HIU34512 Environmental Disasters in World History (Ludlow)

Assessment: Essay 40%, Take-Home Exam 60%.

This module explores why societies have suffered from repeated environmental disasters, including those apparently “natural” in origin (e.g., earthquakes, hurricanes) and those better described as technological (e.g., nuclear meltdown, oil spills). To understand this, we must study the interactions between natural forces and societal systems (their economics, politics and cultures) that ultimately give rise to disaster vulnerability. As part of this, we must study the strategies that past societies adopted to recover from disasters, the efforts made to manage the risks of future disasters, and the reasons why these efforts often (if not always!) failed. In doing so, many periods of world history offer relevant cases. Among these are the infamous smallpox epidemic in 5th Century BCE Athens, climate-driven revolt and environmentally destructive warfare in Ancient Egypt and the Near East, mass human and animal mortality linked to extreme weather in medieval Ireland, the Great European Famine of 1314-1315 and subsequent Black Death in Europe, the "collapse" of medieval Chinese dynasties following major climate-altering volcanic eruptions, the repeated famines in Tokugawa-era Japan (1603-1868), the entangled responses of Native North Americans and Central American Mayan civilizations to demographic, environmental and military pressures in the first and second millennia CE, the contributions and consequences of the "forgotten" European subsistence crisis of 1740/1741, the 1755 Lisbon earthquake, tsunami and fire, the 1918-1919 Spanish flu and subsequent pandemics, the 1986 Chernobyl and 2011 Fukushima nuclear disasters, and the experience of New Orleans following Hurricane Katriana (2005). We will identify the common features of such events, examining how societies often helped to create apparently "natural" disasters, how such disasters may be transformational for the societies in question, and how disasters can create both “winners” as well as losers. Such understandings are increasingly needed at a time when pollution, degradation of natural resources, global climate change and other environmental challenges are increasingly evident and projected to worsen in coming decades.