

Russia, cholera riots of 1830–1831

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The Russian cholera epidemic of 1829–31 was the cause of widespread popular unrest that developed in response to government checkpoints to prevent

its spread and the perception that poor peasants and workers disproportionately suffered from the disease. Cholera reached Russia for the first time in September 1823 but soon ebbed due to the winter frosts. Six years later, in 1829, cholera reappeared in the southern cities of Astrakhan and Orenburg. According to official historic accounts, the disease was brought to Russia by Kyrghyz nomads. But in the fall of 1830 cholera spread even more extensively into the Russian heartland, reaching the edges of St. Petersburg, then Russia's capital. In response the government set up numerous quarantines, but it could not contain the epidemic. Subsequently the government set up checkpoints stopping merchant caravans, which in itself caused popular antagonism and disarray as the severity of the disease intensified among all social classes. Those who fell victim to the disease included upper classes, dukes, duchesses, generals, and the tsar's brother, Prince Konstantin. The death toll among the lower classes reached epidemic proportions, taking the lives of some 100,000 people.

Despair and popular resentment toward the government quarantine and checkpoint enforcement broke out into a vast popular protest. Once again, rumors that the aristocracy and upper classes were responsible for the plague set off insurrections, as those who were poorest were least able to ward off the disease. The rumor that doctors poisoned the wells sparked a wave of bloody riots throughout Russia, with large crowds sacking affluent households, smashing quarantines, and killing medical personnel.

The epidemic peaked in mid-1831 as about 600 people a day in the capital fell victim to the disease. Government offices, schools, businesses, and theaters were closed. Incited by the rumors that the disease was a result of deliberate contamination, insurgents destroyed ambulance carriages and sacked hospitals. On June 22, 1831, demonstrators in St. Petersburg gathered at the main cholera hospital located on Sennaya Square and went on to ransack the building, murdering several doctors. The arrival of two regiments with cannons halted the crowd's progress. Emperor Nicholas I personally addressed the insurgents and convinced them to leave, ending the riot considered by Alexander Pushkin as "senseless and merciless."

References and Suggested Readings

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