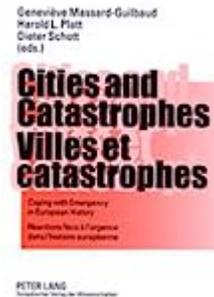




Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud, Harold L. Platt, Dieter Schott, eds. *Villes et catastrophes: Réactions à l'urgence dans l'histoire européenne.* Frankfurt-Main and Berlin: Peter Lang, 2002. Index. EUR 28.20 (paper), ISBN 978-3-631-37169-5.



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River floods in Southeast Germany, earthquakes in Southern Italy, inundations in China, bushfires around Sydney—these are only some of the “natural” tragedies that have hit humankind this year. Although natural disasters were often touched on by historians in different contexts, only in recent times do we find proper studies about the effects of catastrophes such as earthquakes or floods on human life. These studies make a contribution to the international quest to gain a better understanding of ways to reduce the tragic consequences of natural and human-made environmental disasters. Of course, those efforts can be interpreted as one of the main achievements of modern environmental history, in focusing on the question as to whether or not such catastrophes are, at least partially, caused by humans and can be called ecological disasters. The focus on such disastrous events, however, also gives us a new historiographical perspective to understand the ways in which people organize their social life within urban society. The essays in this volume present this perspective in a convincing manner.

Based upon papers given at a session at the 5th International Conference on Urban History 2000 in Berlin, the ten essays investigate different disastrous incidents that challenged the social, economic, and cultural order of the city in European history. They cover a wide geographical range of countries from France to Poland and Greece,

from Great Britain, its Caribbean colonies, and Finland to Germany and Italy. At the same time, the articles (presented with abstracts in English, French, and German) cover a wide range of urban disasters from floods and fires to earthquakes and epidemic diseases. Catastrophes like wars or civil conflicts are excluded, although some papers tend to blur the boundary between “naturally occurring” and “man-made” disasters. Immediate effects as well as long-term repercussions of these events have been analyzed. The volume clearly shows that in many cases those events marked a major turning point in the history of a city. Some cities were destroyed and never recovered, while others managed to take their destruction as a starting point for a new urban development, including economic and political reforms.

The case studies are connected through a comprehensive introduction by Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud. After a careful bibliographical overview, she gives a systematic framework for the investigation of urban disasters in terms of “explaining,” “relieving,” “preventing,” and “memorising” disasters, “reconstructing cities,” and “catastrophes as catalysts for change.” Indeed, this framework provides a useful tool for analyzing urban disasters for comparative purposes. The ten studies themselves offer a good selection of cases through which to study the state of emergency when cities are faced with catas-

trophic events, including the impact of fires on towns in Finland at the beginning of the nineteenth century (by Marjatta Hietala), the Manchester floods as the result of the industrialization on nature (by Harold L. Platt), and the two earthquakes of Messina in 1783 and 1908 (by Michela D'Angelo and Marcello Sajia). Matthew Mulcahy shows in his analysis of urban catastrophes in the eighteenth-century British Atlantic world that disaster relief offered a useful measure of the extent to which the British Empire became a unified entity during that time. Dieter Schott analyses the ways in which the "Great Fire" of 1842 was remembered in Hamburg during the "Great Flood" of 1962, while the cholera outbreak of 1892 was not kept in the collective memory because it was not possible to understand the epidemic as a factor in the emerging national identity.

By focusing on catastrophic events, *Ereignis-*

geschichte begins to return within the scheme of *Strukturgeschichte*. However, there are some critical points to mention. First, the volume lacks articles from European urban history in the middle ages. Also, the essays hardly deal with the personal disaster experiences of individuals, such as their perceptions, reactions, and disaster management. The largely socio-political perspective should be supplemented by a historical-anthropological approach. In addition, the specific meaning of "urban" is not always very clear. This volume would benefit from a comparative perspective with examples of non-urban life, for instance, disaster experiences in villages and small communities. Nevertheless, the essays in this volume satisfactorily treat a subject that, thus far, has been neglected in urban history studies. They constitute a crucial step forward to a deeper understanding of the impact of catastrophes on European city life and provide examples of a model for future studies.

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