

Pre-Modern Towns at the Times of Catastrophes: East Central Europe in a Comparative Perspective. Edited by Michaela Antonín Malaníková, Beata Mozejko, and Martin Nodl.*

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Disaster studies as a research field is certainly in a boom. In recent years, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian occupation of Ukraine, the conflict between Israel and Hamas as well as the ever more unpredictable change of the climatic system of the Earth draws attention to the vulnerability of present societies. The volume to be reviewed along these lines is the latest fruit of such collaborative works that attempt to understand how past societies reacted to different challenges they had to face. It is most welcome that while the important previous works when came to the discussion of premodern management of disasters focused heavily on Western Europe and Germany, *Pre-Modern Towns at the Times of Catastrophes* brings the region of East Central Europe to the forefront and analyzes the region of what is today's Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Ukraine, and Germany. While all these countries are touched upon most of the contributions address medieval Bohemia and Poland. The book is edited by three well-known scholars two of whom also authored chapters in the volume. The book, apart from the introduction includes fourteen chapters ordered chronologically and addressing different aspects of catastrophes. It is important to acknowledge that many of the contributions come from scholars who are at an early to mid-stage of their careers and who seldom published in English thus far. This is in itself is an important achievement of the volume.

The introduction apart from providing an overview of what is included in the volume also problematizes how the different contributions apply catastrophe and disaster as well as explains the context in which the case studies are situated that is towns. They argue that towns, even though during the medieval and the early

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modern times were not demographically self-sustaining and were struck by numerous disasters, proved to be highly resilient and recovered very quickly thanks to collaborative efforts and individual strategies. The volume leaves little doubt that indeed towns and their burghers were innovative and, in many ways, used disasters as opportunities to enhance development, to renegotiate their positions. In the following, to show which were the different challenges, the different chapters are grouped into three main categories: natural disasters (hazards), economic crises, and wars.

Most of the papers touch upon one of the most frequent hazards in premodern towns, fires. Five contributions address the topic of fires in different cities of the region from Gdańsk, through Prague to Banská Bystrica. The fires in these cities, while of course caused significant material loss that made life difficult for individual families, or communities (see the contribution of Piotr Łozowski on Warsaw) leading to financial crises and dearth, in other cases were opportunities to reconsider their physical appearance (see the contributions by Martin Musílek, Marcin Grulkowski, and Bohdana Petryszak). As part of rebuilding processes, some cities reconsidered fire safety as did Prague, or tried to reorganize its defenses as did Gdańsk. While again others, such as Lviv gained a new look by adopting Renaissance architecture. Banská Bystrica used an urban fire in a fundamentally different way. Claiming that privileges were consumed in a fire and asking for new ones is not unique but how long and stubborn the burghers of Banská Bystrica tried to strengthen their position against the Dóczy and the Thurzó families in this way is something remarkable (see the contribution by Milan Georgievski).

Storms, especially sea surges in the Middle Ages were amongst the most disastrous events. In the Low Countries and in Southern England catastrophic surges were registered going back to the early medieval times. In rare cases however such events created better communication possibilities for settlements by opening direct connection to the sea, deepening existing riverbeds. A well-known and much-debated case is that of the Zwin and Bruges but as we learn, this is not the only case that is registered in medieval Europe. Narrative sources tell a similar story about Stralsund and its connection to the sea (see the article by Piotr Oliński).

Two papers were dedicated to the blooming field of plague studies. Both are of primary importance as they point to the role of studying later waves of the plague instead of the Black Death the written source material of which will hardly expand. In the case of Prague, Martin Nodl demonstrates that by 1380 people learned to live with the plague, and there is little sign of disruptions during the epidemic of that year. Beata Możejko studied the late medieval waves of the plague at Gdańsk and showed numerous waves that reached the city using previously unstudied sources. She also points to the fact that many of these waves were registered in other cities of

the Baltic area and of the Hansa cities. It would be worthwhile to trace the importance of the trade routes, especially the trading goods such as grain in the transmission of fleas or other vectors of the *Yersinia pestis* bacteria.

Two further studies are dedicated to the analysis of disasters in narrative sources, and the way chronicles and letopises combine events that preserve the memory of common traumas on the one hand and use celestial and weather phenomena to symbolize human sin (see the contributions by Jitka Komendová, Hana Komárková).

Economic crises are also being dealt with in several contributions, and of course fires and other events can also be associated with them in many cases. Two approaches prevail in these papers, they either try to pursue individual family strategies to understand how families found ways to succeed or fell victim to bad individual decisions or changing market possibilities. While Jiří Doležel shows how a not particularly rich trader, Jakub Holub, manages to move to ever more important trade centers to become one of the wealthiest burghers of Brno, Marie Buňatová looks at Jewish and Christian family strategies for success or rather ways to avoid bankruptcies. Both papers heavily build on previously unstudied archival materials making them especially valuable contributions. Two essays mentioned above, that of Martin Musílek and Piotr Łozowski look from an other perspective, from the cities' perspective and attempt to understand the economic consequences of crises that affected the communities in general.

Finally, two contributions deal with another important factor in urban life in late medieval East Central Europe, that is war. Piotr Samól discusses the Hussite military campaigns in the surroundings of Gdańsk and demonstrates how the 1433 events made the limitations of the capacities of the town for defending itself clear, especially in the case of the recently founded Young City (Młode Miasto). Petr Kozák looks at the Silesian city of Glogów and the ways the town tried to navigate in the period of the wars of King Matthias Corvinus, as well as in the period after the Hungarian king's death and the ascent of the Jagiellonian dynasty to the Hungarian throne. Kozák shows that despite all efforts, the wars and the occupation of the city significantly halted Glogów's development, and the town lost its position for good.

The volume is a valuable contribution to the emerging studies on disasters. It highlights the research possibilities of historical disaster experiences in a region still underrepresented by scholarship. The papers gathered in the volume not only speak well to each other, but also draw important parallels for scholars working on German, Swiss, or French cities. There are some minor flaws in the volume such as the lack of maps and supporting visual materials, the recurrent lack of the inclusion of historical names of the settlements discussed, and inaccuracies with name forms (e.g., King Matthias/Mathias), but one point is certainly worth to be raised. The

case studies presented in the volume are meticulously researched and their above arguments are always based on analysis of understudied archival or edited sources but in many contributions the results are not contextualized in the broader context of disaster studies. Consequently, one may miss how the cases help to understand historical resilience to crises. Despite this shortcoming, the volume is well worth reading and will hopefully make it to audiences in East Central Europe and outside.

