


BOOK REVIEW

## Kreike, Emmanuel. *Scorched Earth: Environmental Warfare as a Crime Against Humanity and Nature*

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*Scorched Earth* is a global history of the relationship between war, environment, and society. The book mobilizes the concept of environmental infrastructure, which Kreike has previously developed in a volume on African history (Cambridge, 2013), to show continuities in scorched earth practices in wars from the early modern period to the twentieth century. As he defines it, “environmental infrastructure” is the product of the “coproduction of human ingenuity and labor on the one hand and nonhuman actors and forces on the other”—a wide definition that allows Kreike to include in the category “homes, stables, fields, fences, soils, crops and weeds, granaries and food stores, animals, orchards, wells, dams, canals, and sluices” (2). Because these natural and man-made features of the environment were essential for the logistics of competing armies, Kreike argues that environmental infrastructure was both the target and a tool of war that was constantly weaponized. The volume’s main contribution is to propose the concept of “environcide” to capture the practice of “intentionally or unintentionally damaging, destroying, or rendering inaccessible environmental infrastructure through violence” (3). In Kreike’s framework, “total war” is no longer a conflict that involves civilians as well as regular armies but “the simultaneous destruction of society and environment,” namely an unrestrained resource war that employs human and nonhuman elements (16). Such devastating involvement of the natural world, Kreike argues, characterized warfare in every period and locality, as violence took the form of spectacular episodes (massacres and genocides), everyday violence (armies’ ordinary practice of living off the land and harassing the peasantry), and structural violence (the slow but systemic destruction of ways of life).

The structure of the book alternates in-depth case studies with broader overviews of how environmental warfare characterized European and colonial conflicts in chronological order. Chapter 1 examines war practices during the Dutch Revolt against the Habsburgs in the late sixteenth century, in particular the destruction of dams and the use of strategic flooding. Chapter 2 shows that the Dutch rebels shared techniques of environmental warfare with their Spanish enemies. It argues that the Spanish conquest of the Americas followed patterns that were like those practiced in Europe and paved the ground for the spreading of diseases. Chapter 3 details the experience of environmental destruction in the Low Countries during the Thirty Years’ War and reframes the rise of urban centers during the Dutch Golden Age as the effect of the displacement and impoverishment of the rural population. Chapter 4 examines the contact between European colonizers and Native American communities in North America. Contrary to the colonial myth of the wilderness of the Americas, the chapter suggests that European settlements were successful when they seized Native American environmental infrastructure, such as croplands, villages, hunting, and fishing sites that were already cleared and selected by local populations. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 shift to the War of Spanish Succession in the Low Countries, France, Italy, and Spain to argue that practices of scorched earth and environcide continued in the eighteenth century despite the distribution of pamphlets, regulations on military conduct, and calls for limited warfare during the Enlightenment. Chapter 8 emphasizes how Native American populations should be considered war refugees that American settlers of European descent displaced and forced to turn into hunter-gatherers in hostile environments after the loss of their former environmental infrastructures. Even if armies stopped living off the land in the nineteenth and twentieth

centuries, purposeful destruction of crops, dwellings, and other environmental infrastructure continued to characterize warfare, as in the case of the Dutch conflict against the Aceh sultanate in Indonesia examined in chapter 9. Finally, chapter 10 examines the intentional use of starvation as a weapon of war during the Portuguese conquest of Southern Angola in the early twentieth century.

To provide a vast fresco of the lived experience of environmental war, the book relies on a wide range of sources, including war damage petitions, military instructions, colonial and missionary reports, and oral histories. The book has thought-provoking implications vis-à-vis several historiographical debates. It emphasizes the similarities of practices of environmental warfare across the world, rather than differences in ideology, such as the Enlightenment doctrine of limited warfare and Carl Schmitt's philosophy of total war. It takes issues with the paradigms of ecological imperialism and settler colonialism when it suggests that environicide at the hands of Spanish *conquistadores* played as big a role as virgin soil contagion of new diseases in the collapse of Native American societies and that the frontier genocide in North America was part of a longer history of environcidal warfare.

Although the role of the environment is at the core of the argument of the book, Kreike downplays larger climatic explanations, such as the General Crisis of the eighteenth century during the Little Ice Age, to shed light on the agency and lived experience of perpetrators and victims of warfare. Finally, the book challenges the argument that total war was a modern phenomenon that emerged with the mobilization of civilians in the Napoleonic Wars or the mass warfare of the two world wars. To conclude, *Scorched Earth* is an ambitious project that successfully challenges the nature-culture divide. The book is an important read that is bound to promote debates among scholars interested in the relationship between war, environment, and society across the globe.