struggles provoked by cholera, with riots of 10,000, murdering state officials and doctors, destroying hospitals, town halls, and in the case of Donetsk, an entire city. Finally, the article draws parallels between Europe's cholera experiences and those in West Africa with Ebola in 2014.

### KEYWORDS

Cholera; epidemics; conspiracies; riots; class struggle; Karl Marx; comparative history

In cities across Eastern Europe and Russia, the scale and violence of cholera riots in 1831–32 may have been greater than those in most places in the West.<sup>1</sup> Yet across strikingly different cultures, economies, and regimes – East, West, and South in Europe and to the east coast of the US – the content and character of the conspiracies, divisions by social class, and the targets of rioters' wrath were uncannily similar. Without any evident communication among rioters from

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<sup>1</sup>Research for this paper has drawn on keyword searches of large newspaper databases including the Library of Congress, 'Chronicle America'; the National Library of Australia, 'Trove', the British Library, 'British Newspaper Archive' and its 'Nineteenth Century British Library Newspapers'; the Bibliothèque nationale de France, 'Gallica', individual newspapers digitized by Proquest as well as other digitized sources such as the Wellcome's Medical Heritage Library of Nineteenth-Century Sources and the online collection 'Emeroteca' at the Braidense Library, Milan. In addition, particularly for Italy, where at present only one newspaper, *La Stampa* (and its predecessor, *Gazzetta Piemontese*), have been digitized for the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I relied on microfilm and original copies held at the Biblioteca nazionale centrale of Rome, Milan, and Florence.

New York City to Asiatic Russia or evidence that protesters were aware of similar riots taking place often simultaneously across these long distances, the cholera conspiracies repeated themselves in stories of elites masterminding a cull of the poor to lessen population pressures, with doctors, pharmacists, nurses, and government officials as the agents of this planned class mass murder.<sup>2</sup> To be sure, myths of poisoning streams, fountains, and other water supplies reach back to antiquity (as with Thucydides' claims of the Peloponnesians poisoning cisterns in Piraeus in 430 BCE) and are seen during the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period (most infamously with accusations against Jews and lepers in 1319–21 and more catastrophically against Jews in 1348–50). Yet unlike the slaughter of Jews and lepers, the targets of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century cholera riots were rarely Jews or other marginal groups (and never lepers).<sup>3</sup> Rather than against any 'other', popular rage turned in the opposite direction, against the dominant classes – local authorities and especially the medical profession. Rarely were the targeted groups minorities or outsiders as with possibly the Jesuits in Spain during its first cholera wave in 1834, some Jews at St Petersburg and Königsberg in 1831 and Donetsk in 1892, English doctors in Egypt in 1883, Armenian and Persian wine and spirit dealers at Astrakhan in 1892, foreign missionaries at Tungkadoo, China, in 1892, and gypsies at Pontedra, Tuscany in 1910–11. Yet even in these cases, Jews, foreigners, and gypsies were not the prime targets. Into the twentieth century, doctors, health workers, cholera hospitals, and town halls were the butts of protest, fuelled by accusations of diabolical mass slaughter.<sup>4</sup>

### A comparative history of cholera riots

Despite these similarities, historians have sought to explain the rise of cholera violence by turning non-comparatively to specific political contexts or political crises that characterized particular localities. For Czarist Russia, the underlying political tensions and brutal repression exacted by the Cossacks or the Czar's Russian troops or harsh and rigid quarantines were supposedly the causes.<sup>5</sup> Except

<sup>2</sup>The only evidence I have found of the rumours of a cholera conspiracy explicitly communicated from one place to another was within Scotland. Fishermen from Musselburgh, Fisherrow, and Dunbar spread rumours at Wick that its physician had previously spread cholera at Edinburgh to sell cadavers for the city's anatomy college and was doing the same at Wick: 'Cholera and alarming riot at Wick, Caithness-shire', *Morning Post*, 1 August 1832, 4; *Caledonian Mercury*, 2 August 1832. (The papers included in Gale's database of 'Nineteenth-Century British Library Newspapers' do not specify page numbers.)

<sup>3</sup>In at least one instance, Jews were the instigators of rumours of poisoning that led to riotous attacks on health workers at Lyssobiki [Łysobyki], in the district of Lukow, then in the 'Congress of Poland' during the cholera epidemic in 1892. For this and other cholera violence, see S.K. Cohn, *Epidemics. Hate and compassion from the plague of Athens to AIDS* (forthcoming, 2018), ch. 10.

<sup>4</sup>For descriptions of these, see Cohn, *Epidemics, op.cit.*

<sup>5</sup>R.J. Evans, 'Epidemics and revolutions: cholera in nineteenth-century Europe' in T. Ranger and P. Slack (eds), *Epidemics and Ideas. Essays on the historical perception of pestilence* (Cambridge, 1992), 169.

in Italy and particularly during later cholera revolts as at Ardore (Calabria) in 1867 or Verbicaro in 1911,<sup>6</sup> Russia and several places in Eastern Europe were unusual in their heavy-handed repression with protesters shot, cut down by sabre-rattling cavalries, and subjected to knouting and mass execution. In fourteen months alone (November 1831 to January 1833), the British Isles produced at least seventy-two cholera riots, many with crowds in the thousands that threatened the lives of physicians, attacked hospitals, broke cholera litters and hearses, frenetically tearing them 'to atoms'.<sup>7</sup> Yet in only four riots did municipalities feel the need to summon the military – once in Scotland (Aberdeen, 31 December 1831), once in England (Manchester, 2 September 1832), and twice in Ireland (at Clarmorris, 26 August 1832; and Londonderry, 2 September 1832). Only once did a magistrate threaten to read the riot act to cholera protesters (again, at Manchester, 2 September 1832), and in no instances did troops or police kill any demonstrators or were capital punishments imposed. Moreover, in the British Isles as in many regions of Europe during the first European-wide wave of cholera (1830 to 1837), quarantine was not the issue that provoked protest and violence by turning back suspected ships or isolating cholera victims, the suspected, or their contacts in segregation camps. Instead, in the British Isles and elsewhere during the 1830s, the removal of patients to hospitals for treatment, not quarantine centres, ignited rioting by patients' families and friends, who believed their loved ones had been diabolically carted to their death chambers.

For France and especially Paris, historians have also drawn on the immediate political context to explain the rise of cholera riots. Here, however, it was not the tight grip of a repressive, autocratic regime as in Russia but the opposite. Catherine Kudlick argues that two years earlier (1830) the rise of the progressive July Monarchy, which tossed out King Charles X and the Bourbons, led to new bourgeois anxieties and 'fused' cholera with the revolution, stirring the Parisian riots.<sup>8</sup> Although links between the Parisian cholera riots and national politics may have been more evident than in Britain with its reform movements of 1832, the politics behind Paris's riots were hardly progressive. Instead, religious fanatics and the right fanned them, preaching that the new disease was God's punishment against the reformist government of Louis Philippe.<sup>9</sup> Even on this score, the importance of political ideology is questionable. As Karin Salomé

<sup>6</sup>To repress and punish this town of 4000 (45 kilometres east of Reggio Calabria), a force of 2000 from the National Guard were dispatched, causing 3000 inhabitants to flee into the mountains, where they were hounded for days after the revolt: see *La Nazione*, 10 September 1867, 2; Cohn, *Epidemics, op. cit.*, ch. 10. For Verbicaro, see discussion and notes 56–61 below.

<sup>7</sup>*Morning Chronicle*, 31 March 1832, describing the cholera riot from Lissongrave (today Lisson Grove) to the Mary-la-bonne Cholera Hospital, Camden Town.

<sup>8</sup>C.J. Kudlick, *Cholera in Post-Revolutionary Paris. A cultural history* (Berkeley, 1996), 31–32, 213–19. For a more recent and similar interpretation of the Parisian cholera riots, which stresses the particular political context of the July Monarchy (but which does not cite Kudlick), see K. Salomé, 'Le massacre des "empoisonneurs" à Paris au temps du choléra (1832)', *Revue Historique*, 673 (2015), 103–24.

<sup>9</sup>*The Times*, 12 April 1832, 2.

has recently concluded, the Parisian riots and accusations of poisoning in 1832 lacked 'a clear and intelligible political dimension'.<sup>10</sup> At Paris, economic forces played a more prominent role. The capital's sanitary measures threatened the livelihoods of certain professions such as the proprietors of rubbish collection and their force of 1800 rag-and-bone men (chiffonniers) and vendors of water, fruit, and vegetables. Yet, despite these factors, Parisian rioters produced much the same conspiracy theories as elsewhere.<sup>11</sup> Similar to other regions of continental Europe and the British Isles, Parisians targeted the medical profession, accusing them of instigating the poisoning. Along with setting wagons of garbage ablaze, cholera crowds drowned a medical assistant in the Seine and attacked verbally and physically physicians, whom they branded as the poisoners.<sup>12</sup> An eyewitness account in 1832 by a correspondent of a US medical journal explained the riots by pointing to 'the Paris mob' as imagining physicians in all the hospitals 'engaged in the combination to poison the people, because few patients came out alive'.<sup>13</sup>

The British Isles also possessed its own peculiar wrinkles with cholera fear and violence. The body snatching scandals of the late 1820s to feed demands for cadavers for teaching surgery at new anatomical schools appears behind the British cholera riots. Most famous was Edinburgh's scandal of 1828, after Burke and Hare had murdered sixteen people to supply Dr Robert Knox with bodies for his anatomy lectures. Their much recounted trial, however, was not the only such case to surface in the years immediately preceding cholera's first spread into Britain and Ireland. Two years before, three casks containing eleven salted bodies mysteriously appeared at Liverpool for anatomical dissection, and at Dublin during the trials of Burke and Hare, corpses ripe for export to anatomy schools in England were found.<sup>14</sup> Already in January that year the discovery of a snatched body for anatomical lessons sparked rioting in Dublin, resulting in the murder of a porter of Dublin's College of Surgeons; and in 1827 the school of the Royal College in Dublin had been made a warehouse 'for their ghastly goods ... for lecturers in other Dublin institutions or to be shipped to anatomists in London or Edinburgh'.<sup>15</sup>

Connections with cholera disturbances in 1832 were not entirely imaginary. An article in the *Medical Gazette*, copied by London's papers, exposed the sale of cholera bodies for medical training, claiming it was not an episodic affair with a

<sup>10</sup>Salomé, *op.cit.*, 120.

<sup>11</sup>See for instance, Salomé, *op.cit.*, where a Parisian source in 1832 enunciates the Malthusian fears of cholera rioters: 'Il y a trop de pauvres, et on aime mieux nous empoisonner que de nous nourrir' (107).

<sup>12</sup>F. Snowden, *Naples in the time of Cholera 1884–1911* (Cambridge, 1995), 151; F. Delaporte, *Disease and Civilization*, trans. A. Goldhammer (Cambridge, 1986), 66; Salomé, *op.cit.* (110, 111), does not refer to this incident but cites other cases in Paris during the summer of 1832, when crowds blamed doctors for poisoning and threatened their lives.

<sup>13</sup>*Cholera Gazette*, vol. 1, no. 1-16 (1832), 85.

<sup>14</sup>See L. McDuff, 'The 1832 Liverpool cholera riots' in M. Holland, G. Gill and S. Burrell (eds), *Cholera & Conflict. 19th century cholera in Britain and its social consequences* (London, 2009), 95–107, 95.

<sup>15</sup>C.A. Cameron, *History of the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland* (Dublin, 1886), 183–84.

body snatched here or there; rather in London it was occurring on an industrial scale: the tides of the Thames served as the conveyor belt in the movement of cadavers from cholera cemeteries down river to central London.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, with the spread of cholera riots a new vocabulary arose. Chants and slurs recorded in newspapers during cholera riots of 1831 to 1832 at Sunderland, Aberdeen, Liverpool, Glasgow, Bristol, the East End of London, Camden Town, and Dublin reveal a new working-class slang, reflecting fears and obsessions before cholera had hit the British Isles: 'to burke', 'burking', and 'Burker'.<sup>17</sup> Most emblematic of these fears was the first major cholera riot in the British Isles and one of its most destructive. On 26 December 1831 a crowd at Aberdeen chanted 'Burn the house; down with the burking shop' and burnt to the ground the city's new anatomical college. It was the only time in Scotland during a cholera riot that the military had to be summoned.<sup>18</sup>

However, in the seventy-one cholera riots to follow in the British Isles, no other anatomical schools were targeted, even in the chants of the protesters. Moreover, those using the new vocabulary or whose actions showed great anxieties of body snatching as with a cholera riot in Paisley (Scotland) at the end of March, were not predominant among cholera riots in the British Isles: only fourteen of seventy-two riots show any signs that the horrors of body snatching were the underlying cause. The others attacking physicians, cholera hospitals, and their equipment fit the fears seen across Europe and the Atlantic: physicians in cahoots with the state had invented the new disease to thin populations of the poor. In mid-February, rioters in Glasgow's 'poorest' streets – Highland Close, Goose Dubbs, and Briggate (neighbourhoods just north of the Clyde, opposite Gorbals bridge) – believed the health board's strategy was similar to cattle culls to suppress a disease by weeding out the weak.<sup>19</sup> Other riots turned on fears of quick and intentional live burials. For instance, in a cholera riot at Greenock (on the Clyde estuary) in early March, a fourteen-year-old boy died shortly after being taken to the Cholera Hospital. 'Amongst the ignorant', it circulated that the boy had been killed by his hospital treatment. After the post-mortem, 'an immense crowd' of women and boys pursued his doctor, hooting and pelting him, and insisting that the boy be given a proper Christian burial. The police had to intervene.<sup>20</sup> Concerns over

<sup>16</sup>Cholera Subjects', *Morning Chronicle*, 24 March 1832.

<sup>17</sup>*The Morning Post*, 18 November 1831; M. Durey, *The Return of the Plague. British society and the cholera 1831–2* (Dublin, 1979), 162, 178 for four riots in early June; *Preston Chronicle*, 9 June 1832, 3; *Bristol Mercury*, 11 August 1832; *Scotsman*, 7 April 1832, 2; *Caledonian Mercury*, 5 April 1832; *Westmoreland Gazette*, 9 June 1832, 3; *Morning Chronicle*, 31 March 1832; S. Burrell, 'The Irish cholera epidemic of 1831–2: riots, Catholicism and the wake' in Holland, Gill and Burrell, *op. cit.*, 224–67, 230; more generally, Durey, *op. cit.*, 176–77; G. Gill, S. Burrell and J. Brown, 'Fear and frustration: the Liverpool cholera riots of 1832', *Lancet*, 358, 9277 (21 July 2001), 237.

<sup>18</sup>'Progress of the Cholera', *Manchester Times*, 31 December 1831. On this riot also see R. Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute* (2nd edn, London, 1988), 90–93. The paper claims the crowd numbered 20,000 and historians have not questioned its size, despite being ten times that of the largest cholera crowds in the much larger cities of London and Manchester. Given that Aberdeen's population in 1831 was only 32,912 (*The Statistical Accounts of Scotland, Accounts of 1834–45*, vol. XV, 143 [Edina, on-line edition], and *City of Aberdeen and its Vicinity* (Aberdeen, 1831), iii), this crowd figure was certainly greatly exaggerated.

<sup>19</sup>*Aberdeen Journal*, 22 February 1832; *Caledonian Mercury*, 18 February 1832; and *Manchester Times*, 18 February 1832.

<sup>20</sup>Cholera Riot at Greenock', *Morning Chronicle*, 5 March 1832.

burial also dominated the second largest cholera-riot crowd estimated in 1831–32 (at least 2000 persons): the Commercial Road riot in London's East End. Here, the concern voiced, according to the papers, was of a cholera victim having been buried alive; nothing was said about anatomy schools or body snatching.<sup>21</sup> Similar riots among the poor and marginal populations of Irish immigrants arose from similar suspicions over quick burials with two riots at Birmingham.<sup>22</sup> Another cholera riot among the poor on Edinburgh's outskirts gave no hints of the crowds' motives other than their distrust and pure hatred of medical authorities. The removal of a cholera patient sparked the crowd's fury and chant: 'Kill the doctors, nae Board o' Health!'<sup>23</sup> A cholera doctor, assigned to various places in Ireland since cholera began spreading there in April, described riots he witnessed at Ballyshannon, Ballina, Claremorris, and Sligo. By his assessment, their prime reason

was the old game played before my eyes for the fifteenth time since the arrival of pestilence at Sunderland [in November 1831]. The doctors, it was stated, were to have 10 guineas a day: £5 of every one they killed; and to poison without mercy.<sup>24</sup>

In these, nothing was hinted about profiting from supplying cadavers to anatomy colleges.

Italian cholera riots also possessed distinctive traits, especially with the peninsula's first cholera wave in 1836 to 1837, when such riots were confined almost entirely to Sicily. In contrast to the British Isles, where no evidence links cholera protest with the larger political struggle to pass the reform acts, at Siracusa, momentarily, they became intertwined with national politics, the revolutionary fervour of *la Giovine Italia*, then sweeping the peninsula to topple the Bourbon monarchy. The liberal lawyer Mario Adorno led the charge against the Bourbon state, propagandizing that cholera's spread was 'a devilish plot bent on poisoning the people.'<sup>25</sup> Elsewhere in Sicily along with a few cholera disturbances in the mainland South, the class configuration of cholera revolts mimicked those elsewhere in Europe: the poor and marginal groups (in Sicily, mostly peasants) attacked institutions of the state and the elites (in Sicily, large landowners and the nobility), accusing them of poisoning and disseminating the disease to kill off the poor. The difference here was that hospitals and physicians were rarely targeted;<sup>26</sup> this was a pattern that would, however, quickly change with subsequent cholera waves in Italy.

Yet, despite Adorno's short-lived attempt to oust the Bourbon regime by blaming them for inventing cholera, historians of Italy since the 1830s have doubted whether these riots possessed any progressive ideology. Michele Amari (1806–89) argued that the two revolts – one aroused by cholera, the other by a progressive political

<sup>21</sup>'Cholera Riot', *Morning Post*, 25 August 1832; *Scotsman*, 29 August 1832, 2.

<sup>22</sup>*Morning Chronicle*, 14 August 1832; 'Cholera Riots', *Scotsman*, 29 August 1832, 2; *Chelmsford Chronicle*, 24 August 1832, 2.

<sup>23</sup>'Cholera Riot', *The Examiner*, 6 May 1832.

<sup>24</sup>'The cholera in Ireland', *Lancaster Gazette*, 6 October 1832, from *The Literary Gazette*.

<sup>25</sup>A. Sansone, *Gli avvenimenti del 1837 in Sicilia* (Palermo, 1890), 106.

<sup>26</sup>Sansone, *op.cit.*, who described at least 29 cholera riots in 1837.

ideology – travelled along different tracks that hardly intersected. He argued instead that ‘cholera blocked every revolutionary tendency’; the cholera riots ‘possessed no political character.’<sup>27</sup> Later, based on prodigious archival research, Alfonso Sansoni’s verdict was more nuanced, especially regarding cholera riots in Catania and Siracusa, but his conclusion was much the same: ‘the horrible disease, cholera,’ had ‘interrupted and broken the movement of *la Giovine Italia* and the message of Mazzini.’<sup>28</sup> More recently, Franco della Perutta maintained that cholera’s chaos weakened the Bourbon state in Sicily, providing opportunities for the anti-Bourbon forces. Still, the groups of cholera rebels had difficulty organizing their movements and achieved little success.<sup>29</sup> In summary, Europe presents a kaleidoscope of contrasting political events and regimes on the eve of cholera’s first European tour of the 1830s, but across them, cholera and its riots provoked much the same fantasies and class alignments. Of course, cholera rioting did not erupt everywhere, 1830 to 1837, even where cholera mortalities attained their highest rates as at Bilston in the West Midlands.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, Fernand Braudel’s lesson for comparative history must be taken to heart: local events cannot explain pan-regional phenomena.<sup>31</sup>

### **Cholera protest over time**

Historians have paid much less attention to European cholera riots and their psychological and ideological underpinnings with successive epidemics into the twentieth century. None have considered the temporal transitions and continuities beyond two cholera waves or have compared them across national settings.<sup>32</sup> First, the second cholera epidemic to spread through Europe coincided with an even more tumultuous revolutionary period – that of 1848–49 – but now the fusing of cholera with riotous fervour was less evident than in the 1830s. This second cholera wave, moreover, killed more than Europe’s first one as well as any after

<sup>27</sup>P. Preto, *Epidemia, paura e politica nell’Italia moderna* (Bari, 1987), 140, taken from archival materials.

<sup>28</sup>Sansone, *op.cit.*, 204.

<sup>29</sup>F. della Perutta, *Mazzini e i rivoluzionari italiani: Il ‘partito d’azione’ 1830–1845* (Milan, 1974), 274.

<sup>30</sup>Durey, *op.cit.*, 186. Given Bilston’s high rate of cholera cases and absence of rioting, together with the infrequency of rioting during Europe’s next cholera wave, 1848–49, when case numbers and mortalities reached their apex in European history (as discussed later in this article), one might speculate that cholera severity and rioting were inversely related. However, no correlation between the two seems evident. Sligo, in the province of Connacht, was the worst hit per capita of any locality in the British Isles. At least two-thirds its population had fled by September, and of those remaining, the disease killed one in four (P.J. Henry, *Sligo. Medical care in the past 1800–1965* [Dublin, 1995], 83), more than five times Bilston’s rate (693 cholera deaths in a population of 14,500). According to Edinburgh’s *Caledonian Mercury*, 1 September 1832, Sligo’s statistics were even bleaker: by 1 September only 2860 persons remained there; 14,000 had left or died. Nine days later, the paper revised its figures, claiming only a thousand remained from a population that at the beginning of the year numbered 15,000 (10 September 1832). Yet this town produced the worst cholera social violence of any place in Ireland with three riots during the summer of 1832 (see Cohn, *Epidemics, op.cit.*, ch. 7).

<sup>31</sup>F. Braudel and F. Spooner, ‘Prices in Europe from 1450 to 1750’ in E.E. Rich and C.H. Wilson (eds), *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, vol. VI (Cambridge, 1967), 374–486, 437; on this lesson, also see the essays of R. Binion, *Past Impersonal. Group process in human history* (DeKalb IL, 2005).

<sup>32</sup>For the few to study cholera disturbances after the 1830s, see Snowden, *op.cit.*; Evans, *op.cit.*; R.J. Evans, *Death in Hamburg. Society and politics in the cholera years 1830–1910* (Oxford, 1987); P. Bourdelais and J.-Y. Raulot, *Une Peur Bleue. Histoire du choléra en France 1832–1854* (Paris, 1987); Kudlick, *op.cit.*

it.<sup>33</sup> I have spotted only four cholera riots across the Britain Isles: one at County Kerry at the Western tip of Ireland in June 1849; a second at the fishing village of Findhorn in northern Scotland, west of Elgin, in July; a third, at another northern Scottish fishing village, Dunbeath, twenty miles south of Wick; and a fourth at Totnes in South Devon.<sup>34</sup> Not only were these far removed from major cities and comprised of handfuls of neighbours that newspapers did not bother counting, but in addition, they no longer reflect the same class cleavages and hatred of the 1830s. The threats of County Kerry concerned whether a Protestant cholera victim had lapsed to Catholicism in his dying hours. His Protestant neighbours assembled and violently opposed the intervention of a Catholic priest who came to perform the patient's last rites. The two Scottish ones turned on fears of contagion by illegally preventing outsiders entering their communities. Only the riot at Totnes resulted in a crowd attacking a hospital but the reasons now differed from those in 1832. Instead of attempting to 'liberate' cholera patients from the clutches of doctors and the state, the rioters sought to block any cholera victim coming into their midst. As with the three others, fears of contagion motivated the protesters.

In addition, several small incidents spurred by the spread of cholera lingered on in the United States with one significant riot erupting across the border in Quebec City: a crowd of 2000 demolished the cholera hospital; the police were incapable of controlling the crowd, and the military had to be summoned.<sup>35</sup> Yet, even here, with the largest estimated crowd of any cholera riot in North American history, earlier mythologies of physicians or state agents poisoning the poor fail to appear. Instead, as with those in the British Isles during its second cholera wave, the spark of Quebec's riot rested on fear of contagion and the desire to remove any carriers from their city. For France, I have not found any cholera disturbances for these revolutionary years; nor has Kutlick or others working in French archives. Instead, the mid-century one appears as a watershed in France. I know of only three further cholera riots and these were in provincial towns or villages in mountainous regions of southern France: Le Var, Arles, and Auriol.<sup>36</sup> From this trajectory, Kutlick has concluded that 'cholera's potency' to provoke violence had derived from 'its novelty

<sup>33</sup>Evans, 'Epidemics and revolutions', *op. cit.* 155, 169; C. Hamlin, *Cholera. The biography* (Oxford, 2009), 55; also see J.N. Hays, *The Burdens of Disease. Epidemics and human response in western history* (New Brunswick NJ, 1998), 159; for England and Wales, cholera reached its apex in 1849 with 40,000 deaths: F. Clemow, *The Cholera Epidemic of 1892 in the Russian Empire* (London, 1893), 31; K.D. Patterson, 'Cholera diffusion in Russia, 1823–1923', *Social Science Medicine* 38 (1994), 1176 and 1179.

<sup>34</sup>Some have suggested that after the wave of 1831–3, no further cholera riots appeared in Britain; see Durey, *op. cit.*, 211; Gill and Holland, 'Conclusion: the cholera riots in context' in Holland, Gill and Burrell, *op. cit.*, 331–41, 340. For the four riots above, see *Leeds Intelligencer*, 16 June 1849, taken from *Kerry Evening Post*; *Inverness Courier*, 20 September 1849; *Elgin Courier*, 14 September 1849; *Scotsman*, 24 November 1849, 2; *Western Times*, 6 October 1849.

<sup>35</sup>Attempt to Destroy the Cholera Hospital at Quebec', *Trenton State Gazette*, 23 July 1849, 4. Australian and British papers also covered the story; and see G. Bilson, *A Darkened House. Cholera in nineteenth-century Canada* (Toronto, 1980), 125–26.

<sup>36</sup>R. Baehrel, 'Épidémie et terreur: histoire et sociologie', *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, 23 (1951), 114–15, 128–29. I have found none of these events in any British or American papers or in Gallica's online French ones. For three other instances of physical violence provoked in later waves of cholera (1847, 1851, and 1870), see Salomé, *op. cit.*, 103–104. From her brief descriptions, all appear to have been attacks on single individuals by small groups and not actions of substantial crowds.

in 1832.<sup>37</sup> Recent historiography on epidemics in general – the assumption that epidemics most readily spur blame and violence when diseases are new and mysterious without cures at hand<sup>38</sup> – supports Kutlick’s conclusion. By the third European cholera wave of the mid-1860s, John Snow’s theories of cholera’s water transition had gained acceptance.<sup>39</sup>

## Later cholera riots in Russia and Eastern Europe

The trajectories of cholera violence in the British Isles, France, and to some extent in North America underlie the common view that the social toxins of epidemics declined or disappeared altogether after their first appearance or with increased medical understanding of them.<sup>40</sup> Yet, should we generalize from these countries’ experiences? In Russia, places in Eastern Europe, and Italy, trajectories of cholera violence instead evolved in the opposite direction: rioting became more violent and extensive with successive waves of cholera to the end of the nineteenth century or even to Europe’s last major epidemic in 1910–11. To date, no one has compared the number, range, or ferocity of these revolts, or how their ideologies, conspiracies, and myths may have changed. To take the cholera year of 1892 alone for Russia: in July at Astrakhan, an administrative centre on the Volga, 28 kilometres northwest of the Caspian Sea, rumours spread that the sick were forced into hospitals and buried alive. A crowd of 10,000 and by some estimates 30,000 in a city of around 80,000 – the highest estimated for any cholera riot, those of the 1830s included – set the city’s hospitals ablaze, and then attacked the Governor’s house. A military detachment arrived, arrested the leaders, and dispersed the crowd, killing three.<sup>41</sup> Less than a month later, at Saratov, a major port on the Volga, rumours again spread of hospitals as death chambers and physicians as murderers: ‘ignorant peasants, small tradesmen, and mechanics’ attacked medical assistants, killed two and mutilated their bodies, smashed windows, burst into the dwellings of policemen and doctors, destroyed the residence of the Chief of Police, ransacked shops, forced their way into the police station, burnt official

<sup>37</sup>Kudlick, *op.cit.*, 213–14.

<sup>38</sup>For the citation, see note 40.

<sup>39</sup>See Hamlin, *op.cit.*, 191; for Naples, *Mercury* (Hobart, Tas.), 21 November 1867, 3, based on an unidentified Neapolitan paper of 14 August.

<sup>40</sup>On these assumptions, see numerous citations in Cohn, *Epidemics, op.cit.*, Introduction and ch. 30. Dorothy Nelkin and Sander Gilman, ‘Placing blame for devastating disease’, *Social Research*, LV (1988), 362–78, reprinted in Arien Mack (ed.), *Time of Plague. The history and social consequences of lethal epidemic disease* (New York, 1991), 40, claim that ‘Blaming has always been a means to make mysterious and devastating diseases comprehensible’. Roy Porter, ‘The case of consumption’ in J. Bourriau (ed.), *Understanding Catastrophe* (Cambridge, 1992), 179, concurred with Susan Sontag that ‘deadly diseases’ especially when ‘there is no cure to hand’ and the ‘aetiology ... is obscure ... spawn sinister connotations’.

<sup>41</sup>*Pittsburgh Dispatch*, 27 July 1892, 12, based on correspondence, put the Astrakhan ‘mob’ of 3 July 1892 that broke into the hospital and beat all its doctors severely at between 20,000 and 30,000. At St Petersburg in 1831, the crowd numbers may have been larger, but I know of no sources to estimate them. Also see *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, 12 July 1892, 12. The Australian papers found in the Trove Digitized Newspapers followed these Russian cholera disturbances at Astrakhan, Saratov, Taskend, Nijni-Novgorod, Starobelski, and Galicia, from July to September, 1892, but not with the detail they gave to cholera riots in Italy. With the exception of a riot at Majorea in the Voronezh district in early August, the riots are also found in the British, French, and US papers.

books and documents, destroyed cholera carts, ‘ruthlessly massacred all members of the hospital staff’, looted the new Central Hospital, and set its sheds on fire. Several days later, ‘a serious riot of the same character’, erupted at Pokrovsk, near Saratov, attacking the hospital, wrecking the resident physician’s lodgings, and killing a medical assistant.<sup>42</sup> One hundred and sixty were arrested and tried.<sup>43</sup> Riots spread to other towns in the province at Volsk, and Khvalinsk, where the ‘mob’ took over the town for three days.<sup>44</sup> Rioting returned to Astrakhan, targeting doctors, sacking the hospital again and threatening the police.<sup>45</sup> In the same week, ‘serious disturbances’ flared in the province of Astrakhan, in the small town of Trednaia (Srednaia-Akhtouba) and in surrounding villages of Tolenoï, Zaimische, Sye-Darya: physicians, pharmacists, and government buildings were targeted.<sup>46</sup>

During the same month – but because of Czarist censorship, seeping to the foreign press almost a month later – riots’ erupted at Tashkent on the Uzbekistan-Kazakhstan border. Immigrant Asian Sarts believed cholera was the work of Russian doctors to poison their tribesmen. Armed with revolvers and daggers, 5000 of them invaded the Russian quarter of the city, plundered shops, and stoned ‘all citizens in their way’. They destroyed the residence of the Deputy Governor, Count Poutinstinoff, chased him through the streets, trampled, stoned, and beat him to death, mutilating his features ‘beyond recognition’. Cossacks and the army quelled the revolt, killing sixty Sarts by one account, seventy, by another, with ‘hundreds’ wounded.<sup>47</sup> Despite the Czar proclaiming a state of siege at Nijni-Novgorod and sending military vessels down the Volga, cholera riots spread through central Russia, at Seradanach, Toubanound, Astrakham, Tolenoï, Zamischa, Balakovo, Kazan (capital of Tartastan), and other places.<sup>48</sup> At the end of the month, a US paper concluded that these Russian acts of violence ‘scarcely find a parallel in modern history since the plague riots of the Middle Ages or only in Russian annals of the seventeenth-century uprisings of Stenko Razin and Pugacheff’.<sup>49</sup> Surely, this was an overstatement. Nonetheless, it is striking that the earlier cholera riots at St Petersburg and other places in Russian and Eastern Europe in 1831 were not mentioned.

In August, cholera rioting spread further, as at Serdodsck [Serdobsk], hundreds of miles from the Volga to the east, where rioters burnt 300 houses. Still more seriously, a riot flared on 1 August at the Hughes’ steel works and collieries

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<sup>42</sup>Cholera Riot in Saratoff, Murder of doctors and nurses; *Guardian*, 20 July 1892, 8, from Reuter’s; *The Scotsman*, 20 July 1892, 8.

<sup>43</sup>Cholera riots at Saratoff and Pokrovski; *Reynold’s Newsletter*, 11 September 1892, front page.

<sup>44</sup>*Scotsman*, 22 July 1892, 5, from Reuter’s at St Petersburg on the previous day; *Edinburgh Evening News*, 19 July 1892, 3.

<sup>45</sup>*Scotsman*, 19 July 1892, 5; and *Nottingham Evening Post*, 19 July 1892, 3.

<sup>46</sup>*The Record-Union*, 2 August 1892, front page; *Scotsman*, 26 July 1892, 5, from Reuters at St Petersburg, the previous day; *Western Times*, 27 July 1892, 4. On Russian censorship restricting papers to published only official information of cholera, see *Manchester Evening News*, 2 August 1892, 4.

<sup>47</sup>*St Paul Daily Globe*, 29 December 1892, 4; *Scotsman*, 2 August 1892, 6. Also, see its earlier brief notice on 30 July from a Reuter’s telegram of the day before.

<sup>48</sup>*Morning Call*, 23 July 1892 and 30 July 1892; *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, 27 July 1892, 12 and 30 July 1892, 7; *Witchita Daily Eagle*, 26 July 1892, 2; *The Record-union*, 30 July 1892, front page; *Le Temps* (Paris), 25 July 1892, 2.

<sup>49</sup>*Pittsburgh Dispatch*, 27 July 1892, 12.

at Hughesofka, now Donetsk in the Ukraine. It began with the usual fears of intentional murder by elites and cholera hospitals as pre-planned death chambers: ‘a mob’ stoned the police removing a woman to the hospital. The crowd next sacked the hospital and that evening tried to set the town on fire. According to an Odessa correspondent, 10,000 assembled the following morning, sacked the hospital and public pharmacy, killed several Jews, invaded the factories, and burnt down the town, ‘every house reduced to ashes, including even the church’<sup>50</sup> It took three days to restore order and only with the intervention of two regiments and a battery of artillery.<sup>51</sup> By *Le Temps*’s count, on the first day of fighting alone, the rioters killed or gravely injured twenty-five Cossacks, while for the rioters, ‘two hundred were put out of combat’. Yet by the second day ‘the Cossacks were unable to defend themselves against the thousands of workers and were mostly killed’.<sup>52</sup> Over the next months to 1895, cholera riots spread into Syria, Asia Minor, the Congress of Poland, Persia, villages in Hungary, then to Hamburg, Munich, Livorno, and as far west as Belgium.<sup>53</sup>

### Europe’s last major cholera wave in Italy

For Italy, the second deadly cholera wave of the late 1840s into the 1850s proved only a momentary pause in cholera’s social violence. From its next cholera epidemic in 1867 to its last major one, of 1910–11, the old mythologies of physicians, hospitals, and the state engaged in purposeful poisoning re-ignited grisly collective violence from workers, agricultural labourers, and impoverished women and children. We will focus on this last cholera wave. Despite prime-minister Giovanni Giolitti’s efforts to censor all news of cholera and especially the internationally embarrassing mass assaults against hospitals, health workers, and public officials, these two years chart the widest geographic spread of collective cholera violence in Italian history. At least twenty-six major riots can be counted, several with crowds estimated at 3000 in small towns such as Taranto, Massafra, and Segni. At Ostuni, in the Province of Brindisi, Puglia, one paper estimated the crowd at 8000, but another, more realistically, put it at 3000 for this cathedral town of 18,500 in 1910. These riots had two major epicentres, the first in Puglia in the fishing and fig-growing regions of Bari; the second in Calabria, north of Cosenza. The local context in Puglia was an agricultural recession made worse by crippling sanitary sanctions that declared figs and shellfish as cholera’s sources. Those at the forefront of the cholera violence, however, were impoverished women (*‘donnicciuole’*) and the targets of their discontent were the same as they had been across much of Europe since the 1830s: physicians, local authorities, hospitals, and town halls. At Massafra,

<sup>50</sup>*Scotsman*, 27 August 1892, 7. John Hughes (1814–89) was a Welsh engineer, inventor, and entrepreneur, invited by the Czar to build a steel works in 1868 to provide the metal plating for a naval fortification on the Baltic. The family works prospered until the revolution. Now called Donetsk, the city population is over one million.

<sup>51</sup>*Wichita Daily Eagle*, 27 August 1892, front page.

<sup>52</sup>*Le Temps* (Paris), 28 August 1892, 2.

<sup>53</sup>These are described in Cohn, *Epidemics, op.cit.*, ch. 8.

in the province of Lecce, impoverished men and women, 'armed with spades, sticks and other farm implements', congregated in front of City Hall, marched to the hospital, where they 'liberated' cholera patients, 'parading them triumphantly on their shoulders' back to their homes. They then destroyed the hospital: 'The general belief of the people is that the doctors inoculate cholera-stricken persons with poison.'<sup>54</sup> In addition, traditional religious beliefs often entered the toxic brew of violent emotions. At the Cathedral town of Bisceglie, forty kilometres north of Bari, concerns about shell-fishing and economic insecurity as seen with the cholera riots at Taranto and the fig-growing towns Molfetta, Mola di Bari, and Barletta also conditioned mistrust and violence at Bisceglie. Agricultural workers and fishermen mobilized to oppose supposed anti-cholera preventive measures that crippled the economies of small towns and villages through Puglia. Yet at Bisceglie the Cathedral was the principal battlefield, where first women and children stormed its doors to prevent the Red Cross fumigating the sacred statues: 'many hundreds of women and children ... poured into the Cathedral as though a swollen river' and ran to the high altar. Seeing the statues of their saints blackened, 'they turned demonic' and succeeded in ousting the Red Cross.<sup>55</sup> Aided by fishermen and fig-growers armed with revolvers, '*i rivoltesi*' then took possession of the city.

North of Cosenza at Verbicaro, an isolated mountain town of 6000, eighteen kilometres from the nearest railway station (Paola), without a road to it passable by automobile or horse-drawn coach, the destructiveness of cholera rioting reached a crescendo rarely seen with earlier cholera waves in Italy, those of 1836 to 1837 included. Verbicaro's cholera social violence was such that it momentarily broke the Giolitti censorship, producing numerous and long soul-searching editorials in Italy's major newspapers for more than a month after the tragic events. Yet, historians have hardly noticed it.<sup>56</sup> Its origins exemplify as well as any cholera riot the old cholera myths and fears. A crowd of rebels ('*i rivoltosi*'), numbering 1200 attacked the town hall, while the mayor was holding a meeting. At first, women 'animated by the desire to do violence against the mayor', comprised the crowd, but soon men and boys armed with axes, scythes, and knives arrived, chanting 'Death to the Mayor!'<sup>57</sup> An employee, late for the meeting, appeared at the back and soon was discovered as the clerk involved with the town's recent census. A

<sup>54</sup>Citations from N. Simonetti and M. Sangiorgi, *Il colera in Puglia dal 1831 ai giorni nostri* (Fasano, 2003), 189 (author's own translation); the last citation is from *The Times Dispatch* (Richmond, VA), 10 September 1911, front page. Also see *Washington Herald*, 12 September 1911, 7; *Sun* (NYC), 12 September 1911, 2; 'The Anti-Hygenic Riots', *The Times*, 11 September 1911, 7; and *La Stampa*, 9 September 1911, 6, which supplies fewer details than the foreign press based on Italian correspondents.

<sup>55</sup>*Corriere della Sera*, 23 September 1910, front page. Otherwise, the Milanese paper reported much the same as the US ones based on Milanese correspondents, except *Corriere* did not allude to the fishermen's participation. Instead, as with the scenes inside the cathedral, it presented the riot as overwhelmingly one of women. The only men mentioned were 'hooligans' (*giovinasti*), who climbed the belfry and began the bells peeling. *Corriere* adds to the US papers' accounts that women became even more enraged when a bullet left an individual in a pool of blood in the cathedral. The women took the cadaver and placed it on the high altar.

<sup>56</sup>Curiously, Snowden, *op.cit.*, does not mention it. One small book is centred on it, M.P. Lorenzo, *Colera sovversiva. Le rivolte di Verbicaro (1855 e 1911)* (Salerno, 1990), but I know of no copy of it outside of Italy.

<sup>57</sup>'La folla paura degli "untori": una visita a Verbicaro. La popolazione in fuga', *Il Corriere della Sera*, 31 August 1911, 2.

woman struck his head with a knotty stick. Another shot him with a revolver, while a third slashed his head off with a pruning knife.<sup>58</sup> The papers maintained that this horrific scene had not occurred at random. The employee's job with the census had been his undoing. Harking back to a basic plot of cholera conspiracies across time and space, the peasants believed it to be the instrument to determine who should be eliminated because of supposed overpopulation: 'Certain ones' had been selected in advance 'for the sacrifice'.<sup>59</sup> With spades, knives, sticks, and agricultural implements, 'the rebels' paraded through the town, shouting 'Long live the king!' 'Death to the Mayor!' They knocked down telegraph poles to prevent authorities summoning troops, besieged the town hall, wrecked the furniture, burned its archives and the building, along with the praetorial court, the telegraph office and the mayor's house, and released prisoners from the local gaol. The mayor, town clerk, and judge fled. A group of eleven, including three women, caught the clerk, 'hacked [him] to pieces'. The judge 'died of fright' as he reached the train station. The mayor escaped but not for long: two days later, he returned to resume his duties but was murdered, replicating his grandfather's fate fifty-five years before, when he had been Verbicaro's mayor during a cholera riot.<sup>60</sup> With the 1911 revolt, troops did not arrive until the following day and arrested eleven ringleaders. Corpses were left unburied; half the town's population fled to the mountains, believing the government planned to poison them. A month later, they still resided in mountain gorges, returning nightly in armed bands to scavenge food.<sup>61</sup> Famous journalists such as Luigi Barzini (Sr) reflected on Verbicaro's disaster and explained it as the 'southern problem' or even more specifically as a 'Calabrese problem' that rested on peasant conceptions of the state, a feudal relationship between government and the people [popolo], in which the state was seen as a 'foreign power', an occupying army.<sup>62</sup>

Not only were similar cholera riots simultaneously raging in Sicily, Puglia, and the Abruzzo, neither in 1910–11 nor earlier had these disturbances been exclusive to the Italian South. In 1910 to 1911 alone, cholera uprisings occurred in the hinterland of Rome at Terracina, Anzio, and Nettuno (twice).<sup>63</sup> Moreover, a correspondent from the *Lancet* claimed that 'a similar uprising, equally inspired by superstitious dread of hygienic precautions and the institution of a lazaretto', occurred at Venice, 'doubtless to be followed by others'.<sup>64</sup> The largest and most destructive of these northern ones occurred at Segni, a town in Lazio, then less than an hour by train southwest of Rome. With a crowd estimated at 3000, it was among Italy's largest cholera revolts and was richly interwoven into

<sup>58</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>59</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>60</sup>Papers such as *The Sun* mistakenly said it was his father. 'La folle paura degli untori', *op.cit.*

<sup>61</sup>Luigi Barzini, 'Una terra italiana da redimere', *Corriere della Sera*, 4 September 1911, 1–2. On Verbicaro in 1911, see Lorenzo, *op.cit.*

<sup>62</sup>Barzini, *op.cit.*

<sup>63</sup>Tumulti popolari per il colera a Terracina', *La Stampa*, 18 October 1910, 2; *The World's News* (Sydney, NSW), 26 November 1910, 18. 'Le selvagge scanate di Nettuno contro un medico della Croce Rosso. Un tentativo di linciaggio', *Corriere della Sera*, 5 July 1911, 4 and *Corriere della Sera*, 30 December 1911.

<sup>64</sup>*Lancet*, 22 July 1911, 274.

the old mythologies of government agents and physicians out to massacre the poor. With only five cholera patients in Segni's newly-formed cholera hospital, inhabitants marched on the town hall, believing that 'the municipal authorities, the Government, and the Carabineers were in league to poison them, and had organized a slaughter of the innocents.'<sup>65</sup> Quickly, the rioters overwhelmed the police and battered down the door of the town hall. Their targets were the mayor and hospital clerks. 'The women were particularly ferocious.' One 'seized a Carabineer by his tunic and threw him to the ground. He was disarmed, trampled upon, and wounded.' After destroying the hall's furnishings, another 'woman seized the municipal flag and shouted, "To the hospital"'. The 'mob' followed and surged through the town, crying 'Death to the doctors and nurses.' They entered the hospital and released three patients, two of whom were at the point of death, 'and carried them in their arms in a procession to their homes. The scene was ghastly in the extreme.'<sup>66</sup>

Despite new elements of an economic rationale and a clearer sense of organization, planning, and leadership in these riots,<sup>67</sup> the old myths present at the outset in the 1830s persisted: beliefs of intentional poisoning and planned massacres of the poor, with hospitals, doctors, and governments as the agents of a grandiose Malthusian plot. These ideas were present not only in isolated and neglected agrarian districts as at Verbicaro but within Rome's hinterland and seaside resorts and possibly at Venice, nodes of international tourism and modern commerce. No doubt, this last major wave of cholera in Italy produced further incidents, presently hidden by the national censorship. A long Sunday front-page editorial in Milan's *Corriere della Sera* two weeks after the Verbicaro riots maintained that this 'atrocious event had not yet to run its course ... beliefs in the intentional man-made origins of the disease persisted at Massafra, Sant'Angelo in Grotte, Cetara and several other rural communes of the South'. Except for Massafra, none of the other tumults have surfaced from my searches through thousands of newspaper pages. As this same editorial alleged, belief that the State was poisoning the people had become stronger in 1910 to 1911 than during the previous cholera waves of 1866 to 1867 or 1884 to 1885, that is, after the mechanisms of cholera transmission had been largely discovered and Robert Koch had cultured the bacillus.<sup>68</sup> For at least a half century, cholera had no longer been a new or mysterious disease.

<sup>65</sup>The report derives from Reuter's, based on a Milanese dispatch and appeared in Scottish, English, and Australian papers: see e.g. 'Cholera Riots at Segni; Anger of ignorant Populace', *Scotsman*, 17 October 1911, 8; also, 'Una ripetizione dei fatti di Verbicaro: Il Municipio di Segni incendiato dalla popolazione', *La Stampa*, 17 October 1911, 4.

<sup>66</sup>*Scotsman*, 17 October 1911, 8.

<sup>67</sup>In addition, to economic protests by fig-growers and fishermen, whose livelihoods were threatened by supposed anti-cholera preventive measures banning commerce in their produce, at Palermo in 1884, workers across occupations mounted a massive demonstration ('*numerossima*') against the city's cholera quarantine and demanded that the state provide bread and work for labourers: *Il Pungolo: Corriere di Milano*, 24–25 August 1884, 2.

<sup>68</sup>*Il Corriere della Sera*, 17 September 1911, front page: 'Perchè non è scomparsa la credenza nel veleno di Stato.'

## Marx, Engels, and modern historians

Despite these waves of revolt from the 1830s into the twentieth century – consistently aligned by class, with peasants, workers, and impoverished women mounting barricades to attack state officials, governments, elites, and the medical profession – historians have yet to investigate them over the long term and especially within the parameters of class struggle. Although these events swirled through their lives, filling their contemporary newspapers, neither Karl Marx nor Fredrick Engels ever reflected on them. In *The Conditions of the Working Class in England* (1845), Engels mentions cholera only twice.<sup>69</sup> His brief comments attributed its rise at Manchester in 1832 to the horrendous housing conditions of the poor. The fifty volumes of Marx's and Engels' correspondence and their other works mentions cholera only in three further places. On 13 September 1854, when Marx resided at 28 Dean Street, within 100 yards of the Broad Street pump, which John Snow famously identified as Soho's source of cholera, Marx, similarly to Engels, attributed the disease to social conditions:

Dans ce moment the total absence of money is the more horrible – quite apart from the fact that family wants do not cease for an instant – as Soho is a choice district for cholera, the mob is croaking right and left (e.g. an average of 3 per house in Broad Street) and 'victuals' [Lebensmittel] are the best defence against the beastly thing.<sup>70</sup>

Eleven days later Marx's speculation about cholera's cause was closer to the mark but with a bizarre twist:

London, 22 September 1854: The cholera epidemic, now much abated, is said to have been particularly severe in our district because the sewers made in June, July and August, were driven through the pits where those who died of the plague 1668 (? I think) were buried.<sup>71</sup>

Finally, with the fourth cholera wave in 1866 Marx returned to his original supposition, emphasizing housing stock, despite water sources now becoming the accepted mode of cholera's transmission:<sup>72</sup>

The cholera is paying us [Londoners] its respects with the utmost gravity, and Dr. Hunter's report, in the VIII<sup>th</sup> Report of the Health Board on the Housing of the Poor, which appeared last week, is presumably intended to serve Madame Cholera as a Directory of addresses calling for preferential visitation.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>69</sup>F. Engels, *The Conditions of the Working Class in England*, trans. W.O. Henderson and W.H. Chaloner (Stanford, 1958; German edn, 1845), 73, 75–76.

<sup>70</sup>*Marx & Engels Collected Works* (London, 1975–), 39:481, no. 242, letter to Engels, 13 September 1854, 28 Dean Street, Soho.

<sup>71</sup>*ibid.*, 39: 483. That plague of London occurred in 1665 to 1666.

<sup>72</sup>Hamlin, *op.cit.*, 191. However, Hamlin and others may have overstated the extent to which Snow's ideas had been ignored before James Farr rejuvenated them during the epidemic of 1866. See for instance Henry Wentworth Acland, *Memoir on the Cholera at Oxford in the Year 1854* (London, 1856): 'For instance, few persons will doubt the connection between some Cholera outbreaks and the condition of the Water – as in our County Gaol; or more extended districts elaborately and meritoriously investigated by Dr. Snow' (77).

<sup>73</sup>*ibid.*, 42:301. I thank Carole Fabricant for these references. In addition, scattered remarks on the effects of diseases, chronic and contagious, on labourers are found in *Capital*, vol. 1 (*Marx and Engels Collected Works, op. cit.*). Cholera is listed with other diseases in the section, 'The Nomad Population', regarding transmission 'of small-pox, typhus, cholera, scarlet fever, &c' into the dwellings of recently arrived agricultural labourers in industrial centres (657). However, Marx supplies only one example, and it regards the spread of smallpox; I know no place, where Marx mentions cholera's social violence.

In addition, one of the ten to attend Marx's funeral at Highgate cemetery was E. Ray Lankester, son of Edwin, first to identify the cholera bacillus in water. Yet, an analysis of cholera and its social consequences did not enter any of Marx's works published in his lifetime, and he appears to have been oblivious to any manifestations of its social protest and class struggle. Still more surprising is an absence of attention to cholera's social violence by more recent historians of the New Left who have studied nineteenth- and twentieth-century class struggle meticulously – E.P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, John Foster, John Calhoun, and others – despite these events sparking crowds estimated as high as 30,000, taking control of cities (even if only briefly), murdering governors, mayors, judges, physicians, pharmacists, and nurses, destroying factories and towns and which some contemporary commentators believed, 'scarcely [finds] a parallel in modern history'.<sup>74</sup>

Certainly, the bitter class distrust, hatred, and antagonism ignited by cholera was not 'class struggle' in a classical Marxist sense, tied to wresting control over the means of production from the bourgeoisie or altering social hierarchies and rule by industrial, mercantile, or landed elites. As noted above, this violence rarely touched the larger political contests then swirling throughout much of Europe in 1831 to 1837 or later. As Italian historians have emphasized, even in Sicily in 1837, where at Siracusa cholera riots shared the same platform with the struggle to liberate Italy from large landowners and the Bourbon monarchy, the two intersected only momentarily. Instead, cholera violence blunted the effectiveness of social and political revolt, and its association with wider mass popular and political movements was less evident with cholera's return during the revolutionary years of 1848 to 1849.

Yet during the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, Marxist historians, especially in Britain, have widened notions of class struggle beyond the point of production as with popular insurrections against abuses of power by nobilities, or encroachments by states and municipalities on rights in common or against broad-based citizenship during the late Middle Ages.<sup>75</sup> With the revolts of Levellers, Diggers, Fifth Monarchists, and the Ranters during the English Civil War, the range of these struggles extended to religious toleration and political participation.<sup>76</sup> For the nineteenth century, the spotlight has turned on social movements of 'primitive rebels' – mafia, pre-industrial urban mobs, labour religious sects and millenarian groups – whose attitudes and actions recalled movements of the central Middle Ages. As Eric Hobsbawm illustrated, social banditry, which had 'next to no organization or ideology' and classical

<sup>74</sup>Citation from 'Doctors Killed by the Mob', *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, 27 July 1892, 12. Although not of the 'New Left', also see the highly influential work of Ralf Dahrendorf, *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society* (London, 1959).

<sup>75</sup>See R.H. Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free. Medieval peasant movements and the English rising of 1381* (London, 1973); with new introduction by C. Dyer (London, 2003); also S.K. Cohn, *Lust for Liberty. The politics of social revolt in Medieval Europe, 1200–1425* (Cambridge, 2006); for antiquity, see G.E.M. De Ste Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World. From the archaic age to the Arab conquests* (London, 1981).

<sup>76</sup>C. Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down* (London, 1972).

pre-industrial urban ‘mobs’ of the late nineteenth century that attacked foreigners, have not endeared themselves to historians, Marxist or not: few will regret their disappearance.<sup>77</sup> Yet Hobsbawm insisted that historians must attempt to understand them, because ‘they played an important role in the political evolution of the modern world, before giving way to better movements.’<sup>78</sup>

With the mythologies, conspiracy theories, and violence associated with certain epidemic diseases, as with cholera in Venezuela in 1992,<sup>79</sup> or Ebola in West Africa in 2014, we cannot now be as confident as was Hobsbawm in 1959 that such movements have vanished from our present worlds. On a positive note, the study of these past movements not only can lead to historical understanding, it can plot historical parallels and from them point to solutions to current problems. Although Ebola is not cholera or a bacterium, similarities between the two diseases are striking: the effects of rapid dehydration, explosion of bodily fluids, high rates of lethality of 50% and greater (at least in Africa for the former, and before antibiotics for the latter), and their socio-psychological reactions, as witnessed with Ebola in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone from April to December 2014.<sup>80</sup> Despite distances in time and differences in social, economic, and cultural contexts, similar distrust and suspicion of health and state authorities produced similar slogans and uses of violence. In West Africa, inhabitants resisted quarantine; accused the Red-Cross of purposeful poisoning; assaulted health workers, especially when they interfered with traditional burial customs; brutally wounded and murdered hospital workers, doctors, politicians and journalists; and chanted slogans reminiscent of European cholera revolts reaching back to the 1830s: ‘Ebola is a lie!’ ‘Here, if the people come in [the hospital], they don’t leave alive.’<sup>81</sup>

An eventual resolution to these patterns of distrust and violence followed paths seen much earlier in Europe. Cholera riots continued in many cities and regions through the late nineteenth century and, in Italy and Russia, into the twentieth, where elites continued to belittle the supposed ‘superstitions’ of villagers, minorities, and the poor, violated their burial customs and religious beliefs, and imposed stringent anti-cholera regulations even after most of them had been proven to be ineffectual. Moreover, ruling elites in these places addressed popular resistance with military force and brutal repression. By contrast, distrust and rumours of purposeful poisoning abated where elite attitudes and impositions

<sup>77</sup>E.J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels. Studies in archaic forms of social movement in the 19th and 20th century* (Manchester, 1959, 2nd edn with new preface, 1971), cit. 4, 124, chs 5 and 6.

<sup>78</sup>*ibid.*, 125.

<sup>79</sup>See the conspiracy theories of East Venezuelan Indian crab and fishermen; Charles L. Briggs, ‘Theorizing modernity conspiratorially: science, scale, and the political economy of public discourse in explanations of a cholera epidemic’, *American Ethnologist*, 31 (2004), 164–87, esp. 169–70; Cohn, *Epidemics*, *op.cit.*, ch. 10.

<sup>80</sup>The following narrative is based on *Attacks on Health. Global report of WHO*, Geneva, 18 May 2015; *New York Times*, 12 February 2016, 15; P. Bellickfeb, ‘Red Cross faces attacks at Ebola victims’ funerals’; J. Fairhead, ‘Understanding social resistance to Ebola response in Guinea’ (2015) <http://www.ebola-anthropology.net/evidence/1269/> (accessed 16 September 2015); other references cited in S.K. Cohn and R. Kutalek, ‘Historical parallels, Ebola and cholera: understanding community distrust and social violence with epidemics’ *PLOS: Current Outbreaks* (26 January 2016).

<sup>81</sup>See Cohn and Kutalek, *op. cit.*

changed, substituting charitable assistance and negotiation for harsh regulations and repression. With cholera riots, destruction, killings, and arrests that mounted to 263 at Königsberg in 1831, Berlin learnt these lessons fast. The king, city government, and its middle classes intervened, modified stringent regulations over quarantine and burial practices, organized soup kitchens for the unemployed, and provided care for the orphans of cholera victims. Despite rumours of poisoning 'common throughout Prussia' and cholera riots that had just flared or would shortly ensue at Königsberg, Memel, Stettin and smaller Prussian towns and villages in 1831, none occurred at Berlin, either in 1831 or during later cholera waves.<sup>82</sup>

On the other hand, recalcitrant policies and resulting social violence could recur over long periods. Space allows only a glance at an Italian case from its first cholera wave in 1836–67 to its last major one in 1910–11. Throughout this period, municipal authorities in the Pugliese Cathedral town of Ostuni (mentioned above) continued to prohibit non-elites (*il popolo*) from performing their traditional burial rites, visiting afflicted friends and relations, and viewing victim's cadavers before burial. However, the town's elites could continue to bury their loved ones stricken by cholera in traditional ecclesiastical grounds. Such class-based impositions intensified fears that doctors backed by the state had poisoned the cholera infected or had buried them alive. Seeing their relatives unceremoniously thrown into ditches of newly-created cholera grounds outside town, Ostuni's *popolo* in 1837 shouted they would not tolerate it and rioted.<sup>83</sup> The town's authorities appear not to have learnt any lessons. During Italy's last major cholera wave in 1910 to 1911, the state continued to impose the same burial restrictions, provoking the same fears of poisoning and live burials as in 1837; but now Ostuni's collective violence exploded beyond any that had occurred before. In mid-November 1910, 3000 wrecked the cholera hospital, 'liberated the patients' and paraded them home, burnt down the town hall and offices of the health department, attacked health workers, stoned *carabinieri*, destroyed doctors' homes, and took possession of the town square.<sup>84</sup>

During the recent riots and violence in Western Africa, health workers and authorities believed that its disease-fuelled violence spurred by Ebola was new to history and particular to Africa.<sup>85</sup> Perhaps had authorities been aware of Europe's long past with certain socially violent epidemics, which possessed high lethality rates, they would have been quicker to negotiate with local populations and to explain the need to modify traditional burial practices and implementation of preventive measures in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone before any rioting had erupted.

<sup>82</sup>R. Ross III, *Contagion in Prussia, 1831. The Cholera epidemic and the threat of the Polish uprising* (Jefferson NC, 2015), 149. For Königsberg, Memel, Stettin and smaller towns and villages in 1831, see *ibid.*, ch. 8 and 148–49.

<sup>83</sup>della Perutta, *op. cit.*, 265–66.

<sup>84</sup>*La Stampa*, 15 November 1910, front page; *Corriere della Sera*, 15 November 1910, 2 and 16 November 1910, 2.

<sup>85</sup>Communication of 2 June 2015 at the Rockefeller Center, Bellagio, Italy, with Dr Ruth Kutalek, a WHO worker at an Ebola Treatment Centre in Liberia in 2014 to 2015.

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