



Scorched Earth: Environmental Warfare as a Crime against Humanity and Nature. Emmanuel Kreike. Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540. 2021. xiv + 521 pages. Price: Rs 3144. ISBN: 9780691137-421, 0691137420.

The description of the negative effects of war on human civilization has been recounted through different types of books and narratives that include autobiographies, accounts of war survivors and socio-political analysis of the impact of war. Many of these books have been written from an anthropocentric perspective and indeed, no one can deny the enormous loss of human life and property that comes with the war and fighting. Such perspectives on war and society seek to awaken the reader to the political and national importance of peace and diplomacy.

The field of environmental humanities is an interdisciplinary field that focuses on the issues related to the conceptualization of nature and the ethical stance of human beings towards the non-humans and the impact that human beings have on the planet. In the era of Anthropocene, the dichotomy between nature–culture, between human and nonhuman is blurred as the human beings have begun to impact the very geological nature of the planet they live on. With the growing significance of studying the history of human impacts on nature in Anthropocene, a series of new reinterpretations of the history of wars have been attempted that describe the impact of conflicts on the landscape and the environment. A popular book that comes to mind is one by Noam Chomsky and Larry Polk called, *Nuclear War and Environmental Catastrophe*¹ that was a critique of the misuse of nuclear technology for

conflict. Other notable books that focus on the effects of war on environment include Jurgen Brauer's book on *War and Nature*² published in 2009, and a detailed book on the American civil war and environment published recently in 2020, authored by Judkin, and Silver titled *An Environmental History of the Civil War*³. The book under review falls within the field of environmental history that intersects with history of war and conflict. The author recreates some historical accounts of war, analysing both the role of the manipulation of nature during specific periods of conflict and the effect that wars have had on the environment at those times. Wars have altered landscape and water bodies, when armies have ravaged lands and crops, destroyed communities through taxes and consumption of resources and created conditions of disease and displacement. These tactics of war that are referred to a 'scorched earth operations' (p. 396) are environmental atrocities that cause maximum damage to both human and non-human cohabiting a place. The author claims that as it is with human habitat, environment also forms an important part of the infrastructure that allows human beings to survive. Combining the history of the environment with the history of warfare, this book details how the environment was not only affected by war, but it was also a tool for war. Furthermore, natural resources and land were often the prize of war. The author also claims that both premodern and modern warfare have perpetrated violence against both human and non-human, a phenomenon he calls 'Total War'. Many aspects of the cost of what Kreike calls 'Total War' are not discernible in the usual historical accounts of war. The effect of war on rural populations and occupied territories that are marked by alteration and destruction of natural resources and landscape, depletion of resources, and loss of people's access to natural resources are considered as a symptom of this 'Total War'.

The book merits readership on two counts. One as a study of war from a broader perspective that is inclusive of an environmental theme. It offers the much-needed connection between peace and ecological balance. In conversations about peace and conflict, environment and ecology are often addressed as secondary themes, at best from a perspective that the natural resources are something to be fought over. Similarly, war and conflict seldom feature centrally in accounts of environmental history unless they are connected to the

struggles of people and habitation. By linking these two themes together, the author has brought a holistic perspective to the interconnections among conflict, nature and society. The second reason why this book should be widely read and discussed is the way it analyses the complex nature of conflict and oppression that occurs during war and conquest. In this book, a detailed description of the different kinds of conflicts that are seen at local, regional and global levels indicates how the effects of violence extend across time and across geographic and spatial boundaries, damaging the human and nonhuman alike.

In a detailed and well discussed introduction, the author lays out the synoptic ideas of genocide, ecocide and envirocide. These conceptualizations are well formulated in the book and draw our attention to the parallel between crimes against humanity such as genocide and crimes against environment, envirocide. While the destruction of a community of people known as genocide is illegal and a crime, the author claims that large scale destruction of the environment or cumulative acts of violence against nature are to be seen as ethically similar.

The chapters provide a detailed and engaging account of a sweeping history of wars, using examples from across continents Europe, Americas, Asia and Africa from the period of late 16th to early 20th century. The inclusion of the history of colonial conquests as wars is an important acknowledgement of colonialism as conflict and not as a mere hostile economic takeover. In particular, the colonial campaigns and the battles against and within indigenous populations are also included in the chapters, that make the reading relevant to readers in India who will see parallels in our own history. Colonial conflicts are not only notorious for exploitation of land and resources, but also are cause for politically induced internal conflicts between the local populations through displacement and depravity. Besides, I appreciate the author for moving away from a Eurocentric approach to conflicts, describing a truly global sample of wars.

The ten chapters are laid out chronologically, but each chapter can be read as a standalone essay after the introduction because they are comprehensive accounts of specific wars. Some of the conflicts covered in this book are the Dutch revolt in 16th century, Spanish conquests of the Americas, European wars in Brabant, France, Spain and the Austrian succession, colonization

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conflicts in Eastern North America, Africa and Asia. The 19th century conflicts in American West, Indonesia and Angola and Namibia make for a rich diversity of conflicts spread across different continents. The author himself provides a succinct description of the layout of the cluster themes through which a reader can approach his book (p. 17) spatially, the set of chapters 1, 3, 5, 6 and 9 as local village level experiences of war, chapters 2, 4, 7 and 8 as regional and continental macro-geographical accounts. I found it interesting to arrange the reading this way from a place-studies perspective. The author also suggests other ways to approach the book and to me this is one of the strengths of the book that allows it to be approached by a diverse set of readers interested in different aspects of this subject, including history of wars, both local and regional, environmental issues, colonialism, conceptualization of war and so on.

For instance, chapter 4 is a revealing account of the ways in which eastern indigenous North Americans were targeted by the European settlers and soldiers not only by bringing war and aggression to a fragile landscape, but also causing disease and displacement to the human population. An interesting perspective Kreike provides in this chapter is the idea that the so-called vulnerability of nature-dependent populations, and the destruction of their livelihoods was often a human-made condition caused due to contact with European settlers.

According to the author, the chapters of the book can also be read through themes of experience of rural life and warfare or synchronously as warfare during similar periods. Some of the chapters provide both a detailed account of a war followed by a chapter that looks at the same war from a

larger perspective. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 are very significant in the book as they show the continuity of envirocide from the 18th century, during the Spanish succession, through the Austrian succession and all the way to the subsequent colonial conquests all over the globe. The many examples of conflict and environmental perspectives indicate for us that the nature of Total War as not only local or regional but also as global. What was missing for me in this book was any ecofeminist reference to the special vulnerability of women and their deep connection to nature both conceptually and historically during the total war. Warren and Cady (1994, p. 17) point out the many connections among women, nature and peace, suggesting that perspectives on nature, peace and war must “be ‘reconceived’ because, once one looks at peace and war through a feminist lens, one sees things differently: Never again does one have the privilege or luxury of talking about nationalism, and regional conflict, militarism, war, and violence, as if women and nature didn’t matter. They do. That’s what is shown when one takes feminism and peace connections seriously”⁴. The parallels between women as ‘prize’ for the conquerors and land as ‘prize’ make women during these wars especially susceptible. Though mentions of women’s safety and issues during the descriptions of the different conflicts has been made given the close connection between nature and women, it would have been more meaningful if the author had drawn this relationship in his theoretical analysis.

In his conclusion the author makes a compelling argument that network crimes are not limited to crimes against humans, but wars have systematically targeted nature, causing the collapse of the delicate balance between humans in nature. Some commu-

nities may have demonstrated resilience and avoided total annihilation. However, according to Kreike, even resilience to such destruction has its limits, forcing deep irreversible changes in communities and sometimes even camouflaging the effects of conflict.

For the author, the problem with accounts of war and conflict is also influenced by the same nature–culture dichotomy. He makes a case for understanding conflict as an environmental problem that is inclusive of human populations. He suggests that Total War in the form of envirocide should be condemned as crime as it caused large scale destruction of both natural and human space shaped environment. This book makes a strong case for peace as a precondition not only for human survival but an integrated necessity to survive in Anthropocene.

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1. Polk, Laray and Noam, Chomsky, *Nuclear War and Environmental Catastrophe*, Seven Stories Press, United States, 2013.
 2. Brauer, Jurgen., *War and Nature: The Environmental Consequences of War in a Globalized World*, Alta Mira Press, Lanham, 2009.
 3. Browning, Judkin and Timothy Silver, *An Environmental History of the Civil War*. The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2020.
 4. Warren, Karen J. and Duane L. Cady, *Hypatia*, 1994, 9(2), 4–20; <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810167> (accessed 27 August 2021).
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