

**HIST-535/615/635-B01: Disasters in History
Spring 2019**

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Robinson B343 ~~ Office Hours: W 11-1, or by appointment

What constitutes a “disaster”? What do changing explanations of the causes and costs of disasters, and differing responses to them, tell us about the larger contours of history?

Proceeding from three assumptions, this readings-based seminar will examine disasters as lived experiences and cultural constructions from the early modern period to the industrial era. First, the course assumes that so-called natural disasters are never entirely “natural” phenomena. Second, storms, fires, and other destructive forces become “disasters” only when they intersect with human lives. Third—and most important for our purposes—our readings will show that case studies of disasters provide compelling insights into their cultural and social contexts.

Course Requirements: This class meets once weekly. Students should do assigned reading before coming to class and be prepared to participate in discussions.

Written requirements are two short essays chosen from the weekly assignments listed below, one paper or project proposal, and a final paper or project. Short essays (4-5 pages) are *not* summaries of the assigned reading but rather essays that draw on the reading to answer specific analytical questions. Detailed instructions for the proposals and for the final paper or project can be found on the last page of this syllabus.

Please note that historians use “Chicago” or “Turabian” style footnotes or endnotes, and that this form of annotation (done correctly!) is required for both the final paper and the proposal's annotated bibliography—and also for the shorter papers, if you choose to use citations in them. For proper citation formats, consult Kate Turabian, *A Manual for Writers* (many editions). Brief overviews and examples are also widely available online—e.g., http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html.

Due dates for all written work are noted in the course schedule below. Students must submit their work on or before scheduled due dates. Written work should be submitted via email (as Word files or as links to digital work). For all assignments, late work will be penalized a minimum of one letter-grade.

Oral requirements consist of attendance and participation in weekly discussions, an informal presentation of the final project or paper, and leadership (or co-leadership) of class discussion for one predetermined week during the semester. Each week, class leaders should be prepared to raise questions about the assigned reading to spur debate and discussion. (Of course, I will be there to help, if needed, but ideally leaders should be able to generate and guide the class discussion.)

All books are available at the campus bookstore, as well as at amazon.com and other online booksellers. Articles are accessible in electronic format from the library via JSTOR or other electronic databases, with the exception the two pre-circulated book chapters we will discuss in our first class meeting.

Course grades will be calculated as follows:

- Short papers (2 x 20%) 40%
- Project proposal (due Wednesday 6 March) 10%
- Final essay or project (due Friday 3 May) 30%
- Participation (including leading discussion) 20%

If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please see me and contact Disability Services at 993-2474, <http://ds.gmu.edu>. All academic accommodations must be arranged through Disability Services.

Finally, please note that all students are subject to the George Mason University Honor Code (see <http://jiju.gmu.edu/catalog/apolicies/honor.htm>). The penalty for cheating or plagiarism on any assignment will be—at a minimum—a grade of F for this course.

Course Schedule

Wednesday 23 January: Introductory meeting. Read Ted Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America*, pp. xvii-xxv, and Kevin Rozario, *The Culture of Calamity: Disaster and the Making of Modern America*, pp. 1-29. (Both pre-circulated as pdfs, via email.)

Wednesday 30 January: Climate and Colonies. Read Sam White, *A Cold Welcome: The Little Ice Age and Europe's Encounter with North America*. Paper topic: Write an essay describing the types of primary sources that this week's author cites and explaining how he used them to explain the impact of climate—and Europeans' lack of understanding of it—on the colonization of North America. (4-5 pages)

Wednesday 6 February: Understanding "Acts of God" in the Atlantic World. Read Matthew Mulcahy, *Hurricanes and Society in the British Greater Caribbean, 1624–1783*; Whitney Barlow Robles, "Atlantic Disaster: Boston Responds to the Cape Ann Earthquake of 1755," *New England Quarterly*, 90 (2017): 7-35. Paper topic: Write an essay describing seventeenth- and eighteenth-century transatlantic conversations about hurricanes, earthquakes, and other "acts of God" and assessing the extent to which colonists and their correspondents in Britain held differing ideas and perspectives. (4-5 pages)

Wednesday 13 February: Catastrophe in the Age of Enlightenment. Read Mark Molesky, *This Gulf of Fire: The Great Lisbon Earthquake, or Apocalypse in the Age of Science and Reason*. Paper topic: Why have many historians called the Lisbon earthquake the "first modern disaster"? Would Molesky agree? (4-5 pages)

Wednesday 20 February: Individual meetings.

Wednesday 27 February: Disasters in the Early American Republic. Read Conevery Bolton Valencius, *The Lost History of the New Madrid Earthquakes*; Eve Kornfeld, "Crisis in the Capital: The Cultural Significance of Philadelphia's Great Yellow Fever Epidemic," *Pennsylvania History*, 51 (1984): 189-205. Paper topic: Compare and contrast American reactions to the Philadelphia yellow

fever epidemic and the New Madrid earthquakes. Who responded to disasters in post-revolutionary America? (4-5 pages)

Wednesday 6 March: Humanitarian Disaster Relief. Read Christine Kinealy, *Charity and the Great Hunger in Ireland: The Kindness of Strangers*; Andrew Jones, "Band Aid Revisited: Humanitarianism, Consumption and Philanthropy in the 1980s," *Contemporary British History*, 31 (2017): 189-209. Paper topic: International response to the Irish famine was an expression of humanitarian benevolence, which became a defining feature of Western culture in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. To what extent did Band Aid—and, more generally, Western famine relief for Ethiopia in the 1980s—derive from these same cultural priorities? (4-5 pages)

****Spring Break—No Class****

Wednesday 20 March: Disaster and the Politics of Difference. Read Karen Sawislak, *Smoldering City: Chicagoans and the Great Fire, 1871-1874*; Andy Horowitz, "The Complete Story of the Galveston Horror: Trauma, History, and the Great Storm of 1900," *Historical Reflections*, 41 (2015): 95-108. Paper topic: Case studies of disasters provide windows on to the values and lived experiences of past cultures and societies. What do these case studies of the Chicago fire and the Galveston hurricane reveal about life in Gilded Age America? (4-5 pages)

Wednesday 27 March: Science, Disease, and Public Health. Read Alfred W. Crosby, *America's Forgotten Pandemic: The Influenza of 1918*, 2nd edition; Michael Willrich, "'The Least Vaccinated of Any Civilized Country': Personal Liberty and Public Health in the Progressive Era," *Journal of Policy History*, 20 (2008): 76-93. Paper topic: Write a book review of *America's Forgotten Pandemic*. (4-5 pages)

Wednesday 3 April: Disaster as Spectacle. Read Steven Biel, *Down with the Old Canoe: A Cultural History of the Titanic Disaster*; Andrea Stulman Dennett and Nina Warnke, "Disaster Spectacles at the Turn of the Century," *Film History*, 4 (1990): 101-11. Paper topic: Why do disaster stories appeal to wide audiences? Why does the *Titanic* story, specifically, arguably loom larger in the popular imagination than that of other disasters? (4-5 pages)

Wednesday 10 April: Assessing Causes and Culpability. Read Bryant Simon, *The Hamlet Fire: A Tragic Story of Cheap Food, Cheap Government, and Cheap Lives*; Scott Gabriel Knowles, "Lessons in the Rubble: The World Trade Center and the History of Disaster Investigations in the United States," *History and Technology*, 19 (2003): 9-28. Paper topic: What does Bryant Simon mean when he characterizes the Hamlet fire as "wrongfully ordinary"? (4-5 pages)

Wednesday 17 April: Environmental Degradation and Public Policy. Read Christopher Morris, *The Big Muddy: An Environmental History of the Mississippi and Its Peoples from Hernando de Soto to Hurricane Katrina*; Mike Davis, "The Case for Letting Malibu Burn," *Environmental History Review*, 19 (1995): 1-36. Paper topic: To what extent do this week's readings challenge Enlightenment-born confidence in humanity's ability to control nature and in science as a panacea for all human problems? (4-5 pages)

Wednesday 24 April: Student presentations.

Wednesday 1 May: Student presentations.

Friday 3 May: Final papers/projects due at 5:00 p.m.

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### **Proposals and Final Projects**

The main assignment for this course has two components: a proposal (due Wednesday 6 March) and a paper or project (due Friday 3 May). Students may choose any topic relevant to the course. The requirements are as follows:

#### **Proposal: 3 paragraphs, plus an annotated bibliography**

- Paragraph 1: Topic overview
- Paragraph 2: The research question you seek to answer in your paper—stated explicitly as a question—and a brief explanation of how you will try to answer it. What kinds of primary sources will you use?
- Paragraph 3: What will be the format of your final project? It can be a paper (10-12 pages), a video, a podcast, an online museum exhibit, or something else entirely. But you must explain here what you want to do and why you believe your chosen format is appropriate for your topic.
- Annotated bibliography: Correctly formatted entries for a total of ten (or more) primary and secondary sources, each of which must be accompanied by an annotation explaining the contents of the source and its utility for your project. I strongly recommend that you begin your research by consulting the library's info-guide for your particular historical subfield at <https://infoguides.gmu.edu/history>.

### **Final Projects/Papers**

Whatever format you choose, the core of your project should be an analysis of primary sources. The quantity of sources you analyze should represent a semester's worth of work. Secondary sources should provide the historiographical context for understanding and explaining your primary sources. Given our time constraints, the quality of your analysis is more important than the overall quantity of your research.

This final assignment will probably work best if you focus your primary sources on a specific disaster, though secondary sources can (and likely should) be more general. Examples of plausible projects might include:

- Disaster monuments and commemoration
- Mainstream and African American press coverage of a particular disaster
- Clergy's response to a specific disaster
- An aspect of federal disaster relief policy (e.g., flood insurance)
- Popular culture portrayals of a specific disaster or type of disaster