The Power of Plagues, 
Second Edition
Irwin W. Sherman; ASM Press, Washington, DC, 
Price: $30.89

A usual dictionary definition of 
plague (a highly infectious, 
usually fatal epidemic disease; a 
estilience; https://www.thefreedic-
tionary.com) differs from that used 
by Irwin W. Sherman in his book 
The Power of Plagues. To accom-
plish his purpose in writing this 
book (“to make the science of epi-
demic diseases—plagues—accessi-
ble and understandable”), Sherman 
borrows his definition from historian Asa Briggs: “Plagues 
are a dramatic unfolding of events; they are stories of dis-
covery, reaction, conflict and resilience of local and admin-
istrative structures.”

This book is a history of humanity as influenced and 
shaped by plagues of known and unknown etiology. One 
of its strengths is also one of its weaknesses. To trace our 
journey from 4 million years ago to the present, weav-
ing in plagues, people, microorganisms, and advances in 
technology, is no small feat. However, for the most part, 
Sherman accomplishes this goal in what is a very readable 
book that should appeal to a wide variety of audiences. 
Indeed, it should be read by every student of medicine and 
the health professions.

Did you know that Pharaoh’s plague and snail fever 
are the same disease, or that war fever and jail fever are 
also caused by the same microorganism? Can you name 
10 famous people who had syphilis or 20 famous people 
who died of tuberculosis? Did you know that heroin at 
one time was a treatment for the very troublesome cough 
of tuberculosis? Along with the answers to these ques-
tions, in this book you will find how plagues shaped his-
tory from ancient times to Napoleon’s invasion of Russia 
to the very modern plagues of HIV/AIDS, influenza, and 
Lyme disease.

The art or photographic reproductions, usually placed 
at the beginning of a chapter, are a most powerful method 
of connecting the reader to what life was like at a given 
time in history. For example, look at Figure 6.1, Eugen Le 
Roux’s engraving of Napoleon’s troops in Vilna after the 
Russian Campaign in 1812, or Figure 5.1, a photograph of 
Lorraine, age 11, who has AIDS, being comforted by her 
grandmother.

Errors in the first edition, noted by Rigau-Perez (/), 
have been corrected. The placement of AIDS in Chapter 
5 (A 21st Century Plague, AIDS), immediately after the 
chapter on the Black Death, is out of order chronologically 
and disrupts the history timeline. Chapters 10 (Preventing 
Plagues: Immunization) and 11 (The Plague Protectors: 
Antisepsis to Antibiotics) could easily be deleted in favor 
of more detail or artwork. However, these criticisms are 
minor. The major strength of this book is that it is a very 
readable history of humanity as shaped by plagues, making 
it attractive to a wide audience.

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