

Call for Papers

**ENVIRONMENTAL AND CULTURAL DESTRUCTION  
IN IMPERIAL SPACES**

*Second annual conference of the Research Group “Empires” (University of Freiburg)*

**Confirmed Keynote Speakers:** Benno Weiner, Aondover Gabriel Gyegwe

30 November – 2 December 2023, Freiburg, Germany

Empires can be guarantors of unity, stability, and peace. At the same time, they are often embedded in a history of destruction of lives, habitats, and cultures. Imperial orders laid waste to many previously autonomous polities and stable ecosystems, creating destruction not only during their ‘rise’, but also through their efforts to maintain control, their demise, and often long thereafter. This conference aims to shed light on destruction in imperial spaces through the dual lens of environmental and cultural destruction. To better understand the relationship between these forms of destruction and imperialism is one of the main goals of the conference.

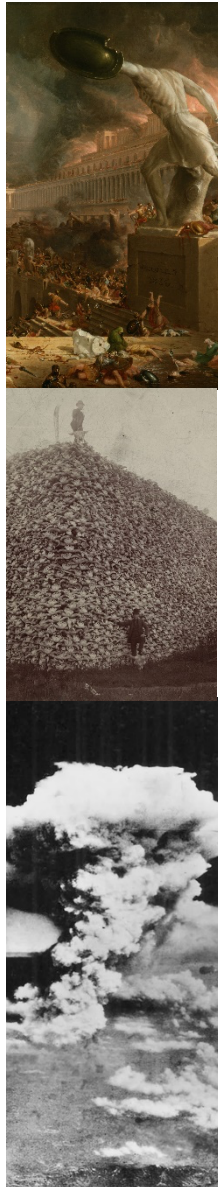
Empires have harmed culture and nature, bodies and minds, objects and peoples, material and non-material heritages. The conference is thus based on a broad understanding of destruction. It envelops a wide array of phenomena of damage and harm, both visible and invisible, immediate and incipient, and of fleeting and lasting impact. Destruction can be a show of force, an incidental by-product or a deliberate policy, ideologically motivated, a result of institutional routines or simply of a lack of care. Destruction has a temporal as well as a spatial dimension. Destructive events and processes can change conceptions of time, memories of the past, and imaginations of the future. The spatial dimension includes the destruction of imperial centres and peripheries as well as empires’ encroachment into ‘unknown’ lands, creating new frontiers and borderlands of destruction. Destruction does not only emanate from the imperial centre, but might also emerge from co-opted local elites or anti-imperial resistance.

Imperial subjugation of the ethnic ‘other’ often went hand in hand with the exploitation of the environmental ‘other’. As the quest for resources was often accompanied by civilising missions, imperial expansion has had both environmental and cultural dimensions. In fact, research has long shown that nature and culture are not dichotomic but rather terms that construct a supposed human difference. Moreover, studies on landscape development explain how humans and environments interact. In this vein, the conference aims to explore the specific dynamics of socio-cultural and environmental destruction, as well as to examine how these two forms of destruction align, intersect, and influence each other in imperial spaces.

The overarching questions of the conference are:

- What is the relationship between destruction and imperialism?
- How can we understand environmental and cultural destruction as distinct, yet interrelated phenomena?

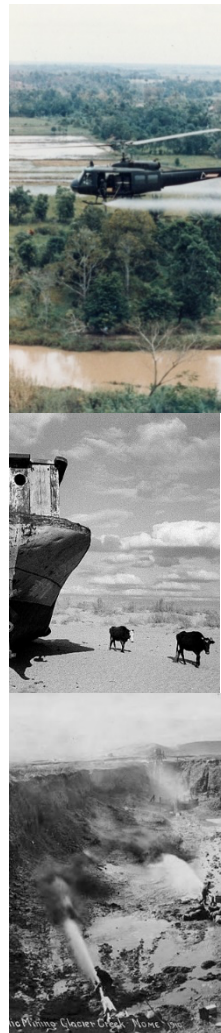
We welcome applications focusing on a wide range of empires (modern/pre-modern/ancient, maritime/land-based, pastoral/sedentary, authoritarian/democratic, capitalist/communist, continental/over-sea) and exploring them from a variety of different – inter alia economic,



political, cultural, landscape – approaches, as well as focusing on different spatial and temporal aspects of destruction.

Relevant topics might include, but are not limited to

- **destruction in warfare.** Papers might interrogate how destruction was used and justified against different kinds of opponents, why some imperial wars were more destructive than others (and how to measure such destructiveness), and what traces such wars have left on landscapes and cultures. They might also examine how destruction is rationalised, in, for example, different phases of imperial expansion as well as in anti-imperial resistance movements.
- **environmental and landscape destruction.** Papers might address imperial transformations of environments and landscapes, discourses of human-nature relationships, the interdependence of technological and environmental transformation. But it may also be worth interrogating what kind of ‘nature’ seemed worth preserving and why some forms of environmental impact are regarded as destruction while others are not.
- **cultural destruction.** This might relate to the destruction of cultural landscapes, historic places, monuments, and artefacts as well as intangible heritage such as customs, beliefs, traditions, knowledge, concepts, and languages. Papers might probe the specific settings in which the destruction of culture occurs and how the destruction of material culture differs from that of immaterial culture. What influence did post-imperial orders and empire-to-nation-state transitions have on cultures that were considered peripheral and underdeveloped? Papers might also explore those instances where efforts to ‘save’ cultures led to their destruction.
- **memory/visions of destruction.** Ruins of architecture and landscapes keep the memory of destruction alive. Papers might focus on whether and how different forms of destruction are/were remembered differently as well as on how memory itself can be destroyed. They might analyse the role that destruction plays in storytelling and art, and explore how destruction is narrated, visualised, or made into sound and aestheticized. How do artistic reflections on destruction change our perception and memory of destruction? And what are visions of future destruction?



### *Application*

We welcome contributions from all the humanities and social sciences as well as hybrid sciences such as geography. We especially encourage scholars in the early stages of their career (PhD & Postdoc) to submit proposals. The conference will be held in hybrid format.

Interested applicants are invited to send a **working title**, an **abstract of no more than 400 words**, and a **short biographical note** to [conference@grk2571.uni-freiburg.de](mailto:conference@grk2571.uni-freiburg.de) by **17 March 2023**. Please also indicate your preference for virtual or in-person participation. Any further queries can be directed to the same address.

The accommodation in Freiburg will be covered by the Graduate School “Empires”. We will also strive to at least partially reimburse presenters for their travelling expenses.

Presenters will be asked to provide a first draft of their paper at least two weeks prior to the conference. After the conference, we intend to publish selected papers in an edited volume.

The conference is the second of a series of annual conferences organised by the *DFG Graduate School 2571 “Empires: Dynamic Transformation, Temporality and Postimperial Orders”* (Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg). More information on the research group can be found at: <https://www.grk2571.uni-freiburg.de/events/annual-conference-2023>

