
A. Alberola, D. Cecere (eds.), *Rischio, catastrofe e gestione dell'emergenza nel Mediterraneo occidentale e in Ispanoamerica in età moderna*, Federico II University Press, FedOA Press, Universidad de Alicante, Napoli-Alicante, 2022, pp. 273

Over the centuries life of mankind has always been characterized by catastrophic events of various kinds. Wars, famines, epidemics, earthquakes, volcano eruptions have forced human beings to think about ways to face these events, sometimes pushing them to find immediate solutions that were not conclusive. Over the last few years, scholars have been increasingly focusing on the so called "disaster studies", perhaps in the wake of the recent catastrophic events such as the unexpected COVID pandemic and the ongoing wars on foreign territories. These events have brought to the fore more clearly than ever the need to study the events of the past in order to better understand contemporary disasters. Often times, events that occurred in the past have a lot of similarities with contemporary ones and for this reason can offer some interesting keys to researchers studying the present. "Historical experience is a cornerstone of disaster studies" has emblematically declared Yaron Ayalon (*Natural Disasters in the Ottoman Empire: Plague, Famine and other Misfortunes*, Cambridge, 2014, p. 3) paving the way to the idea of history seen as a significant instrument to read and interpret contemporary catastrophes.

The volume we report here fits within these considerations. Curated

by Armando Alberola and Domenico Cecere, it collects twelve essays, eleven of which provide a wealth of interesting cases – which vary in terms of geography and time – of catastrophes occurred in the course of history. These essays are the result of years of research within a project promoted in 2017 by late professor Jean-Philippe Luis, professor of Contemporary History at the Université Clermont-Auvergne and director of the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme at Clermont-Ferrand, to whose memory are dedicated both the volume and the first essay, written by his maestro Gérard Chastagnaret (*Le professeur Luis [1963-2020]*).

Dedicating the opening of the book to Jean-Philippe Luis, the promoter of the studies making up the whole volume, is “the best way to present the readers the contents of the book”, declare the curators in their *Forewords* (p. 14). Contents that – as we said before – provide for an extensive overview of several historical catastrophes. The second essay of the volume, is focused on disasters and on the answers to them (*Desastres extremos en la monarquía hispánica a mediados del siglo XVIII: análisis de la respuesta de las autoridades en la época de la Ilustración*). In this work, María Eugenia Petit-Breuilh analyses the responses provided for by the authorities in the half of the 18th century to the various earthquakes that occurred at that time: Lima/Callao (1746), Concepción (Chile, 1751), Santo Domingo (1751), Quito (1755) and in the Gulf of Cadiz (Spain, 1755). As stated by the author, the high frequency of disasters in Spanish America makes this geographical area a real laboratory to investigate the governance of catastrophes. A governance divided between the traditional religious solutions and the most innovative measures based on the rational ideas that were gaining ground in those years.

The supernatural solutions had a hard time to disappear within a society still characterized by a deep link with the religious world. It is not by chance that in the following essay (*Jesuitas frente a la naturaleza indómita en la península de Baja California, 1702-1793*) Raymundo Padilla Lozoya examines the answers provided for by the order of the Jesuits to tackle the hydro-meteorological events occurred in an area where it was difficult to found stable settlements: Baja California. The answers given by the Jesuits were still strongly imbued by a heaven-sent vision that was far away from the new trends that in the second half of the 18th century were spreading in some parts of Europe and that favoured a naturalistic interpretation of the natural phenomena.

The next essay, too is focused on the responses given by local authorities to emergencies (*Gestión y manejo de la crisis agrícola triguera de 1770-1771 en Nueva España*); written by Virginia García Acosta, the essay analyses a special type of emergency, that is the wheat crisis, that in

her opinion was handed successfully. Through her work, the author wants to prove that disasters caused by natural or biological threats are interesting elements of investigation because they can bring to the fore pre-existing critical conditions and hence to put to test the rulers. In a quite similar way, epidemics too, force authorities to experiment new governance strategies that nevertheless in some cases include also methods adopted in previous emergencies. In this case, memory plays a key role in the choices made by the authorities, as it is clearly shown in the essay by Domenico Cecere (*Poteri pubblici e società di fronte alle emergenze nel Regno di Napoli: la peste in Calabria nel 1743*), that analyzes the case of plague in Calabria in mid-18th century. The strategies adopted in that circumstance, in addition to those already used in the epidemic of 1656, would provide for a solid base for the measures taken for the Calabria earthquake of 1783.

The earthquake in Calabria that occurred at the end of the 18th is investigated also by Armando Alberola Romá in his work *La información post desastre en el siglo XVIII: los terremotos de Calabria y Mesina (1783) en la prensa oficial española*. The earthquake affected also Sicily with terrible consequences. Thanks to the close relationship between the Spanish and the Neapolitan Monarchies, the Spanish press, in particular the *Gazeta* of Madrid and the *Mercurio Histórico y Político*, dedicated many articles to this tragic event, disseminating precious information on how the earthquake was felt and on the need to convey a reformist message – in vogue at that time – favouring the scientific interpretations of the phenomenon rather than the heaven-sent ones. That earthquake was really devastating, not only for the high number of casualties but also for its consequences in terms of forced migrations, violence, poverty, famine as it clearly emerges also in the essay by José Miguel Delgado Barrado (*Ciudades destruidas, ciudades trasladadas. La gestión del terremoto de Mesina-Calabria de 1783 en Mileto*). Also, for these reasons, the earthquake became a “banco de pruebas de la política reformista borbónica de la época”, as emblematically underlined by the author (p. 136), who focuses his attention on a very specific case, which is the centre of Mileto. In fact, according to the author, compared to other places, this one has some interesting features: in addition to offering a very rich and varied documentation, also cartographical, Mileto can be considered as an exemplary case of a city that had to be moved from its place of origin following its destruction.

In the second half of the 18th century, the earthquake was an event that hit not only Europe but also America. Starting from July 1st 1775, a series of quakes hit the central highland of the kingdom of Guatemala, accompanied by a series of eruptive phenomena in the volcano of Pacaya. As Luis Alberto Arrijoa Díaz Viruell remembers (*Pacaya: una*

experiencia de sismicidad y vulcanismo en el reino de Guatemala [1775]), historical studies on these events are quite scarce. Even though they did not cause any casualties, their social implications were extremely relevant. And this is exactly the topic studied by the author who analyses the strategies implemented under those circumstances by the civilian and religious authorities, based mostly on the speed of action, as a consequence of the experience acquired from other extreme natural phenomena.

Experience that was also decisive in another area of America, that is Ecuador, hit over the course of history by a series of seismic events. Adrián García Torres (*Las políticas de emergencia de la administración borbónica en Ecuador frente al terremoto de 1797*) remembers the most important ones, starting from the end of the 16th century up to the one that he considers as the most significant in terms of impact: the earthquake of 1797. Like in the preceding essay, even in this one the author focuses his attention not only on the event per se, but also on casualties and material losses, on the way the earthquake was tackled by the civilian authorities of the Bourbon administration, with a special attention also for the relationship among the various levels of the administration.

In order to trace a history of disaster governance at various levels it is possible to resort to different sources, including chronicles and local stories. A choice made by the next essay (*Clima, disastri e bugie interessate: le inondazioni della "anomalia Maldà" nel Compendio Storico Oriolano di José Montesinos [1791-1809]*), where Cayetano Mas Galvañ analyses the *Compendio Storico Oriolano*, a story written by José Montesinos Martínez Pérez de Orumbella. Within that work, Galvañ considers only the part relating to the floods of the Segura, between 1760 and 1809, in the city of Orihuela, south of Valencia, even because at that time Montesinos was actually a witness of the events. However, Galvañ acknowledges that Montesinos often provides for poorly reliable information, sometimes even invented, and do not offer any document or bibliographic references to the events mentioned in his book, leaving the readers prey of a big uncertainty. As a testimony on an idea of history as carrier of moral truths, and as a consequence also open to fiction. Despite this limitation, the *Compendio*, has the merit to bring to the scholar's attention some phenomena that because of their nature, are not easy to define and whose traces are difficult to find somewhere else.

The next two essays that close the volume resort to a completely different source, and in particular to the Spanish press. The first of the two, *Prensa, clima y enfermedad en el Mercurio de España en el contexto de las guerras napoleónicas (1796-1807)*, written by Antonio Manuel Berná

Ortigosa, uses the newspaper *Mercurio de España*, which survived to the restrictive legislation promulgated on February 24th, 1791 suspending all the non official publications with the aim of controlling the news coming from France and to oppose all propaganda in favour of the Revolution. The reason why the *Mercurio* was not suppressed is that it became a government's instrument to control the news, a loyal spokesman of the Napoleon wars and, among other things, of the influence of climate on war events. The central role of the press as a government's instrument also appears in the last essay of the volume (*Noticias sobre sismicidad y gestión del desastre en la Gaceta de Madrid: 1800-1808*), where José Daniel Lozano Díaz mentions again the usefulness of the official Spanish press as a source, between the 18th and 19th century, to retrace the earthquakes, quantify the damages and understand the responses given by the authorities to fight them. In particular, the essay focuses on the main events occurred in various European countries between 1800 and 1808 that were mentioned in the *Gaceta de Madrid*. As underlined by the author, the historical press is a valuable source, useful to historical seismology in addition to playing a central role to understand how societies react to disasters.

A source that has to be integrated by others in order to provide for a more exhaustive picture of catastrophes and to offer not only to historians but also to those who operate in the contemporary world, some useful instruments to investigate both the past and the present.

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