

**HISTORY 2186B**  
**Zombie Apocalypse: Panic and Paranoia in Human History**  
**Winter 2024**

**Instructor: Professor Jonathan F. Vance**

Email: [jvance@uwo.ca](mailto:jvance@uwo.ca)

---

**Course Description:**

What terrifies you? Financial ruin? Global pandemic? Alien invasion? Zombie apocalypse? Do you feel more frightened when people around you are frightened?

We like to think that the more we understand about the world, the less we have reason to fear – and so the less we fear. But mass panic is just as prevalent today as it has ever been. The object of this course is to explore episodes of mass panic throughout human history. Why do concern and anxiety transform into panic and hysteria in some contexts but not in others? What do panics reveal about the societies in which they occur? Why have panics provided the justification for attacks on immigrants, women, the disabled, minorities, and any other group that could be construed as a threat? Panic, as we will see, has always been about much more than just panic.

The course will consider a number of themes in the context of different panics through history:

Long-term preconditions – Are there underlying forces that need to be in place for mass panic to occur?

Short-term triggers – Is there a single event that sets it off?

How panic is spread – Is panic different in our modern mass-media age than it was in pre-literate societies?

Impacts of panic – Who gets hurt? Who profits?

Panic in popular culture – Why are we so fascinated by mass panic?

By the end of this course, students should:

- understand the impact of fear on human society through history
- be able to see trends in responses to events over time and space
- appreciate how changes in communications over time have affected the spread of panic
- be aware of the challenges that emerge as we try to make rational sense of fundamentally irrational human behaviours
- be familiar with a variety of notable examples of mass hysteria in different societies
- understand how scholars in various disciplines interpret panic in an historical context

**Course Materials:**

There are no textbooks to purchase for this course. Readings are available on the course website. You should keep up with the readings on a weekly basis, as they will be referred to in lecture. You will be responsible for **ALL** of the course readings for the term tests and final examination.

**Methods of Evaluation:**

Term test #1 (written answer)	35%
Term test #2 (written answer)	35%

Final examination (written answers)

30%

You DO NOT need to write the final exam to pass this course. If you are taking it as a Discovery Credit and you score 50 points or more on the two terms tests, you can opt out of writing the final.

## **Course Schedule and Readings:**

**9 January – Introduction - Why do zombies scare us so much?**

**“You don’t look so good ...” – Threats to the Body**

**16 January**

Disease Panics in the Old World: The Bubonic Plague, Cholera, and Smallpox

Reading:

John Kelly, *The Great Mortality: An Intimate History of the Black Death, the Most Devastating Plague of All Time* (2005), chap. 4 & 5

**23 January**

Disease Panics in the Modern World: The ABCs (AIDS, Bird Flu, COVID) and More!

Reading:

Thomas Abraham, *Twenty-First Century Plague: The Story of SARS* (2004), chap. 3 & 4

**“There’s a run on the bank!!!” – Threats to the Home**

**30 January**

Financial Panics: From the Tulip Mania to Global Meltdowns

Reading:

Maury Klein, *Rainbow’s End: The Crash of 1929* (2001), chap. 10 & 11

**2 – 3 February**

\*\* Term test #1

**The Enemy among Us – Threats to the Community**

**6 February**

Revolutionaries and Rebels: From the Great Fear to the Indian Uprising

Reading:

Kim A. Wagner, *The Great Fear of 1857: Rumours, Conspiracies and the Making of the Indian Uprising* (2010), chap. 8, 9 & 10

**13 February**

Communists and Terrorists: From Red Scares to the War on Terror

Reading:

Michael Barson and Steven Heller, *Red Scared!: The Commie Menace in Propaganda and Popular Culture* (2001), chap. 5 & 6

**20 February - no class - Reading Week**

## **“We shall fight on the beaches” – Threats to the Nation**

**27 February**

Invasion Scares: From the Spanish Armada to Adolf Hitler

Reading:

I.F. Clarke, “Before and After *The Battle of Dorking*”, *Science Fiction Studies* 24/1 (March 1997): 33-46

## **“Double, Double, toil and trouble” – Threats from Other Realms**

**5 March**

Witches, Dancing Mania, and Demonic Possession

Reading:

Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbours: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft* (1996), chap. 5

**8 – 10 March**

\*\* Term test #2

**12 March**

Space Invaders, Martian Attacks and Alien Abduction

Reading:

You should listen to the original broadcast of Orson Welles’ *War of the Worlds*, available on-line – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xs0K4ApWl4g>

## **“It’s the end of the world as we know it” – Threats to Existence**

**19 March**

Armageddons and Apocalypses: Nuclear Annihilation, Doomsday Cults, and the End of Days

Reading:

Joanna Bourke, *Fear: A Cultural History* (2005), chap. 9

## **“There be monsters” – Unspeakable Threats**

**26 March**

Vampires, Werewolves, Serial Killers, and Stranger Danger

**2 April – Conclusion**

Zombies ... and then what?

### **Additional Statements:**

- Please review the Department of History’s shared policies and statements for all undergraduate courses at: [https://history.uwo.ca/undergraduate/program\\_module\\_information/policies.html](https://history.uwo.ca/undergraduate/program_module_information/policies.html) for important information regarding accessibility options, make-up exams, medical accommodations, health and wellness, academic integrity, plagiarism, and more.