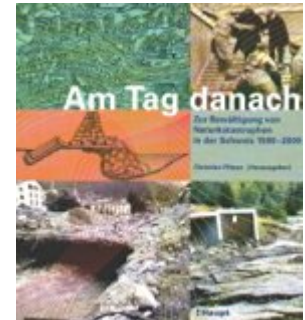


**Christian Pfister, ed..** *Am Tag danach: Zur Bewältigung von Naturkatastrophen in der Schweiz 1500-2000*. Bern: Paul Haupt, 2002. 263 pp. CHF 58.00/EUR 36.00, cloth, ISBN 978-3-258-06436-9.



**Reviewed by** Matthias Bürgi

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Two events finally led to the publication of this volume comprising a collection of sixteen chapters written by different authors. First, the volume's editor Christian Pfister has long been teaching about natural disasters, with many of his students contributing chapters to this volume. Second, Pfister and several colleagues proposed "Natural Disasters" as one of the themes to be explored at the Swiss National Exhibition "EXPO.01" (which later became "EXPO.02"). The theme was not selected for the exhibition, but the selection process helped identify other authors for this book.

Although the genesis of this volume is quite complicated, the same is not true for the concept and the structure of the resulting book. Embraced by an introductory and a concluding chapter written by Pfister, we find fourteen well-written chapters dealing with different types of natural and semi-natural disasters.

In his introduction, Pfister explains how and why until the 1990s, natural disasters have been largely ignored by scholars of the humanities. Regarded as chance events without general rele-

vance, the study of non-anthropogenic catastrophes was left to the natural sciences. After insightful remarks about the terminology relating to natural disasters and the significance of disastrous events for societal learning processes, Pfister proposes an approach on how to structure different forms of emergency aid and solidarity, including donations, collections, and various forms of voluntary assistance and insurance.

This introductory overview sets the scene for a series of chapters opened by Rosmarie Zeller who writes about perception and interpretation of natural disasters in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century media. These catastrophes were interpreted as godly signs and wonders and not as natural events. In the next chapter Martin Stuber analyzes how the earthquake in Lisbon of 1755 is treated in the correspondence of polymath Albrecht von Haller. Haller stands at the turning point between theological and magical, enlightened and scientific interpretations of natural disasters. For Haller, pests and famines could be interpreted scientifically, whereas earthquakes

could be interpreted as godly punishments with scientifically observable phenomena.

One of the major natural disasters in Switzerland was the landslide in Goldau in 1806, destroying three villages and killing close to 500 people. Alois Fässler describes this event as the birth of federal solidarity within Switzerland. The catastrophe was no longer interpreted as a rightful godly retaliation and, thus, the affected people were no longer seen as sinners but as victims who deserved the aid and support of cantons and countrymen. Major flooding events also affected several municipalities and cantons. Agnes Nienhaus describes the flood of 1834 in the canton of Graubünden, demonstrating how cantonal and federal authorities organized and coordinated private and public forms of short term emergency aid and long term technical improvements.

A few decades later, in 1868, when more floods hit several cantons in Switzerland, the media and authorities again promoted Swiss solidarity and compassion. In her chapter, Franziska Schmid discusses the different forms of spontaneous and organized aid measures, interpreting the actions taken in the aftermath of the disasters of 1868 as an important contribution to the formation of a national identity. Standing together to fight the hardship caused by natural disasters helped to overcome internal conflicts and quarrelling. The events of 1868 also triggered the enactment of the first federal forest police law in 1876—a core event for the protection of mountain forests which fulfilled important roles in erosion and avalanche control as discussed by Veronica Stöckli. The topic of forest legislation is a reminder of how the divide between natural and anthropogenic disasters is sometimes blurred. This is especially true for the landslide in Elm in 1881, caused by unprofessional and risky slate mining. Early warning signs such as huge cracks in the ground and smaller landslides had been ignored and voices of caution had been laughed at. In this interesting chapter Hans Peter Bläuer de-

scribes how, partly in order to raise enough money for aid relief, the media and authorities largely kept quiet about the fact that this landslide was a self-inflicted tragedy and not a natural disaster per se. Whatever the cause, the attention by national and international media triggered an international flow of donations.

The role of media is also crucial for the next chapter by Sascha Katja Dubach: the expansion of Swiss international relief aid from 1950 to 1970. Two of the remaining chapters deal with techniques and concepts of how to prevent and cope with natural disasters. Philippe Schoeneich et al. write on traditional avalanche protection and Andreas Götz describes developments in flood protection. More recent natural disasters are described in a number of chapters, including one about the winter of 1951, when some 100 people died under Swiss avalanches, by Martin Latenser and Walter Ammann; another about a slow earth movement destroying a settlement in the pre-alps in 1994 by Pierre Ecoffey; and, another about the flooding of Sachseln in 1997 by Daniel Bernet.

A single chapter by Matthias Fässler focuses on long-term changes in reactions to a disaster, describing largely technical and relief-oriented aspects of major fires. However, this chapter seems less related to the title of the book, while lacking a convincing analysis of the changes described. The three-part aim of this book is to explore the history of changing perceptions and interpretations of natural disasters; to highlight the role of disasters in developing national identity; and, to show that the history of the insurance industry has, so far, been largely neglected. These topics are treated in a round-table of historical case studies, essays about various aspects of history of technology, and reports about more recent events. This diversity is at the same time a strength and a weakness of the book.

Were it not for the introduction and also the concluding chapter written by Christian Pfister, the selection of topics and approaches combined

in this book would have left me rather confused. Pfister summarizes and synthesizes the different chapters, while putting them into a longer-term perspective, doing this in full awareness of the many remaining gaps. Thanks to Pfister's parenthesis the diversity of contributions and topics is intriguing and inspiring and the book can be recommended for anybody with an interest in these highly relevant fields of interdisciplinary research.

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