

# Climate and Conflict Revisited: Perspectives from Past and Present



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Global warming has heightened scholarly and public concern over links between climate and conflict and has accelerated research into possible connections among extreme events, warfare, and political and intergroup conflict. Nevertheless, scholars have yet to reach firm consensus on past and present linkages between climate and conflict or a comprehensive integration of historical and current perspectives (Degroot 2018).

The workshop "Climate and Conflict Revisited: Perspectives from Past and Present" assembled researchers from the historical, social, and natural sciences to revisit the climate-conflict nexus ([pastglobalchanges.org/calendar/136748](https://pastglobalchanges.org/calendar/136748)). This event – a joint meeting of the PAGES Climate Reconstruction and Impacts from the Archives of Societies (CRIAS) ([pastglobalchanges.org/crias](https://pastglobalchanges.org/crias)) working group and the University of Oslo CLIMCULT project – took place at the Oslo Museum of Natural History. It included 15 presentations, with a public keynote address by Florian Krampe (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute) and a visit to the museum's Klimahuset to explore public perceptions of climate change and conflict.

The first day's sessions began with the archaeology of climate change and conflict during the Late Bronze Age and continued with case studies of medieval Iceland and Byzantine and Ottoman Macedonia. Christian Pfister (University of Bern) discussed pathways of causality between extreme weather and conflict in early modern Europe, and researchers presented new quantitative and qualitative analyses of climate and conflict in China and Central Europe from the 17th to 20th centuries. Stefan Döring (Peace Research Institute of Oslo) introduced studies of current climate change impacts on health and cooperation, followed by Natália Nascimento i Melo's (University of Évora) exploration of climate change and impacts in museum exhibitions. The second day began with a session on new historical databases and applications for spatial and temporal analysis of climate-conflict links. These included Societal Impact Event Records (SIER) for Ming and Qing China, the Historical Social Conflict Database (HiSCoD) database for 12th- to 19th-century Europe, and a collection of witchcraft prosecutions in Catalonia, Spain. Final presentations from Cedric de Coning (University of Oslo) and Silviya Serafimova (University of Sofia) emphasized epistemic pluralism in contemporary climate-conflict

studies and theoretical perspectives from peace studies.

Key themes emerged in workshop discussions, which demonstrated the importance of linking historical and contemporary perspectives. Several presentations explored climate variability and "slow violence" (Nixon 2013), such as withholding common resources or disrupting customary practices of coping during difficult seasons. Participants noted parallels between past and present pathways from climate to conflict, including the instrumentalization of extreme events

to initiate or legitimize violence. Current research based on abundant climate and societal data indicates delayed and displaced impacts, arriving through complex pathways. This raised questions about how best to identify links between climate and conflict in historical data, where to find appropriate spatial and temporal scales for quantitative analysis, and how to overcome problems arising from incomplete or biased reporting in historical sources. Researchers in both current and historical fields also identified common challenges in communicating results, such as how to convey the balance between natural and human agency. Participants expressed hope that historical case studies illustrating past choices and possibilities could improve public messaging and refine both simplified histories of climate-driven conflict and reductionist projections of inevitable conflict under global warming.

The workshop concluded with a roundtable discussion of current needs and future possibilities in the field. Participants planned a thematic review explaining historical insights into climate and conflict for researchers in the social sciences and peace studies, as well as museums and public institutions. The meeting included more than two dozen participants representing over a dozen countries, as well as an international online audience. The CRIAS organizers hope for further representation from countries beyond Europe and East Asia in future meetings.

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