

PHD THESIS

Natural Disasters and the Romanian Modern Society (1800-2000)

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Keywords: history, collective mentalities, natural disasters: earthquakes, floods, epidemics, famine, astronomic phenomena, global warming.

Summary

The current paper aims at analysing the cultural history of natural disasters that occurred during the 19th and the 20th centuries, from the perspective of the history of mentalities. The cultural history of natural disasters is not a new subject of research, but it hasn't been thoroughly analysed by historians with particular focus and interests on collective mentalities. We owe a few explanations to the potential recipients of the current paper. It mainly focuses on analysing insecurity, individual and collective anxiety and fear of human beings towards natural disasters they have experienced during 19th and the 20th centuries.

The summary of our research actually comprises a short description of natural disasters which left their mark on the Romanian society. From a chronological point of view, our paper deals with the period of transfer from a traditional society to modern Romania. Nevertheless, our study underlines the fact that in spite of the shift between generations, the level of anxiety and insecurity in individuals and communities did not change much.

Our current study is based on a thorough research which uses a series of instruments of investigation applied to the field of collective mentalities and psychology. Along the above mentioned instruments, we are going to display a few personal statements from people who witnessed and survived natural disasters. We are talking

about travel journals, accounts on invasions of the Romanian territories by foreign armies, changes in political regimes, robberies, as well as news released by the media of those times with regard to various climatic changes affecting habitual life rhythms. Our thesis also includes a presentation of means and ways in which the 19th-20th-century Romanian society used to arrogate these natural catastrophes to the will of God.

First and foremost, we shall display a short presentation which would comprise the types of natural disasters which occurred in the 19th and the 20th centuries and their effects upon the social and economic realm. Our goal is to discover whether and which were the attitudes and feelings triggered by this sort of events in the core of the Romanian society, as well as the implications of natural disasters at a social, human and political level. All these aspects should clearly indicate a certain approach and way of reacting to the challenges of climatic change. Although we do not hold exhaustive data concerning all types of interaction of human beings with the environment, we are going to thoroughly analyse the impact of natural disasters upon the human society on our territories.

From a climatic point of view, the main types of natural disaster which occurred during the 19th and the 20th centuries, one can mention earthquakes, floods, epidemics, famine and various astronomic phenomena. All these have been perceived as very serious events, as turning points in the evolution of every human society. Their emergence more or less predictable placed individuals and communities into a crowded, apparently inextricable situation, generating multiple mutations at the level of collective psychology and mentalities. Climatic variations or figuratively speaking, the badly-tempered nature mostly perceived as hostile and harsh continued to maintain an atmosphere of anxiety, uncertainty and fearfulness in traditional societies overall.

Since the beginning of the 19th century, our country faced major changes in the level of temperatures. In addition, the climate seemed to become more and more unstable, with alternating periods of drought, floods, rainy springs, long frosty winters, with heavy snowfalls and sharply frosty weather.

Epidemics have always been an important factor in high death and morbidity rates among the population. Epidemics and most of all, statistics of epidemic diseases are also regarded as an indicator of the state of health in the population, a mark of the level of

hygiene in a community, as well as an indicator of state measures and state implication in what the health care services are concerned. The current research paper aims at outlining the main epidemics which undoubtedly had negative effects upon individuals and communities, upon the Romanian society in general. Thus, the 4th chapter of the current thesis depicts a series of instants from the beginning of the Romanian scientific medicine, in order to reveal its role in the fighting against and preventing diseases.

Morbid events have constantly occurred in humans' life and permanently influenced human evolution: they triggered events and situations and contributed to the writing and rewriting of history. The research concerning the ways a disease can unfold and develop itself, especially in its epidemic forms, also reveals a past of misfortunes and sufferings in all human societies, no matter the time they have lived in.

The 5th chapter approaches the problem of the famine which is also thoroughly analysed based on a very solid set of documentation in this respect. The large amount of documents we have analysed along the research stages of the current study may seem surprising for those unacquainted with the subject we decided to deal with. Nonetheless, historians interested in the matter can use a great number of these documents, as they deliver a rather global image upon the research theme. The reason is quite simple, as these sources come both from the "officials" (that is to say, the authorities), and also from the "lower" level of the society, from common individuals who were directly affected by natural disasters. Among the documents officially issued by authorities one can mention a series of orders granting aids for those subject to indigence due to calamities, documents regarding imports and exports, reports issued by the Ministry of Commerce or of Agriculture, reports on the consumption of goods in certain localities and communities, etc. Common individuals are also good sources of documents with regard to their drama, to what they have experienced during natural disasters: they simply wanted to leave notes, comments and records to posterity. Other documents stand for various requests or letters through which people used to ask for help or assistance from the authorities. Or, they might as well ask for loans from other regions, hoping that they would help them bridge the crisis. Other records made by various travellers passing through territories affected by calamities also revealed situations in which wealthy people were drafting wills stating that their fortune would be left to poor families or to the Church after death.

A large number of such notes, reports and testimonies can also constitute important sources for a history of natural disasters.

The 6th chapter of the current thesis aims at analysing astronomic and atmospheric phenomena, as well as bizarre and unexplained encounters which have always raised questions to our fellow humans of all times. Always triggering interest, as well as anxiety and concern, these phenomena of a special nature have for many centuries escaped the understanding and reasoning capacity of human beings. For a very long time have they been depicted in people's imaginary as mischievous and harmful creations of some supernatural, overwhelming forces. Even without triggering catastrophic incidents, major astronomic events occurring during the past few centuries affected collective mentalities to a greater extent than they do today.

Major astronomic events such as total solar or lunar eclipses or the emergence of comets have for a long time been observed from long distances, in various places of our planet. Comets are spectacular events which in the past determined, almost every time they emerged, a series of concerns and more than that, collective hysteria among communities of humans.

As an expression of constant interest in our people towards such "celestial events", old Romanian records reveal an important number of testimonies regarding unusual phenomena occurring on the sky on our territories. These accounts were written down by inhabitants of various regions, emanating from heterogeneous social classes.

On the other hand, global warming is one of the catastrophic phenomena of greatest concern for human kind nowadays. After decades of silence and disinterest, when environmental issues were of no concern to anyone, this sudden preoccupation in our planet's health is due to the occurrence of a series of catastrophic events which happened during the last decades of the second millennium and during the first few years of the 21st century. All these disasters determined scientists to finally allege that the major cause for all that happened was something called "global warming", a phenomenon which brings along serious changes in the worldwide climate.

We have decided to investigate this phenomenon of "global warming" in the 7th chapter of our thesis. As it has already been said, it denominates a series of climatic changes and it is currently one of the most ardent subjects of debate in the realm of

contemporary science. There is no secret for anyone that the climate of our planet is continuously changing at a world scale, with major consequences to human society. How fast and dramatic these changes would further develop, or what other catastrophic events would they trigger, it remains to be seen.

Although global warming affected our planet throughout the last century, it was more evident after 1983, when most of the population became seriously concerned with the matter. In what Romania's situation is concerned, Romanian environmental specialists indicate that in less than 25 years, our country might undergo major changes, as it will experience annual droughts, floods and tornadoes. Therefore, we should all acknowledge that positive change must be enhanced and the relationship between human society and nature must be improved and rebalanced. Disregarding nature, acting destructively and continuously contaminating it would slowly but surely lead to a major cataclysm at a global scale. The actions of human civilization are currently focused on destruction, these being the characteristics of a self-destructive civilization.

The environment has always been and will always be a major concern for us, humans, in the attempt of deciphering the mystery of the Universe, as well as in our constant efforts of understanding all phenomena around us, as well as the purpose of our own lives. Constant and irresistible curiosity towards distant horizons in space and time has always driven human society to a quest for truth and mystery solving. Human beings have always been fascinated by and interested in questions (apparently) without answers. This interest seemed to have triggered a feeling of permanent anxiety which cannot be annulled by any scientific or technical advancement.