

HISTORY 2186B
Zombie Apocalypse: Panic and Paranoia in Human History
Winter 2026

Tuesdays, 10.30 to 12.30 – HSB 40

Instructor: Professor Jonathan F. Vance

Office Hours: Mondays, 1 – 2PM, Wednesdays noon – 2PM

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This is a draft outline. Please see the course site on OWL Brightspace for a final version.

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 may 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 complete all of these components to pass the course. For example, if you are doing the course as a Discovery Credit and score at least 50 points out of a possible 70 on the first two tests, you are not required to write the final exam. In such cases, your final grade will be the sum of the grades achieved on the term tests, with a ZERO grade being registered for the final exam.

*** Note: Both term tests have **flexible deadlines**, meaning that they may be submitted on any day of the week in which they are due. For this reason, tests in History 2186B are **NOT** eligible for a request for academic consideration without supporting documentation. Permission to write a test late can only be given by the Academic Advising office of your home faculty.

The use of AI generative tools is NOT permitted when writing the term tests in this course. As a very wise person once said, "If you can't be bothered to write it, why should I be bothered to read it?"

Course Schedule and Readings:**6 January – Introduction - Why do zombies scare us so much?****“You don’t look so good ...” – Threats to the Body****13 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

20 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**27 January**

Financial Panics: From the Tulip Mania to Global Meltdowns

Reading:

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

The Enemy among Us – Threats to the Community**3 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

5 – 6 February

**** Term test #1**

10 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

17 February - no class - Reading Week

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

24 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

3 March

Witches, Dancing Mania, and Demonic Possession

Reading:

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

5 – 6 March

**** Term test #2**

10 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

17 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

24 March

Psychopaths, Serial Killers, and Stranger Danger

31 March

Vampires, Werewolves, and Things that Go Bump in the Night

7 April – Conclusion

Zombies ... and then what?

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 for important information regarding accessibility options, make-up exams, medical accommodations, health and wellness, academic integrity, plagiarism, and more.