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"Gerbils Without Borders: Invasiveness, Plague, and Micro-Global Histories of Science (1932–1939)"

Skotnes-Brown, Jules, and Matheus Alves Duarte da Silva

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In the 1930s, a series of bubonic plague outbreaks among humans cropped up in several villages at the border of Angola and Namibia. These outbreaks provoked deep concern, laying bare social and political tensions amongst neighboring imperial powers and Indigenous people within the region. Despite the appearance of this disease in what was then considered a recondite place, its spread sparked debate in transnational forums, such as the League of Nations and the Office International d'Hygiène Publique. Drawing upon archival records in Namibia, South Africa, Portugal, the United States, and the United Kingdom, this article argues that concerns over the spread of plague across land borders led to the development of a nascent invasive species framework which indicted border-crossing "migrant" South African gerbils for the international spread of the disease. It follows the transnational political and scientific dynamics created by the plague "invasion" and discusses how these, like the gerbils, crossed numerous borders and scales. Ultimately, this article shows how localized inter-species and inter-imperial encounters can provide empirical insights into the feasibilities of a micro-global history of science in which more-than-human actors take on an important role. (Abstract)

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