



SMUS MODEL  
UNITED NATIONS

# HCC Background Guide

# Letter from the Director

Dear Delegates,

My name is Eli Alexander, and as a grade 11 student here at SMUS, it is my pleasure to welcome you all to the Historical Crisis Committee (HCC) this iteration of SMUSMUN. I will serve as your director for HCC and as the Secretary General for the conference. I started Model United Nations in Grade 7 as an attention-seeking geography nerd eager to learn more about international relations and global politics. Ever since then, I have fallen in love with the concept of MUN, and this conference is my 11th to date, my first time staffing. Being the secretary general and HCC director for the first time is quite intimidating. Still, it will be an enjoyable experience, so I am ready.

This year, we have the incredible opportunity to facilitate a meeting between delegations from the European, Asian, and African continents, set in 1347, to discuss the siege of Caffa and its significance on the world stage. I am genuinely excited to see how well you all play your roles and how diligently you try to prevent the spread of the disease we all know as the Black Death. In the real world, we know that the black death killed millions across all continents, but it was especially devastating to Europe, having killed an estimated one third of all Europeans. Some cities were hit harder than others, with mortality rates of over 50%; however, every European was affected, regardless of their ethnicity, culture, worldviews, or religion. In our simulation, delegates will attempt to prevent this from ever occurring.

This background guide will serve as the basis for the crisis, and as a result, I would like to introduce the people who have worked hard to create this source for you all to reference. Grade 10 Byrdie Fisher-Franke will serve as Chair, with four years of MUN experience, and Grade 10 Mia Nadra will serve as Assistant Director, with five years of MUN experience. And we could not operate our committee without our excellent Crisis staff, SMUS Grade 12 Yingfan Bai, and Grade 10 Kinara Kumar, a GNS student. I am deeply grateful to each and every one of them for volunteering their time to facilitate this committee.

I am profoundly excited and eager to unlock the door to Crothall 115, and I am so incredibly honoured to meet all of you on November 22nd!

Sincerely,  
Eli Alexander  
HCC Director and Secretary General

# Position Paper Policy

## What is a Position Paper?

A position paper is a brief overview of a country's stance on the topics being discussed by a particular committee. Though there is no specific format the position paper must follow, it should include a description of your positions your country holds on the issues on the agenda, relevant actions that your country has taken, and potential solutions that your Empire/Kingdom would support.

Each position paper should not exceed one page, excluding works cited, and should all be combined into a single document per delegate. For HCC, position papers are required and must be submitted by the deadline. If delegates choose to write their position paper with the help of AI, they will also not be eligible to receive awards.

## Formatting

Position papers should:

- Include the name of the delegate, their country, and the committee
- Be in a standard font (e.g. Times New Roman) with a 12-point font size and 1-inch document margins
- Not include illustrations, diagrams, decorations, national symbols, watermarks, or page borders
- Include citations and a bibliography, in any format, giving due credit to the sources used in research (not included in the 1-page limit)
- Not be written by Large Language models (AI), as this does not align with school and SMUSMUN policy. (If you require further clarification, please contact us.)

## Due Dates And Submission Procedure

Position papers for this committee must be submitted by 11:59 PM PT on November 18, 2025. Once your position paper is complete, please save the file as your last name, your first name and send it as an attachment in an email to your committee's email address, with the subject heading as "[last name] [first name] — Position Paper". Please do not add any other attachments to the email.

Your position paper should be submitted in PDF format; position papers submitted in another format will not be accepted. Each position paper will be manually reviewed and considered for the Best Researched award.

Please send all Position Papers along with any questions you may have to:  
[eli.alexander@smus.ca](mailto:eli.alexander@smus.ca).

## Introduction and Summary

The Historical Crisis Committee (HCC) takes place in 1347, during the infamous siege of Caffa. Sometimes spelled Kaffa, this city was a vitally important hub on the Black Sea that facilitated trade between the Silk Road to the east and the Mediterranean Sea to the west. Preceding the events that underlie the crisis, the Republic of Genoa obtained Caffa from the Mongol Empire's Khanate, the "Golden Horde." A link between the east and the west, the ruthless Golden Horde leader, Jani Beg Khan, eventually ruled that his army would control Caffa and its sister city, Tana. While Tana was captured, its residents fled to Caffa, where they were able to sustain their independence from the Mongols for some time, with the help of Italian reinforcements.<sup>1</sup>

From the sidelines, the plague, commonly known as the Black Death, spread rampantly throughout Central Asia and Russia, infecting the armies of the Golden Horde. It is unknown where the disease originated; however, it is known to have spread along trade routes, including the Silk Road. As the Mongols neared completion of their siege, and as the Genoese were nearing capitulation in Caffa, the Golden Horde's besieging army was suddenly infected with the plague. As numerous soldiers fell ill and passed away, Khan Jani Beg saw no choice but to retreat. However, before doing so, he would release one final wave of assault. This time not with living, fighting soldiers, but with dead ones who were heavily contaminated with the plague.<sup>2</sup>

Numerous bodies pound the colony, and the Genoese work hard to prevent panic. However, it is too late. Boats are already starting to fill up with refugees, sailors, merchants, and civilians fleeing the brutal siege towards the rest of Europe. The first few have already arrived in Sicily. With the sight of an almost entirely deceased crew, the port authorities ordered the ship back out to sea.<sup>3</sup> More ships like these will inevitably dock at other ports across the continent, and each time they do so, the likelihood of disease transmission increases.

As the disease spreads rapidly within the city walls, citizens have started to panic as their loved ones fall ill and perish. The demand for evacuation increases, and more vessels prepare to set sail for the rest of Europe. This is the timeframe for the meeting between delegates of various empires.

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<sup>1</sup> Kalu, "Birth of the Black," War History Online.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> "What Made," video.



## Issues at Hand

With endless waves of bodies flung over the city walls, the people of Caffa remain in a state of panic. With the inevitable infection of civilians, issues at hand include the safe evacuation of personnel out of the port city, the treatment of those still trapped inside, the rampant spread of the disease within the city walls, and the ever-looming threat of the Golden Horde's fierce army, waiting to break the siege.

Among those trapped in the port city are notary Gabriel de Mussis, a common writer who writes a personal account of the situation in Caffa.<sup>4</sup> The said account could help prevent the further spread of the disease. Mussis must be evacuated from the city to a safe port in the Mediterranean for questioning and further study. While sailors and merchants have begun evacuating the colony, a significant Genoese army remains in Caffa, awaiting a retreat to their homeland.

Caffa is a culturally diverse city of over 17000 homes, which house ethnic Genoese, Venetians, Greeks, Armenians, Jews, Mongols, and Turkic peoples.<sup>5</sup> Each of these families is actively trying to protect itself from the dangers of the illness, but little is known about how to do so effectively. From written accounts of citizens on the frontlines, it is generally thought that the Mongols are purposely attempting to spread "stench" into the city walls.<sup>6</sup> In the city, citizens claim the stench is impossible to escape, and they are desperately trying to evacuate. It is feared that ships in which sailors and merchants have already boarded are deeply infiltrated with the stench brought on by the Golden Horde. In Messina, Sicily, the local authorities have already denied entry to many Caffan refugees who were observed to have been infected with this new disease.<sup>7</sup> The arrival of more so-called "death ships"<sup>8</sup> is inevitable.

While devastated by the plague, the Golden Horde remains an adversary of European powers, including maritime powers such as Venice and Genoa. The Horde is fortunate to have control of some of the most significant trade routes between China and the empires of the Black Sea.<sup>9</sup> At present, Khan Jani Beg's army is achieving glory at its finest, despite recent events in Caffa. Ever since the decline of the Kievan Rus', the Golden Horde has developed its operation in Russia to establish complete de facto control over its land area,<sup>10</sup> with no visible intent to back out of future conquests further into the European Continent.

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<sup>4</sup> Wheelis, "Biological Warfare," U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

<sup>5</sup> Wheelis, "Biological Warfare," National Library of Medicine

<sup>6</sup> "How the Black," Medievalists.net.

<sup>7</sup> "The Black," The Ministry of History.

<sup>8</sup> "The first," The Horror Zine.

<sup>9</sup> HistoryMaps, "Golden Horde," History Maps.

<sup>10</sup> Vogel, "The Mongol," UI Scholar Works.

The current situation in Caffa remains unstable, with pressing issues including the spread of disease within the city, the fear of death ships making landfall in Mediterranean maritime states, and the enduring threat posed by the Golden Horde and its ruthless leader, Khan Jani Beg. It is unknown how citizens in Europe will respond to such an unprecedented attack; however, with immense shock from the unexplainable, the blaming of scapegoats is a fear that cannot be ignored.<sup>11</sup>

## Timeline

### **The Plague of Justinian (541 - 590CE)**

The modern-day plague has existed for thousands of years; however, the first documented outbreak was recorded between 541 and 590 CE, known as the plague of Justinian, named after the Byzantine emperor at the time.<sup>12</sup> It is widely believed that the infection originated in the Nile Delta and spread to the Byzantine Empire (Eastern Roman Empire) via maritime trade routes. For four months in 542, the plague ravaged the rich Roman capital of Constantinople, even infecting the Emperor himself, though he recovered. The Byzantines dug pits to dispose of their corpses, with overflow leaving bodies in the city's towers.<sup>13</sup> They loaded their dead onto ships, which set sail out into the Sea of Marmara. At its peak in Constantinople, the plague killed as many as 10,000 citizens per day. Estimates dictate that nearly half of the city's population had perished in the span of these few months.<sup>14</sup> After the disease finally left the city, it continued to spread across the empire, becoming endemic in Persia and the Caucasus mountain regions.<sup>15</sup> It helped the Byzantines fight, as it killed many invading armies.<sup>16</sup>

### **Origins of the Mongol Empire (1200s)**

In 1206 CE, Temüjin was elected Genghis Khan by various regional tribes in the vast plains north of China. After consolidating power, Genghis Khan set his sights on China's Jin dynasty. By 1227, the time of Genghis Khan's death, his empire spanned from China to the Caspian Sea, with no vision of stopping.<sup>17</sup> Because of its capture of the Chinese homeland, the Mongol empire developed a unique ideology, which is referred to as "one world, one ruler."<sup>18</sup> Genghis Khan and his army sought to conquer the world so they could control every person, tradition, culture, religion, and right. Everyone was to practice the same way of life that had been taught to him. Additionally, the Mongols sought complete control over all land trade routes, which provided

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<sup>11</sup> Johnston and Koyama, "6 - The Shock," Cambridge University Press.

<sup>12</sup> Backhouse, "Plague of Justinian," Britannica.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Mongol Empire," Britannica.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

financial support for military expansion. Their wish eventually came to light, as the Mongols took control over the entirety of the infamous Silk Road, between Europe and Asia.<sup>19</sup>

### **Establishment of the Colony of Caffa (1266)**

In 1266, the Genoese and the Mongol Golden Horde Khanate agreed to establish the port of Caffa as a trading hub, linking the maritime republic of Genoa with the expanding Mongol Empire and its Khanates. As such, Caffa was, and still is, a vital port for the transportation of goods between Europe and Asia. Since its establishment, Caffa has faced numerous threats from different Khans of the Golden Horde.<sup>20</sup>

### **First Siege of Caffa (1343)**

In 1343, Genoese Christians and Mongolian Muslims in the Crimean city of Tana fought each other. The tension between these groups resulted in the death of a local muslim. Seeing their prosecution by the Islamic Golden Horde as inevitable, the Genoese fled to the port city of Caffa.<sup>21</sup> However, soon after their arrival, the Mongols followed. They initiated a brutal siege; however, it proved that Caffa's strategic location was tough to penetrate. After the Genoese brought in reinforcements from Italy via the sea, they managed to force the Mongol army into retreat.<sup>22</sup>

### **The Outbreak of the Current Epidemic (Early 1300s to 1347)**

The mysterious disease originates in China, rapidly spreading and eradicating families. With global trade intensifying between Asia and Europe, the Black Death spread quickly along the Silk Road. As the century continued, it began spreading through various ranks of the Mongol Armies.<sup>23</sup>

### **The Order (1347)**

After being devastated by the mysterious plague, the Khan of the Golden Horde, Jani Beg Khan, has ordered his soldiers to load the corpses of their dead onto catapults and launch them into the city.<sup>24</sup> The Khan has been left with no choice, as his army lacks morale after being infected with this ferocious illness.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> Wheelis, "Biological Warfare," National Library of Medicine

<sup>21</sup> Kalu, "Birth of the Black," War History Online.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Black Death," Britannica.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

## Historical Analysis

The events on the timeline above demonstrate the ideology of the Mongol Empire and its Khanates, as well as the history of the plague that has ravaged many over the years. It is not the first time humans have had to defend themselves against this deadly illness. Additionally, throughout various other outbreaks of the plague, humans have blamed each other for deaths, and this will inevitably occur again<sup>26</sup>. What the past has taught current empires is that the plague, in its current form, is unstoppable and will continue to ravage civilization unless controlled more effectively. The disease pits humans against each other, which only exacerbates the conflict and results in death.

Demonstrated by the fast-moving disease, the European culture of moving around further spreads the illness. Because of the plague's immense effects on trade routes such as the Silk Road, it will inevitably spread quickly due to the never-ending flow of goods throughout the Mediterranean and Europe. Merchants and sailors in Europe thrive because of trade between empires, and this new infectious disease threatens their way of life. On the Silk Road, the disease was spread by caravans and merchants who would stop in villages, towns, and cities, bringing toxic air with them. These trade routes, known as the Pax Mongolica<sup>27</sup>, bring light to affected Genoese and Europeans about the extent to which the illness can spread. There is no doubt that the European way of life will make the plague much more contagious than it already is if it is to be brought onto the continent.

Furthermore, the Colony of Caffa, established with the Golden Horde's consent by the Genoese, monopolized trade around the Black Sea, arousing jealousy among the Mongols. The Mongols, who aim to control all trade throughout the world in a global empire,<sup>28</sup> will not rest until they have conquered the colony in which they agreed to let be established. The Genoese bought the land for their maritime colony from the Mongols, who, ever since then, have attempted to sack the city and obtain all of the wealth the Genoese have accumulated.<sup>29</sup>

From the events on the timeline, one can visualize the development of the Mongol Empire and its Golden Horde as fierce nation-states, willing to perpetrate anything, regardless of the consequences, for the glory of their leaders and their desire for a unified world with their values. Meanwhile, the mysterious plague acclimatized to the human way of life. It familiarized itself with trade routes, adapting to latch onto caravans, ships, and merchants as they spread along the Silk Road. With all this knowledge, it is easy to predict that the plague will continue to spread on

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<sup>26</sup> "Bubonic Plague," Highbrowthe Genoese established exacerbated.

<sup>27</sup> Sherry, "Trade Networks," OER Project.

<sup>28</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Mongol Empire," Britannica.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid



ships, where it will devastate the population not just in Caffa but also across European Civilization.

## Past Efforts

### Separation of the sick from the healthy

The only effective way to stop the spread of the plague was to separate healthy citizens from sick patients. Although this didn't cause the plague to become extinct, it did slow its spread at the time. One of the first areas to enforce quarantine and social distancing was the port city of Reguasa, using an isolation tactic forced on arriving ships.<sup>30</sup> As other towns adopted this effort, many adopted a more enforcement-oriented, but similar, policy. The Milanese authorities forced quarantine on its citizens under the law to the point of complete isolation in patients' houses until the plague had presumably left their systems.

### Use of Weaponry

In 1344, an Italian relief force destroyed the Mongol siege machines. This led to an apparent weakness in the Mongol army, as they lost the strength that they had beforehand.<sup>31</sup> With the influx of supplies the Genoese received from the surrounding sea, they had a better chance at defending themselves. A primary tactic used by the Genoese was Greek fire, which helped protect against attackers. The use of weaponry was tactical in the freedom of many and supportive of victory.

### Past Religious Efforts

There were many religious efforts to end the Plague of Justinian. For people of Christian beliefs, this included attending mass, fasting, praying, the use of amulets and other charms, flight from affected areas, as well as the persecution of marginalized communities.<sup>32</sup> These efforts all stemmed from the same idea that the plague was brought from God to punish them, and as soon as traditional responses to God stopped, more extreme measures were imperative. These included the slaughter of Jews, gypsies, and other minority groups. Similar responses were found in the Muslim community at the time, including flight from affected areas and prayer and supplication at mosques.

### Biological warfare

Mongol soldiers decided to use the bodies of their dead plague-infected soldiers as weaponry. They hurled the bodies of their dead in attempts to spread disease among the inhabitants of

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<sup>30</sup> "The Black," The Ministry of History.

<sup>31</sup> "Siege of Caffa," Wikipedia.

<sup>32</sup> Worldhistory.

Caffa.<sup>33</sup>The disease rapidly spread, leading to the death and destruction of millions of citizens as well as the loss of the Genoese defenders, as they now begin to leave their positions and try to escape death. As many Genoese in Caffa start to leave by boat, there is a fear that this use of biological warfare will spread significantly further than Caffa.

## **Isolation**

Mongol Soldiers surrounded Caffa, completely cutting them off from external aid.<sup>34</sup>They erected catapults, battering rams, and other siege engines to breach the fortress's walls. The defenders managed to fend off the Horde's forces for months on end, but now, they begin to feel the repercussions of the lack of supplies that was being channelled into the city.

## **Possible Solutions**

### **Diplomatic Negotiation and Trade Agreement**

Negotiations through the Mongols and Caffa leaders could raise the siege, in exchange for possible privileges or trade opportunities. Options inside of negotiations include mediators who ensure that both sides are treated equally. This could help reduce the spread of plague by halting close-quarter fighting and allowing cleaner, safer passage for citizens, thereby avoiding unnecessary escape routes. It also reduces the number of lives lost and bloodshed, while fostering a healthy trading relationship.<sup>35</sup>

### **General Containment**

Containment from a humanitarian perspective could look like establishing quarantines that prevent the plague from entering or leaving the city, and spending time enforcing these laws accordingly. It could also involve organizing additional measures in the town to ensure the citizens and military can survive the siege, and enforcing precautions to support the defence. From a military standpoint, this appears to be organizing a possible naval patrol that not only deflects Mongol destruction but also protects key trade routes. Both humanitarian and military containment are influential in protecting innocent citizens.

## **Bloc Positions**

The bloc positions for the siege of Caffa consist of two major blocs: the pro-Mongol bloc and the European anti-Mongol bloc. These two blocs each share a desire for a world free of the plague;

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<sup>33</sup> "Siege of Caffa," Wikipedia.

<sup>34</sup> Weeks, "The Siege," Owlcation.

<sup>35</sup> Diplomacy Agency.

however, they disagree on the means to achieve it. The pro-Mongol bloc is primarily Islamic, whereas the anti-Mongol bloc is generally Christian and anti-Muslim.

## **Pro-Mongol Bloc**

The Pro-Mongol Bloc primarily consists of the Golden Horde and its regional allies. As a result of their shared opposition to the Western Christian powers and trade interests, these states aim to maintain control of the Silk Road and Black Sea trade routes. Under the leadership of Jani Beg,<sup>36</sup> The Golden Horde sees Genoa's fortified colonies, such as Caffa, as a direct threat to its Crimean sovereignty. Even with the illness, the Horde is determined to control local trade and oppose European influence. The Mamelukes, who controlled Egypt and crucial Mediterranean ports, may support the Mongol rule. In the midst of the instability brought on by the war and plague<sup>37</sup>, a growing power in Anatolia, the Ottomans, strongly believe that this conflict is a chance to expand their territory.<sup>38</sup>

The pro-Mongol bloc's main rival is the European bloc, though the two share many similarities.

## **European Bloc (Anti-Mongol)**

As the largest bloc, representing the main forces of the Western Christendom, the European Bloc consists of the Republic of Genoa, Republic of Venice, Papal States, Kingdom of France, Kingdom of Aragon, Kingdom of Poland, and Holy Roman Empire. These states are alarmed by the rapid spread of the disease throughout the routes and the Mongol siege of Caffa. Although these states are divided by trade and economic rivalries, they are united by their Catholic faith. The Republic of Genoa is a leader in the bloc's immediate interests, in the middle of defending its colony at Caffa from the Mongol siege and plague.<sup>39</sup> However, Genoa and Venice, long-term competitors, are currently temporarily aligned in their strong desire to secure their trade colonies and protect their merchants in the East. The monarchies in the West, in particular France and the Holy Roman Empire, are mainly focusing on continuing to build and reinforce their internal defences and on making vital decisions about whether to respond militarily or diplomatically to the Mongol aggression. The Papal States are calling for social and moral economic reform in response to the plague, interpreting the outbreak as a call for a stronger order and greater responsibilities.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Mark, "Effects of the Black," World History Encyclopedia.

<sup>37</sup> Britannica Editors, "Black Death," Encyclopedia Britannica.

<sup>38</sup> Weeks, "The Siege," Owlcation.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid

<sup>40</sup> Britannica Editors, "Black Death," Encyclopedia Britannica.

## Discussion Questions

Discussion questions will be the main points of discussion for the committee during debate. They outline exactly which problems delegates will be required to address to progress the crisis.

1. How will we prevent the plague from spreading within Caffa?
2. How will we safely evacuate essential personnel from the city?
3. How will we calm the public to prevent panic?
4. How will we ensure everlasting peace between the Mongol Empire and European States?
5. How will we prevent violence between religious groups?
6. How will we prevent the scapegoating of minority groups that often occurs during mass tragedies?
7. How will we stop the plague from spreading across the European continent?
8. How can we study previous outbreaks of the plague to determine safer, more effective ways to pursue this disease?
9. How will we protect important individuals and their families?
10. How do we continue to accumulate economic resources and build infrastructure despite mass casualties?
11. How will we work together with other empires who share the common goal of eradicating the plague?

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