

Epidemic as History: Interplay of Structure and Agency in Narratives of the Black Death in Contemporary Textbooks for Russian Language Schools

M. S. Fabrykant

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Marharyta Fabrykant, Candidate of Sciences in Sociology, Candidate of Sciences in Psychology, Senior Research Fellow, Laboratory for Comparative Studies in Mass Consciousness, Expert Institute, National Research University Higher School of Economics; Associate Professor, Department of Social and Organizational Psychology, Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences, Belarusian State University. Address: 9 Kalvariyskaya St, 220004 Minsk, Belarus. Email: mfabrykant@hse.ru; marharyta.fabrykant@gmail.com

Abstract

The article presents the results of a comparative analysis of narratives of the Black Death (the epidemic of plague that struck Western Europe in the mid-1300s) in six contemporary history textbooks in the Russian language published in Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan. Structural narrative analysis provides an answer to the research question about the interplay of external circumstances (structure) and individual choices (agency) in depicting the causes of the Black Death, its course of events, and attribution of its developments and consequences. Findings demonstrate that structure prevails over agency. The textbooks offer no behavioral patterns to internalize and implicitly conceptualize behavior in an epidemic as a mass phenomenon, not as a product of many individual choices. This perception of agency blatantly contradicts the two prerequisites for an effective epidemic response elaborated during the COVID-19 pandemic: quality of governance and population's willingness to comply with authorities' recommendations in spite of the growing circulation of false information. The Black Death is presented in textbooks as an inevitable attribute of the Middle Ages—the “era of calamities”. Hence, an epidemic in any other historical period appears an omen of “bad times” coming, which is likely to create expectations of new unavoidable disasters and foster catastrophic perceptions of the already existing problems. To shift this approach to history as “life’s teacher”, intrinsic to didactic pedagogy, two methods are suggested: explicit comparison with epidemics from other historical periods (not only the present) and counterfactual thinking to create alternative scenarios with regard to general patterns of human behavior and the characteristics of the Medieval Period.

Keywords

textbook research, public history, narrative analysis, epidemic, structure, agency, medievalism.

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The COVID-19 pandemic naturally stirred interest in how the process of an epidemic and the measures to counteract it affect everyday practices and social institutions, including education. Substantially less attention is paid to the opposite: how education can affect behaviors of people caught off guard by a pandemic. A recent essay in *Nature Human Behavior* suggests that two factors are required to respond effectively to an epidemic: adequate decision making at the level of public administration and population's willingness to comply with the new social norms [Bave et al. 2020]. In a situation where even health care professionals can only gradually come to grips with the novel coronavirus's characteristics, readiness to follow justified recommendations while ignoring equally rampant false ideas is a function of not only health literacy but also the behavioral patterns associated with earlier epidemics.

Significance of prior experience quickly manifested itself in attempts to make sense of what was going on. Mass media stressed that the last epidemic of this scale—Spanish flu—took place about a century ago. Furthermore, the pandemic was perceived as an attribute of the past that was long over and could never happen again, which made it look highly unexpected and therefore frightening. This calamitous projection from the past into the present could have prompted the “I never thought it would happen to me” mentality, which affected critical thinking and resulted in “rule of thumb” behavioral patterns based on previous experience. If the situation is perceived as having no modern analog and referring to a collective experience in the past, what was that experience like?

Prototypicality of various past epidemics in today's public mind has never been studied empirically. Media sources indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic is associated most often with Europe's deadliest epidemic of plague that occurred in the 14th century, also known as the Black Death. The short and vivid name itself, along with the extent of consequences, contributes to the Black Death being more recognizable than other notorious epidemics, such as the Plague of Justinian (6th-8th centuries) or the Great Plague of London (1665–1666). Association of the current pandemic with the Black Death is interesting in that it makes reference to the Middle Ages, one of the historical periods represented most vividly in public history.

Representations of Medieval Western Europe in the collective mind have become an independent subject of research at the interface of medieval studies and culturology. In contrast with medieval studies—basically the history of the Middle Ages—medievalism is focused on how this epoch is reconstructed in the latest historical periods. Special attention is given to the divide between historical facts established by medievalists and individual and mass interpretations of those facts [Matthews 2015]. Interest in some events and phenomena of the Middle Ages often has to do with using this information not so much for rethinking the past as for making sense of the modern age. Matching one's times to the Medieval Period as the “dark ages”, typical of Re-

naissance and Enlightenment scholars, or, by contrast, trying to regain the moral and aesthetic ideals from medieval heritage in the Romantic way, directly reflect and define to some extent the major dichotomy of rational vs. irrational in European thought. Throughout the 20th century, these two versions of medieval historical narrative alternated as mutually exclusive, according to the famous historian Norman Davies [Davies 2014]. However, they are often intricately intertwined in popular culture of the 21st century, where the image of not only romanticized but also “suffering Middle Ages” [Kosyakova 2018] with their hardships and fallacies is regarded as a source of life wisdoms and role models [Elliott 2017]. It comes as no surprise that a number of mass media outlets published recommendations for the COVID-19 pandemic based on medieval practices¹.

However, the most universal, in terms of outreach, medieval narrative is communicated not by mass media, even such powerful as *Washington Post* or *New Yorker*, or through pop-cultural experiences, even such dominating as the *Game of Thrones* television series—it is contained in school history textbooks. Adolescence, during which those textbooks are studied, is the period of identity formation and search for role models. That is why it is so important to know exactly what kinds of narrative of the Black Death as a prototypical epidemic of the past are represented in today’s medieval history textbooks.

This study aims at analyzing the representations of reality and behavioral patterns amidst a pandemic that contemporary world history textbooks in the Russian language communicate in their Black Death narratives. Comparative textbook analysis between Russia and other post-Soviet countries with Russian language schools reveals diverse and ambivalent interpretations of the same material within a common geographic and linguistic area. The key research question directly follows from the dichotomy of perceptions about the Middle Ages mentioned above. Are medieval people presented to contemporary school students as unlucky victims of external circumstances beyond their control or as autonomous agents capable of bearing responsibility for the consequences of their actions? In social sciences, this question harks back to the general theoretical debate on structure vs. agency, making it possible to assess, without falling into anachronism, the impact of Black Death narratives on the beliefs and behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The nexus of structure and agency can be considered a leitmotif across social sciences, sociology in particular. Agency is the capacity of social actors to form their intentions and attempt to convert them into actions independently. Structure, meanwhile, is the general logic of external constraints that determine those intentions and actions

¹ Knight S. Reading about the Black Death with My Daughter during the Coronavirus Outbreak // *The New Yorker*. 2020. March 14; Mulhall J. Milan’s Medieval Response to the Plague Holds Lessons for Today // *The Washington Post*. 2020. April 27.

or at least set a framework for their implementation. Structure-based approaches imply focusing on how seemingly autonomous actors (such as authors of school textbooks) in fact reproduce the structural rules of social institutions and socially shared values dictated from the outside (such as subordinate status of some population categories), sometimes without even realizing it [Stanton 2014]. Contrastingly, agency-centered approaches focus on the potential of social actors to transform, through directed effort, the supposedly unshakeable versions of social order regarded by many as natural and the only possible ones [Welzel 2017]. A recent study analyzing school textbooks from 78 countries shows that there has been a worldwide increase in emphasis on people as agentic actors, though emphasis on older social institutions remains stable [Lerch et al. 2017]. Therefore, the dualism of structure and agency is reproduced not only in research approaches, including the field of sociology of education, but also in the very subject of research, in particular school textbooks and curricula.

Over the past few decades, the structure-agency balance has been subject to reconceptualization in social theory as well as in empirical studies. On the one hand, the idea of returning to agency (after the prevalence of structural functionalism, structuralism, and even post-structuralism) gave rise to an explanatory model based on the transition from conceptions of static structures to structuration as a process. In structuration theory, social structure is not a “social fact” in the Durkheimian sense; rather, it is recreated or transformed through and by virtue of instantiation by social actors [Shilling 1992]. On the other hand, the social constructivist perspective suggests that, just as individual intentions and actions of social actors, the very idea of agency is structurally determined and represents a social construct of post-Christian Western culture in which agency is gradually relocated from godly powers (perceived increasingly as more transcendental and less likely to actively intervene in earthly matters) to human beings, i. e. the willpower and behavior of individual and collective actors [Meyer, Jepperson 2000].

In a number of textbook studies, the shift of focus from structure to agency is associated with giving place in history to minorities that were marginalized in Western societies. For this reason, issues concerning the dualism of structure and agency are often raised in the context of whether textbooks adequately represent the agenda associated with people’s ability to conceive themselves as instigators of social change and empowered historical subjects [Éthier, Lefrançois, Demers 2013], e. g. as relative to the environmental movement [Bromley, Meyer, Ramirez 2011] or human rights [Bromley 2014].

This study zeroes in on history textbook representations of individual free choices and external constraints in tackling a problem which arose as extrinsic—by virtue of its biological nature—to individual and collective actors as well as to the social structure, but quickly became a social one. The course of the epidemic, not to mention the associat-

ed social changes, were not determined by the biological parameters of the disease alone—to at least the same extent, they were a function of collective behaviors. The available array of mass reactions to the Black Death, including organized collective responses, is represented as a social fact that exists independently of individual minds, as objective as the Black Death itself. The historical period in which the Black Death occurred as a prototypical epidemic also provides a context for both structure-based and agency-centered approaches. On the one hand, medieval society, similar to other traditional societies, is normally conceptualized as a stable rigid structure where everyone is assigned a strictly defined status by birth. Even though medieval Western Christianity emphasized the individual aspect—the idea that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, the value of saving every single human life, and personal responsibility to exercise faith in Christ—it did not welcome individualism in the social sphere. On the other hand, the image of the Middle Ages in the public mind was largely shaped under the influence of Romanticism, where agency was embodied in Romantic heroes standing for their interests and their right for self-expression, sometimes by rejecting the established social norms. This tradition of medieval history popularization may have a certain influence on textbook authors, prompting them to unwittingly project the perceptions of agency typical of later historical periods, including modernity, to the Middle Ages, especially when describing events such as the Black Death, which obviously required active effort to fight an external threat. Therefore, Black Death narratives in school textbooks are ambiguous enough to become a material for projecting and communicating a variety of perceptions of the structure-agency balance in external-threat situations such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

1. Data and Methods

1.1. Sampling school textbooks on medieval history

Research was based on post-Soviet Russian-language history textbooks currently used in schools, which feature at least one paragraph devoted exclusively to the Black Death narrative. The final sample meeting the requirements was comprised of six textbooks on world history, of which two were used in Russia, one in Belarus, two in Ukraine, and one in Kazakhstan:

- 1) Aytbay R., Kasymova A., Yeshmukambetov A. (2018) *Vsemirnaya istoriya: Uchebnik dlya 6-go klassa obshcheobrazovatel'noy shkoly* [World History: 6th Grade Textbook for Secondary School], Almaty: Atamura;
- 2) Boytsov M., Shukurov R. (2016) *Vseobshchaya istoriya. Istoriya Srednikh vekov: uchebnik dlya obshcheobrazovatel'nykh organizatsiy* [World History. The Middle Ages: Textbook for Secondary Education Institutions], Moscow: Russkoe slovo;

- 3) Vedyushkin V., Ukolova V. (2014) *Istoriya. Srednie veka. 6-y klass. Uchebnik dlya obshche-obrazovatel'nykh organizatsiy* [History. Middle Ages. Sixth Grade: Textbook for Secondary Education Institutions], Moscow: Prosveshchenie;
- 4) Krizhanovsky O., Khirnaya E. (2007) *Istoriya srednikh vekov: uchebnik dlya 7-go klassa obshcheobrazovatel'nykh uchebnykh zavedeniy* [History of the Middle Ages: 7th Grade School Textbook], Lvov: Oriana-Nova;
- 5) Likhтей I. (2007) *Istoriya Srednikh vekov: uchebnik dlya 7-go klassa* [History of the Middle Ages: 7th Grade Textbook], Kiev: Gramota.
- 6) Fedosik V. et al. (2009) *Istoriya Srednikh vekov: XIV—XV vv.: uchebnoe posobie dlya 7-go klassa obshcheobrazovatel'nykh uchrezhdeniy s russkim yazykom obucheniya* [History of the Middle Ages: 14th-15th Centuries: 7th Grade Schoolbook for Russian-Speaking Institutions of Secondary Education], Minsk: Narodnaya asveta.

Both Russian textbooks on the history of the Middle Ages are designed for 6th-grade students and are included in the federal list of textbooks recommended by the Ministry of Education. In the textbook by Vladimir Vedyushkin and Viktoriya Ukolova, the Black Death narrative is contained in the chapter entitled *The 14th Century in European History*, specifically its first three sections: *The Black Death* (key events and course of events), *Search for the Guilty* (contemporaries' attempts to understand what caused the epidemic), and *Peasants, Lords, and Effects of the Plague* (medium-term socioeconomic consequences of the epidemic). In the textbook by Mikhail Boytsov and Rustam Shukurov, the Black Death narrative is included in the chapter *The Hard Times*, specifically its first two sections, *Hunger and the Black Death* (causes and key events of the epidemic) and *From Subsistence to Market Economy* (economic effects of the epidemic).

The Belarusian textbook under the editorship of Viktor Fedosik is designed for 7th-grade students—the history of the Middle Ages is studied during two academic years (as compared to one year in Russia), the second one being dedicated entirely to the 14th-15th centuries, the so-called Late Medieval Period. The Black Death narrative is represented in the chapter *Everyday Life in the Late Middle Ages*, specifically in the second section *The Black Death and Its Aftermath*.

Ukrainian textbooks included in the sample target 7th-grade students and cover the entire medieval period. Oleg Krizhanovsky and Elena Khirnaya placed the Black Death narrative in the chapter *Medieval Fidgets. "The Three Calamities"*, the latter meaning war, famine, and epidemic. Igor Likhтей's textbook features the Black Death narrative in the section *Population Composition and Mobility* of the chapter *People in the Middle Ages*.

The Kazakh textbook by Rosa Aytbay, Aliya Kasymova, and Altay Yeshmukambetov devotes an entire chapter to the Black Death, entitled *The Pestilence. Peasant Revolts in France and England*, opening the

textbook part *Medieval European Society in the 14th–First Half of the 15th Centuries*.

1.2. Narrative
analysis: rationale
and procedure

Narrative analysis is not the only method to analyze historical texts in general and history textbooks in particular. Textbook studies often use content analysis to focus on specific segments of content [Okol'skaya 2012] and critical discourse analysis to examine narratives as a whole [Bloor, Bloor 2013]. An essential part of public history research is about the most controversial events in national historical narratives that play a critical role in collective identity formation. In this regard, critical discourse analysis is used to reveal attempts to promote ideological perceptions, disguised as neutrality. Unlike in this kind of research, the Black Death narrative is not a battlefield among historians (at least yet), so its projection into modernity has to do with conveying behavioral patterns in an epidemic, not ideological orientations. Narrative analysis allows understanding exactly how the text represents the logic of developments and people's actions. This logic of narration is often implicit, recognizable only in the choice of ways to deliver the same material through different stories [Fabrykant 2017]. Therefore, narrative analysis reveals causal reasoning implicitly engrained in the very narrative structure, which lends meaning and coherence to the events described [Puzanova, Trotsuk 2003]. That is why narrative analysis is used in this study to investigate the interplay of structure and agency in narratives of the Black Death that can be found in modern Russian-language school textbooks.

This basic narrative structure was used to define the parameters for comparing the Black Death narratives across the textbooks. Focus on causal relationships implies comparing the texts separately by how they represent the historical event itself (what events are selected? in which order are they arranged? how are they logically related?), its causes (is there only one cause or more? how are they related to the historical event and to one another?) and consequences (which spheres of life did the event affect? which actors of the narrative were affected and how? are the effects assessed as positive, negative, neutral, or ambivalent?). In addition, since the Black Death is not a single event but rather a series of events, it makes sense to compare the causes and individual episodes attributed to the Plague across the textbooks—otherwise speaking, why the Black Death actually happened and why it happened the way it did. In accordance with the research question concerning the interplay of structure and agency, the narrative material was differentiated based on whether it referred to externally determined circumstances or actors' independent actions for each of the four comparison parameters. A fragment of narrative would be classified as reflecting the structure-based approach if it described events, including actions of individuals, groups, or population categories, as determined by specific characteristics of social order, external and predetermined in relation to the participants. Contrari-

wise, the agency-centered approach was recognized in cases where a fragment presented individual or collective social actors acting out of their own free will and interests and choosing freely from many possible options. Preliminary analysis of the textbooks in the sample shows that none of them is strongly dominated by either structure-based or agency-centered approach that would permeate every chapter and every description of the various events, phenomena, and periods of medieval history. It follows from the above that the balance of structure and agency in the Black Death narratives does not convey textbook authors' general perspective of historical reality but reflects their perceptions of the specific historical phenomenon.

2. Results Analysis of the Black Death narratives in each of the six textbooks according to the plan is presented in Table 1. Below, we zoom in on the similarities and differences among the textbooks in terms of structure and agency for each of the narrative components.

2.1. Causes of the Black Death None of the textbooks analyzed mentions causes of the epidemic that could be attributed to agency. Structural causes can be divided into two groups. The first one refers to the "spirit of the age" as an ultimately general characteristic of the era of "hard times" (the 14th century in the Russian and Belarusian textbooks or the whole Medieval Period in the Ukrainian textbooks). In this regard, the Black Death is in line with other "calamities" of those times: famine and war. A relevant horizon of expectations is constructed, where the Black Death is regarded as inevitable and at the same time confined to the well-defined period in the past, the (late) Middle Ages, which is perceived categorically in a negative way.

The other category of causes—international trade—is not presented as specific to the epoch, being identified in a non-evaluative manner. None of the textbooks asserts that trade restrictions could have prevented the epidemic from breaking out. The region in which the plague originated is also specified neutrally, without any evaluation or connotation. Although one of the Ukrainian textbooks indicates migration as the primary cause of medieval "calamities", along with famine, war, and epidemic, it refers to migrations within Western Europe and implies no xenophobic connotations. None of the textbooks mentioning the Eastern origins of the Black Death describes its outbreak or events in the East, the focus being entirely on Western Europe.

In the narratives analyzed, it is not a remote country that is represented as alien, dangerous, and exotic, but the historical past itself, i. e. the Middle Ages as dangerous times. Thereby, causality attributed to the Black Death could be defined as confined fatalism: the Black Death is inevitable within the "era of calamities", yet harmless beyond it.

An interesting exception is the Kazakh textbook, which specifies no causes of the Black Death at all: the narrative has no buildup, opening

with the outbreak straight away. This way of putting things can also be considered fatalistic—whatever happened, happened and cannot be changed—but it makes no linkage to the specific historical period and its distinguishing characteristics. By contrast, confined fatalism implies generalization: a single negative event as major as a plague epidemic is regarded as a marker of the “era of calamities”, which may entail expectations of new disasters to come as well as catastrophic perceptions of the already existing negative phenomena.

2.2. Course of events

Unlike the causes of the Plague, its course of events is described with elements of both structure and agency in all the six textbooks analyzed. Structural features include the rapid spread of the disease, while descriptions of people’s behavior focus on fleeing from the infected towns to the countryside as the most typical pattern. One of the Russian textbooks and the Kazakh one assess such behavior as destructive and conducive to the spread of the Black Death to new areas. In one of the two Ukrainian textbooks, conversely, this behavioral pattern is regarded as the only effective response. The other three textbooks describe it as self-evident without evaluating its appropriateness in any way. The same neutral perspective is kept on the overall emotional state of fear and desperation. Meanwhile, the textbooks differ in conveying the understanding of the situation. Both Russian textbooks say that the epidemic galvanized the epoch-specific visions of an imminent doomsday with various signs preceding it, while in the Belarusian textbook, contemporaries rather perceive the situation as a time gap between the past and the future.

All the narratives analyzed describe only the behavior of town dwellers fleeing to the countryside, while leaving out the other population categories covered in previous chapters on medieval history, such as peasants in that same countryside or lords in their castles. Neither is there any mention of church or secular authorities’ actions, even though the preceding chapters went into detail describing the role of the church in the Middle Ages and the centralization of power in a number of countries in Western Europe.

As we can see, the Black Death narrative has only one protagonist: a town dweller in Medieval Western Europe who is taken unawares, confused, unable to understand the causes of what is going on, and left to their own devices. The cross-country textbook studies mentioned above associate greater diversity of social actors, including less powerful ones, with agency-centered approaches, and the focus on major social institutions and key actors with structure-based approaches [Lerch et al. 2017]. There is no antagonist in this narrative, since the Black Death is not impersonated but represented as an act of nature and part of objective reality. The protagonist’s loneliness and, consequently, its inability to collide with other characters, align with a flat story arc as a typical feature of the Black Death narrative. Nothing is said about the geographical patterns of spreading or any oth-

Table 1. Comparative narrative analysis of representations of the Black Death in school history textbooks

	Causes	Course of events	Attribution of the course of events	Effects
Boytsov, Shukurov (Russia)				
Structure	The entire 14th century being the "hard times; The Silk Road bringing caravans from Central Asia; Rats travelling on ships	Rats on merchant ships arrive to a port in Italy — the Plague devastates towns	Amplification of the medieval conception of the world	Death of one third of Europe's population, with entire towns wiped out. Reduction in peasant population
Agency	No	Town dwellers depart to the countryside, spreading the disease even further — expectations of doomsday	No understanding of the causes of what is going on	Requests to increase wages — peasant revolts
Vedyushkin, Ukolova (Russia)				
Structure	Famines arising from harvest failures and weakening the population; East-West trade routes; Rats travelling on ships	The Black Death kills people	Concentration of population in towns	Reduction in European population by one third, in some regions by three fourths
Agency	No	Attempts to escape from the outbreak areas — further spread of the disease	No	Accusations of Jews; violent attacks on Jewish communities, and further persecutions of Jews. Increased tensions between peasants and lords: demands for personal freedom vs. attempts to shift the hardships on peasants
Fedosik (Belarus)				
Structure	Lower resistance to disease due to famine; Contacts with the East; Rats and fleas travelling on ships	The disease spreads rapidly	Concentration of population and poor sanitation in towns; poor medical knowledge. Rapid disease progression	Death of nearly half of the population of Western Europe
Agency	No	Town dwellers leave their homes and property and flee to the countryside. No understanding of the causes of what is going on; fear. A feeling of life interrupted, a time gap between the past and the future	No	No
Krizhanovsky, Khirnaya (Ukraine)				
Structure	The Middle Ages as a period of calamities: epidemics along with migrations, famines, and wars	The disease kills people rapidly	No	Death of one quarter to half of Europe's population
Agency	No	Escape from the affected areas as the only effective response	Doctors' ignorance of the source of the disease and of how to treat it	Massacres of Jewish communities — migration of Jews to Eastern Europe. People who took possession of the dead's property became wealthy overnight and embarked on trade and banking
Likhтей (Ukraine)				
Structure	Epidemics as one of the four calamities of the Middle Ages	The Plague spreads rapidly; homes of the dead are open for looters	Concentration of population and "horrible living conditions" in towns	Death of nearly 25 million people. A 60% reduction in Europe's urban population
Agency	No	An atmosphere of "desperation, fury, and fear"	No	Improved living conditions for survivors: inheritance received from the dead; a better bargaining position of peasants and artisans due to worker shortages. Massacres of Jewish communities
Aytbay, Kasymova, Yeshmukambetov (Kazakhstan)				
Structure	No	The disease spreads rapidly, inevitably killing its victims	High concentration of population and poor sanitation in towns. Low status of medicine. Hundred Years' War: refugees and armies. Trade	Death of a considerable part of population
Agency	No	People flee from the infected areas and thus spread the disease even further	No understanding of the biology of the disease	No

er characteristics of the pandemic across different countries and regions of Medieval Western Europe. As a result, the disease is pictured not as spreading, rapidly yet gradually, but rather as hitting the entire Europe at once. This specific feature of the narrative contributes to fatalism in representations of the Black Death, which has already been mentioned with respect to the causes of the epidemic.

2.3. Attribution of events

The textbooks analyzed are largely similar in their interpretations of why the epidemic developed the way it did. Structural causes can be found in all the textbooks except one Ukrainian textbook, and four of the five explain the Plague's characteristics—its impressive size and rapid spread—by the concentration of population and “horrible living conditions” in towns in the first place, thereby maintaining the logic of focusing on urban experiences that was pointed out above. While it would be reasonable to talk about high population density in medieval towns as compared to medieval rural areas, *a priori* judgments about urban and countryside living conditions are hardly appropriate. Although there is no direct reference to standards for comparison, life in a medieval town is more likely to appear unsanitary when contrasted with present-day city life than to medieval rural environments. A similar implicit comparison to the present day is observed in another version of attributing events to structure offered in one of the Russian textbooks: the events that occurred during and due to the epidemic happened because the Black Death amplified the significance of the already existing conceptions of the world, first of all expectations of doomsday as part of medieval Christianity's worldview. Therefore, structural causes of the events within the Black Death narrative are presented in the textbooks largely through general reference to the distinguishing characteristics of the Medieval Period as such—just as the causes of the epidemic itself, if only less distinctly.

It is debatable how applicable this observation is to attribution of events to agency, which can be found in only half of the textbooks, unlike attribution to structure. In all the three cases, people's actions during the pandemic are explained by the lack of medical knowledge about the biology of the disease and the true causes of its spread as well as overall inability to understand what was going on. The reasons for such ignorance are not specified, and neither is the relationship between unawareness and behaviors. Apparently, the textbook authors considered the described response to a situation of mass disorientation just as natural and inevitable (or at least the most probable) as the unavailability of today's evidence-based medical knowledge back in the Middle Ages. Therefore, the lack of knowledge as such is specific to the historical period, but the causal relationship between ignorance and behavior—panic and a rush to leave the areas affected by a disaster of unknown origin—is presented as universal.

2.4. Consequences of the Black Death The effects of the Black Death listed in the textbooks are quite numerous. A drastic reduction in population size is mentioned most often among the structural consequences. Different textbooks report the Black Death killing one quarter, one third, and even half of Western Europe's population. Alternatively, exact numbers are given or high mortality rates are indicated without quantification. Some authors mention high death tolls in individual regions and towns, sometimes reporting their entire populations to have been wiped out. This method of delivering information creates a picture of a huge catastrophe, yet the comparison is not against the consequences of other disasters and calamities of the Middle Ages or other historical periods but probably against some general beliefs about what effects can be considered catastrophic. The textbook authors find it obvious that death of a quarter, let alone one third of the population will be intuitively classified as catastrophic without explanations.

Agency-attributed consequences of the Black Death are more diverse. The one mentioned most frequently is the increased demands of the peasants as a result of their improved bargaining positions due to labor shortages in agriculture, along with the lords' reluctance to make such concessions, especially agree to grant personal freedom to peasants. This conflict results in peasant revolts in England and France, providing a plot to the narrative that immediately follows the Black Death in most textbooks. Another type of consequences of the Plague is massacres of Jewish communities, arising from anti-Semitic conspiracy theories and followed by persecutions of Jews and their mass migration to Eastern Europe. Textbook studies indicate agency of ethnic and other minorities that were challenged by macrosocial structures [Bromley 2014]. However, it is mentioned not in every textbook and not among the first lines. As a result, what is demonstrated is not the opportunity for social change but, quite the opposite, the structural constraints that were not eased but rather strengthened even more by the Black Death as an external threat. Other long-term effects include the overnight improvement in the standard of living among plague survivors who inherited or simply appropriated the dead's belongings, giving rise to trader and banker dynasties. Therefore, while structural consequences of the Black Death are described in the textbooks as a common and universal calamity, agency-attributed effects are interpreted in categories of winners and losers.

This description of various types of confrontations—presented, at least in the case of peasants and lords, as zero-sum games—contradicts the textbooks' earlier representations of Medieval Western European society as a stable and internally coordinated hierarchical structure, inertness of which was hard to shatter even for enthusiastic and influential reformers. This change is not mentioned explicitly, yet it is well in line with the role that the Black Death narrative plays in history textbooks—as a story about one of the “calamities” that opens a new page in medieval history. This transformation is associated with

the overall worsening of living conditions, not an increased malleability of social structures. New opportunities arise, but they are embraced either by chance (inheritance) or as a function of pre-epidemic status in the structure of medieval society (peasant revolts and persecutions of Jews), according to the narratives. This restriction of opportunity, along with confrontations themselves and the zero-sum game paradigm, is presented neutrally rather than as something inevitable and natural. Conspiracy theories, meanwhile, are expressly criticized, but their origins are observed exclusively in the specific features of the epoch—medieval anti-Semitism—and thus do not imply generalization. Although the textbooks give lot of attention to people's psychological state when covering the course of events, they never analyze the psychological impact of such a traumatic experience. Descriptions of peasants realizing and starting to use their improved bargaining position right after the end of the epidemic create an impression that everyday life and the overall perception of the world were back to normal as soon as the Black Death was over.

3. Discussion

Analysis of the Black Death narratives in modern Russian-language history school textbooks reveals the primacy of structure over agency. This is common for textbooks from all the four countries (no prominent cross-country differences in interpretation are observed) and manifests itself in the ways of describing the causes, developments, and effects of the epidemic. Structural characteristics of the Black Death, its causes and consequences are quite diverse, whereas actors are presented as an undifferentiated mass of medieval citizens. Their actions and feelings are portrayed as uniform and rigidly determined by external circumstances—the pandemic itself and some general characteristics of the epoch. Textbook authors hold different views on the appropriateness of the only response to the disease mentioned in their narratives—fleeing to areas as remote as possible and staying there for as long as possible—but they unanimously regard the outbreak and disastrous consequences of the Plague as unavoidable. Therefore, the textbooks offer no behavioral patterns to internalize, implicitly conveying the concept of human behavior in a pandemic as a mass phenomenon, not a product of individual choices. This uniformity occurs spontaneously and contradicts the fact that participants of the Black Death narratives are left to their own devices, without any unifying intervention from governments or church authorities. The lack of an external, consolidated, and potentially consolidating plan for fighting the epidemic may prevent manifestations of agency but at the same time serve as a restricting social fact (just as availability of such a plan), creating the overall atmosphere of disorientation. Furthermore, the primacy of structure over agency rules out statism: medieval states, similar to other social institutions such as the church, have no more agency than individual actors—all of them rather being prisoners of structural

constraints. This representation of agency explicitly contradicts the two prerequisites for an effective epidemic response: quality governance and population's willingness to comply with authorities' recommendations in spite of the growing circulation of false information. Medieval citizens in areas affected by the Black Death, as they are presented in school textbooks, find themselves left to the mercy of fate, confused, copying behaviors and attitudes of others spontaneously and without thinking, thereby fostering the spread of not only the disease itself but also false beliefs about it. Therefore, the textbooks communicate what could be called a perfect negative example, the quintessence of behaviors and conceptions that are undesirable in a pandemic—yet without marking them as such, except conspiracy theories. As a result, the negative learning component is not too obvious here, while the overall fatalistic perspective is quite salient.

Importantly, fatalism that pervades the Black Death narratives in the textbooks is explicitly confined to the Medieval Period. The prevalence of structure over agency is not dictated by the specific characteristics of the Middle Ages; in the context of modern social sciences, it has a prominent value component, which is the extent of believing in the opportunity to achieve directed social change. Interpretation of the epidemic as an attribute of the Middle Ages may be perceived in different ways. On the one hand, exoticization of epidemics on a par with knights' tournaments, the Crusades, and gothic architecture intensifies the typical response to any unexpected negative development—denial of what is happening—which, during an epidemic, may lead to riskier behaviors as a result of underestimating the probability of acquiring infection. On the other hand, if pandemic is an attribute of the Middle Ages as the era of calamities, it means that an epidemic occurring in any other historical period may be regarded as a sign of “bad times” coming. Such perceptions may lead people to anticipate new disasters of comparable size in the future, view them as unavoidable, and reevaluate the present-day negative events—again, catastrophizing their possible effects.

The results of narrative analysis reveal possible practical implications for the contradiction, intrinsic to any historical narrative, between the ambition to avoid anachronisms and deliver as an objective representation of the past as possible, on the one part, and the didactic message of treating history as “life's teacher”, on the other part. In the textbooks analyzed, despite the obvious (as compared to other genres of historical narrative) and even normatively inherent didactic role, the urge to communicate a non-anachronistic image of the epoch clearly prevails over providing an opportunity to learn a lesson. The textbook authors were probably convinced that, by telling the story of the Black Death, they reconstructed events from the remote forgotten past, which were not supposed to be matched against individual experiences in the present. In this case, we are talking about unintentional learning, where an obvious analogy with past events triggers brows-

ing through available historical experiences in search of possible forecasts for event developments, consequences, and behavior patterns. As a result, narratives conceived by their authors as neutral, acquire a prognostic (“here is what may happen and how”) and normative (“here is what you can do and feel”) status. Intended as unbiased, description of events may indirectly promote the reproduction of non-optimal behavioral patterns due to the lack of alternative patterns to internalize.

Comparison with events from other historical periods, in this case other epidemics, is one of the possible solutions to avoid such unintended consequences without moralizing and falling into generalizations inappropriate for modern historical narrative. Comparisons may be offered in the main text, end of chapter questions, or creative project assignments. Another method to overcome this contradiction is counterfactual thinking, where students are asked to imagine alternative scenarios of past events, including behaviors of various actors. At the same time, anachronisms should be avoided by delving into the relevant epoch to understand its internal logic, opportunities for agency, and structural constraints. Both cases imply extending agency beyond the historical narrative, in the process of learning history itself—especially the negative experiences that had better not be reproduced in the present.

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