Catastrophe: The History of Disaster

Instructor: Douglas Northrop

3 credits
HU
lec (MW, 1-2:30 pm)

Course Guide Shortcut:
bit.ly/fa18_hist215

Pompeii. The Black Death. A “Great Fire.” Earthquakes. Monsoon floods. Natural disasters may appear to be a constant of life on earth, but human responses to, and interpretations of, such “acts of God” vary dramatically. While on the surface these calamities bring only death and destruction, they also reveal much that otherwise would remain hidden. How have human societies interacted with (and explained) “nature” and its hazards? Why have some groups and places been more vulnerable than others?

The history of disaster is as much about what happens afterwards, about how men and women respond: to develop religious or scientific explanations for what happened, to criticize state responses or ill-preparedness, to debate questions of responsibility and blame. Catastrophes make it possible to reorganize social relations, to rethink personal priorities, and to rebuild identities and cityscapes in new ways.

This global, comparative course ranges widely through space and time to explore the history of natural disasters: fires, floods, famines, hurricanes, tornadoes, epidemics, tsunamis, earthquakes, blizzards, volcanoes, and more.