

Between Disciplines, Transcending Borders: Natural Disasters in History

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Convener: Christof Mauch (RCC)

Participants: Andrea Janku (School of African and Oriental Studies, London), Heike Egner (University of Mainz), Uwe Lübken (RCC), Christof Mauch (RCC), Mischa Meier (University of Tübingen), Gerrit Schenk (TU Darmstadt), Franz Mauelshagen (Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut, Essen), Cornel Zwielerlein (Ruhr University, Bochum)

Until recently, (natural) disasters were not a topic of great interest to history scholars, but in the last decade or so, this has changed radically. A number of factors have been decisive in shaping this increase in historical interest; firstly, the International Decade of Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR), as the 1990s were designated by the United Nations. The UN, indeed, was the source of many impulses towards transdisciplinary, social science-based research into climate. Secondly, the debate on climate change has been instrumental in questioning the effects of global warming on human society, in which extreme events and natural disasters play a prominent role. Thirdly, developments within the academic discipline of history itself, especially from the perspectives of historical climatology and urban history, have led to a new focus on the relationship between nature and disasters. Environmental history is not the only meeting place for this research, but it is probably the most prominent. From its inception, environmental history has seen itself as an interdisciplinary field, overlapping with geography and the natural sciences, in which the *spatial turn* or the *geographic turn* have an important role. The topic of natural disasters calls for a transdisciplinary exchange of approaches and findings amongst historians, geographers and social scientists. At this event, the cross-section of academics came into being through a cooperation between the *KlimaKultur* project at the *Kulturwissenschaftlichen Institut Essen* (Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities, Essen) and the interdisciplinary research institute Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society in Munich.

The participants in this roundtable event each began by introducing themselves and giving a brief outline of their academic careers; each considered that they had crossed disciplinary borders in the course of their studies in environmental history, whilst employing methodologies chiefly drawn from cultural history. It was emphasized that environmental history as a discipline is in a precarious position at German universities. The main research interests of the participants reflected a range of geographical and chronological terrains, and the types of natural disasters which each had investigated were similarly diverse. The question of how different societies have reacted to natural disasters across history was the subject of intense discussion; were the societies in question able to learn from repeated disasters, especially in areas particularly at risk, and were memories of natural disasters preserved? This gave rise to the question as to whether “cultures of disaster” (Greg Bankoff) have developed in areas characterized by the regular recurrence of natural disasters (e.g. hurricanes on the south-east coast of North America, volcanic eruptions in Indonesia and the Philip-

pinetrees, etc.). The audience was particularly interested in whether the recent climate change could or should be referred to as a “climate disaster.”

Participants were in agreement that while research into disasters has experienced a boom in recent years, both nationally and internationally, there is still a lot of work to be done. It was also pointed out that much of the research produced in Germany on this topic does not reflect the current national and international state of research. It is remarkable that concepts such as social vulnerability continue to be largely ignored by historians in Germany. A controversial point was whether the conclusions drawn in very recent research will be generally acknowledged and eventually find their way into chronologies and handbooks concerned with particular time periods or national histories. Some participants were cautiously optimistic and pointed to the relevance of historical research into disasters in terms of the “big questions” in history, such as state-building in Europe during the early modern period. Others were more sceptical. There was general agreement that, at this point in time, it is too early to draw firm conclusions.

— Franz Mauelshagen