

Puerto Cabello and the Bubonic Plague Epidemic (1903-1908)

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Summary

Epidemics have a social-economic character which affect certain historic periods. The Bubonic Plague, known as the Black Death, in the Middle Ages, caused the deaths of a quarter of Europe's population.

The last plague epidemic originated in China, in the year 1893, and then spread to Europe at the end of the century. The French port of Marseille, in 1903, was the open door to the American Continent, the plague being detected in Panama in 1905 and officially recognised by Cipriano Castro's Government in 1908.

The Venezuelan epidemic occurred during the Liberal Restoration Period. It was met by the Sanitary Authorities with a vision of 'medical positivism'. In our present research, we analyze the importance of Puerto Cabello, together with La Guaira and Cumana, the ports of arrival for the major quantity of European imports by steamships during 1903-1908. The sanitary strategy of medical health advisers and the nonfulfilment of proposed rules within the framework of the crisis of the Venezuelan Liberalism allowed the illness to enter and spread.

Résumé

Les épidémies ont un caractère socio-économique pouvant affecter certaines périodes de l'Histoire. La peste bubonique, connue comme "la Mort Noire" au Moyen Age, causa la mort d'un quart de la population européenne.

La dernière épidémie de peste, originaire de Chine en 1893, s'est répandue en Europe à la fin du XIXe siècle. Le port de Marseille en France, en 1903, était la porte ouverte sur le Continent américain. La peste détectée à Panama en 1905 fut officiellement reconnue par le gouvernement de Cipriano Castro en 1908.

L'épidémie de peste au Venezuela apparut pendant la période de Restauration Libérale. Elle fut accueillie par les autorités sanitaires comme une vision du "positivisme médical". Dans notre étude, nous analysons l'importance de Puerto Cabello, qui comme La Guaira et Cumana, étaient les ports d'arrivée pour la majeure partie des importations maritimes européennes entre 1903 et 1908. La stratégie sanitaire des Forces Médicales et le non respect des règles proposées en association avec la crise du libéralisme vénésoélien ont permis l'entrée de la maladie et sa propagation.

Introduction

One of the most dramatic illnesses in human history has been, without a doubt, the Bubonic Plague. The name itself generates panic and

terror and permits all manner of interpretation about its origin. It was considered a punishment for the 'transgression of Man'.

During one hundred years, in the XIV Century, it affected more than twenty five million people, when a fourth part of the European population succumbed to *Morbus Pestis*. The epidemics continued until the XX Century. During the

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plague epidemic in Marseille. Charles Delorme, personal doctor of King Louis XIII recommended a special suit designed to protect the doctor; and a mask with aromatic substances for use during the rogations and prayers made in the presence of sick people. Yersin, Louis Pasteur's pupil, at the end of the century, learning of a plague outbreak in China, travelled to that country to discover a bacillus, which in his master's honor he named *Pasteurella pestis*. Yersin elaborated a lymph to treat the illness. After Yersin's work, fresh research confirmed some clinical observations that the illness had two methods of presentation in the forms of the Pneumonic Plague and the Bubonic Plague. The urban plague is maintained in the rat population and spreads among the rodents passing to humans, transmitted by infected fleas. (Murray, 1993).

Manipulated information

News was received from Europe of plague existing in the Venezuelan ports, which were an open door for the incoming illness. General Cipriano Castro's Government found itself in a situation of internal conflict threatening international disorder. The possibility of introducing a disease such as the plague required that the information coming from Europe be supplied by the press belonging to the government in a skilful way. So it was denied, at least to some extent, in order to offer the country the surety that this terrible disease would not affect the Venezuelan.

In 1908, when the plague had devastated La Guaira Port, *El Constitucional*, among other newspapers, denied the existence of the illness. Rafael Rangel, an official medical student sent by the government to investigate the Bubonic Plague denied its presence, underlining the political aspects of the situation.

In 1903, Marseille's mayor M. Chanot spoke to the town council concerning the report that workers in a factory had died due to the Black

Plague. In the news pages we find: "Some days ago some workers of a factory of the Marseille suburbs fell sick". When the existence of the illness in France became known, and as Venezuela had business with Europe, Cipriano Castro's government (1), on September 24th, 1903 reported plans for a sanitary policy :

"It has been proposed to disinfect, by adequate means, correspondence coming from Marseille, when it arrives at the Republican Ports."

(*El Cronista*-1903).

Previously, on September 21st, Castro's government had sent orders by the National Telegraph to La Guaira, Puerto Cabello, Cumana and Maracaibo Ports at 4:00 o'clock in the afternoon :

"Mister President of the Council of Puerto Cabello :

On yesterday's date by this Ministry the following resolution was made:

First: Ships coming from infected ports, or when it is suspected that they are infected by the plague, must be submitted to quarantine of twelve days counted from the date of their departure. In relation to the passengers the same quarantine applies and to the disinfection of the merchandise.

Second: Ships which had had aboard one case of Bubonic Plague during the crossing will be submitted to a quarantine of twelve days, counted from arrival in all cases; all the requirements of the Sanitary Rules will be fulfilled in regard to all the passengers and the merchandise."

By the Government.

Lucio Baldo (*El Cronista* 1903).

A year before, in 1902 the Revolution Freedom broke out, a conflict that expanded to the whole country. This revolution caused a remarkable decline in the national economy with a marked reduction in the exportation of goods, which decreased by 39.651.574,54 Bolívares compared with the immediate period before

which had been 75.965.177,45 Bolivars. This situation was supported by external factors such as the fallen prices for quotation of the Venezuelan goods as well as the social and political disorders.

The Restoration Liberal Government of Castro issued comments which were reproduced by the provincial newspapers. *El Cronista*, in Valencia agreed. Its edition of September 22nd, 1903, after confirming the plague outbreak in Marseille, made the following comment. The government, represented by the Ministry of Internal Relations, actively dealt with the promulgation of the necessary rules required against the terrible infection of the Bubonic Plague which appeared lately in Marseille. (*El Cronista*, 1903) Even though Cipriano Castro had beaten the Freedom Revolution, which grouped liberal leaders such as Manuel Antonio Matos, Domingo Monogas, Nicolas Rolando, Zoilo Vidal and Jose Manuel Penaloza with the Colombian government's support of Jose Manuel Marroquin, he was unable to control the harm this caused in the country. The Chamber of Commerce and businessmen were the strongest enemies, which joined with foreign government representatives through the Commercial Houses. The Bubonic Plague meant a strong blow against the government's political stability. But this serious illness was more damaging at the economic level, because, by closing the major ports in the country, the economical improvement suffered a strong reverse. (2) The plague, as other epidemics such as smallpox and malaria, in Venezuela always had political and religious connotations. That is why the liberalism of the people sought to confront the opposition to the political regime in Valencia's and Puerto Cabello's newspapers.

"and as to the transitory damage that it would cause to the relatively small business done in Marseille, and to the Treasury, with such a low income from the use of that port, scruples must not be allowed to interfere, considering that such damage, would be

insignificant compared to the immense disease problem that the Bubonic Plague would bring to Venezuela. Once, in very difficult circumstances we were able to bear the ruinous effects of a blockade with all the world ports during long months"

{El Cronista, 1903}.

When we study this statement we may understand, that Cipriano Castro's government, in 1903, supposed that the sanitary rules in the main ports would only be effective for the immigration from Marseille. This approach was maintained during the 4 and 5 months preceding the official acceptance of the beginning of the Bubonic Plague.

An unrealistic sanitary

In the period 1903-1908, the country was scientifically backward. The development of 'medical positivism' had not arrived in Venezuela. The government had closed Universities such as Zulia and Carabobo. There were few doctors who had left to study in Paris, such as Jose Gregorio Hernandez, Santo Dominici, Pablo Acosta Ortiz and Luis Razetti. The medical school maintained some studies which were in agreement with the scientific advances which had been made in Europe and North America.

The government representatives dictated a sanitary rule that was not executed, because its applicability required trained personnel and inputs which were not available in the country; or had to be imported in ships with the risk of increasing the possibility of bringing the illness too. When the sanitary policy was analyzed, we see, as in the case of Puerto Cabello, that the rule was demonstrably clear and we believe it was ignored:

"1st Article. The entry of any ship coming from an infected port or that is suspected to be so will be forbidden.

2nd Article. Any ship coming from a neighbouring port or one that is infected

will be subject to a quarantine which will not be less than 12 days, counting the crossing days".

(Gaceta Oficial, 1903).

These two articles, if they had become reality, were enough to prevent the epidemic which was officially spread in Puerto Cabello in 1908. No ship was denied entrance nor put under a quarantine between the years 1903 and 1908.

The Venezuelan country, found that the plague, besides having a sanitary component, had a political and economical character, because the customs incomes would be affected for a government that faced an international debt that escalated near 15 million Bolívars. The political speeches of the government representatives tried to guarantee to the population that the rules taken would be enough to prevent the illness.

"The existence of the Bubonic Plague in some ports related to our country placed Venezuela in a dangerous position. The plague can make its appearance, imported by those ships that make their trips between those ports and ours.

And so the municipal authorities must take the necessary authority to prevent the terrible illness being imported and lest this misfortune should happen to provide the population with enough defence conditions to prevent the epidemic spread".

(ElCronista, 1903).

The government asked the medical advisers to elaborate many recommendations to be executed by the Port Police, subject to the Internal Ministry, and which should be executed and accepted as a "general precaution". If the ships' quarantines were not enforced, these precautions were merely Utopian. (3)

1. Daily cleaning and disinfection with a solution of formaline, lysol, creoline; ferric acid, sublimate and milk of lime, in churches, headquarters, markets, slaughter houses,

schools, theatres and in general of all those places in which there are or could be crowded people. The public meeting places as in theatres, or for religious festivals, retreats, pilgrimages, cockpits, bulls, exercises on the street, etc., were forbidden. Daily disinfection of the carriages, tramcars, vapors, garbage cars, and other vehicles.

Ship movements in ports

Between 1903 and 1909, there were not any ships in quarantine in Puerto Cabello. The movement of ships and steamers was considerable. In 1903, 600 ships entered the country by the main ports. But it is obvious that for Cipriano Castro's government port control policy did not exist at any moment in 1905. When the epidemic had spread to Puerto Colon in Panama, the Minister Lucio Baldo ordered the Health Councils in all the ports :

"Mr General Castro :

At this moment I have received your telegram addressed to the Public Treasury and to the undersigned, in which you decree in a formal and rigorous way a quarantine for ships proceeding from Puerto Colon, because of the Bubonic Plague."

But we find that the Customs Intendant of Puerto Cabello, Elias Acosta, communicated with the President Cipriano Castro, in the case of the Spanish steamer *Manuel Calvo*, which before coming to Puerto Colon first went to Curacao. The President authorizes *Manuel Calvo* to enter Puerto Cabello. (*Miraflores Historic Files Bulletin*, No. 9. 1974).

If these events happened when the Bubonic Plague had already been declared in Puerto Espana and Colon, we must deduce that in the year of 1903 no control of ships coming from other countries was made. If we analyze the incoming movements from ships with foreign freights which were made at the end of the year 1903 and the first trimester of 1904, we find

that from a total of 191 steamers and ships with a major tonnage of 35 thousand tons corresponded to : 40 English ships, 47 Dutch, 31 French, 10 Italian, 12 Spanish, 2 Australian, 23 German, 26 North American and 10 national sailings.

The Bubonic Plague risk in the number of European ships was not really taken in mind by the government authorities, because they agreed with the security bill. This was the reason why the plague entered the country. The port authorities' contradictions of ignorance of its presence were manifested in decisions such as the one taken by the War and Marine Ministry in 1905, with General Regulo Olivares, in charge :
"All the national and foreign ships that anchor in Puerto Cabello, remain free of payment for the right of lighthouse dock: when they exclusively come to receive repairs in the National dike shipyard of Puerto Cabello".
(*EICronista*, 1905).

A matter of conclusion

Medical positivism which was developed at the end of the XIX century, had a late influence in our country. It would not be until 1936 with the creation of the Health and Social Assistance Ministry, when Venezuela started to make some sanitary policy control of illness in a preventive and prophylactic sense, as shown in the mass vaccination campaign, environment control, sectors regularization and infectious illness transmission.

During the first decade of the XX century, the country's government, through General Cipriano Castro, attempted in a non coherent way to establish a sanitary policy in the ports to counteract the epidemic spread of Bubonic Plague, which had originated in China in 1893.

If Venezuela had practised port controls, we could have prevented the spread of the illness in the period 1903-1908. There is a high probability

that the Bubonic Plague existed in our ports in the year 1905, when there was no ship quarantine and the medical advisers' rules were not respected.

The national political crisis which caused the collapse of Cipriano Castro's government in 1904, allowed the report of Bubonic Plague to be heard by the executive, when the mortality from the plague was obvious and the government accepted that the epidemic had reached Venezuelan ports.

The Bubonic Plague, which produced mortality until the year 1920 and which was limited in los Valles del Tuy, is an example of how other infectious diseases reported in Asia, Europe or Africa, can reach our country when sanitary policy rules are not fulfilled. AIDS, Cholera, BSE (mad cow disease), Ebola and virulent encephalitis are sanitary challenges that the country still has to face.

This epidemic study illustrates the mistakes made in the past with an objective lesson for our governments. Like the Venezuelans, we do not wish to learn from the past, when the increase of tuberculosis, leprosy, venereal disease, enteritis and environmental illnesses, over which we had some control and there was some decrease in past decades, are now increasing in an alarming way.

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Notes

1. Information from the foreign newspapers which were reported in the Venezuelan Press at the end of the XIX century and the beginning of the XX century, made reference to the Bubonic Plague.

El Cronista in 1903, reported :

. "Mazatlan, 17 - yesterday three people died due to the plague. Of two hundred and two sick people after the plague's appearance, 121 have died.

. London, 17. - A dispatch from Palermo says that a ship of 3 masts Italian, the *Captain Consigjele* which goes from Pensacola to Marseille has arrived there with many suspicious cases. It is believed that it is the

Bubonic Plague and two men from the crew have died.

. Mazatlan, 13. - There are a great number of cases, very ill.

2. The exportation by Puerto Cabello in 1902, was: coffee: Kg? 5.018.810, cocoa: 890.828, beast leather 374.786, deer leather 11.295, goat leather 70.053, unspecific metals: 7.991, spurge : 461, cinchona bark: 675, wood : 358.380, cotton : 6.384, serrapia: 530 and corn : 13.498. All in quintals. And in the third trimester in 1903, importations coming from Germany, Spain, United States, France, Holland, England Italy and Cuba, entered the country in a grand total of 128.763 port bundles with a real value in Bolivars of 6.840.975,12.

The value of these imports generated customs taxes which allowed payment of the international debt. The number of merchandise bundles which came to Puerto Cabello, gives us a clear idea of the magnitude that meant the control of rats and mice in the ship's holds, as well as the presence of fleas. A similar situation was presented in other ports of the country.

3. Castro's government offered a reward for the killing of rats and mice . *El Cronista's* description, which we insert below, is convincing. Poison to destroy rats and mice. Dust lead acetate, a teaspoon mixed with meat sauce, banana, butter, flour and any other substance in this style, which facilitates the composition. In the places where the Bubonic Plague has been declared, we "have proceeded to destroy the rats by other means, paying for killing each one of them, a cent, at least".

Biography

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