Twitter Thread by James Felton



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The Great Rat Massacre Of 1902 (and how it backfired spectacularly)

(Thread, sources here:

While we're talking about £500 incentives, I thought it would be fun to look back at one that backfired spectacularly and likely led to an outbreak of bubonic plague.

In Hanoi, Vietnam, rats were a huge problem around the turn of the 20th century.

Or more specifically, they had long been a problem, but now the colonial French viewed them as a problem too after Alexandre Yersin discovered the bacillus bacteria responsible for the bubonic plague, and the role that rats and fleas played in spreading it.

Rats would occasionally use the pipes that served the flushing toilets of the colonialists (unavailable to the local population) as an entry point into their homes.

Suddenly the pests, largely kept away from the colonialists' spacious mansions and confined to the poorer Vietnamese areas of Hanoi, moved from being "no biggie" to "they must be destroyed this instant".

It's funny how problems suddenly become problems that need to be dealt with when they affect colonists, specifically here when that problem pokes its head out of the shitter.

Worried about the plague and concerned for everybody, the French got stuck in and tried to deal with the problems themselves.

I am of course fucking with you, they hired locals to go down into the cramped, dank sewers in order to kill the potentially disease-filled rats below.

In the first week of the project, the rat-killing team managed to kill 7,985 rats. As their rat killing techniques improved (sadly we have no records of how they improved) they even managed to kill 20,114 rats in a single day.

Which even as someone who's "not a fan of the old rat torture" I have to grudgingly admit is quite impressive.

Somebody says "I twatted this rat to death" I'm the first to go to the fucking police, but say "I killed 20,000 rats" I'm clapping and asking how.

"It is hard to imagine a more incongruous image than that of the colonial civil servant, dressed in white from head to toe and on his way home to his spacious villa, coming into contact with a native sewer worker, covered in filth and carrying hundreds of bloody rat corpses"

historian Michael G. Vann wrote in a paper on the topic.

To be fair, it's much worse to imagine it from the point of view of the rat killer, forced to kill hundreds of thousands of rats then emerging to see someone posh in a completely rat-blood-free suit.

Despite the slaughter, it soon became apparent they weren't even putting a tiny dent in the rat population. The colonial administration, like Californian recruiting kids as squirrel killers in 1918 (google it), decided to turn to amateur vigilantes rather than paid professionals.

While you'd probably think giving money to random people who are up for a bit of rat twatting is bound to have some problems down the line, the administration weren't worried about training the people they were subjugating how to kill.

They began paying members of the public to kill rats, or so they thought. Deciding that it would be too much of an effort to deal in rat corpses, the colonial rulers decided that they would pay 1 cent per rat tail.

At first, the scheme looked like a massive success, if you define success as "a big pile of rat tails began flooding in" which I bet you fucking do.

It appeared people were slaughtering the rodents in impressive numbers.

Soon though, officials venturing into the Vietnamese part of the city took a closer look at some of the rats running around and noticed a distinct lack of tail where the tail should be.

Rather than killing the rats, entrepreneurial types had merely cut off their rat tails and released them into the wild to breed more valuable rat tails.

Essentially, in an attempt to incentivize rat-killing, the government had accidentally incentivized rat maiming.

Worse, people started farming the rats themselves in order to make money. The rat population exploded, and a year later the city began to see cases of bubonic plague, followed by a larger outbreak in 1906.

Sweet revenge by rats who probably had a weird tale of how some arsehole chopped off grandad's tail.

H/T: @cheianov whose tweet about the glorious tail (ha, that's a pun) alerted me to it earlier

Ps if you like me writing about plague rats my book on the Sun newspaper is currently HALF PRICE
https://t.co/Ck0RF1XZos

And if you want to read more about the rats (and I highly suspect you do) this is @MichaelGVann's book (referenced in the article above).
https://t.co/4IvFiWuT5f