African Humanities Research & Development Circle

Journal of AFRICAN HUMANITIES RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT (JAHRD)

Volume 2, 2025
Published by The African Humanities Research and Development Circle (AHRDC)

E-ISSN: 3115-5375

SCORCHED EARTH: ENVIRONMENTAL WARFARE AS A CRIME AGAINST HUMANITY AND NATURE

_By_ Emmanuel Kreike. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2021.
Pp. xii + 521; ISBN: 9780-6911-37421

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War, in both its destructive and transformative capacities, has long preoccupied historians of politics, society, and culture. Yet, as Emmanuel Kreike's *Scorched Earth* demonstrates, the environment, both natural and human-shaped, remains an underexplored dimension of warfare in contemporary scholarship. Kreike positions the environment not merely as a backdrop against which conflicts unfold but as an active participant in the dynamics of war. In doing so, he reframes conflict as a phenomenon that simultaneously reshapes both human communities and the environmental worlds they inhabit. His central argument is that violence against people and violence against the environment are not discrete acts, but rather intertwined processes that must be understood as constituting a unified form of crime against both humanity and nature.

Kreike introduces two concepts that underpin the book's arguments: "environmental infrastructure" and "environcide." Environmental infrastructures, he explains, consist of the material and ecological systems that sustain human societies, such as homes, fields, soils, crops, animals, wells, dams, canals, and storage facilities. These are neither entirely natural nor wholly artificial; instead they are co-produced through reciprocal relationships between people and their environments. Environcide, by contrast, refers to the deliberate or incidental destruction of these infrastructures through acts of war.

For Kreike, environcide is inseparable from what he terms "total war," which he defines as the indiscriminate and simultaneous destruction of society and environment. In both pre-modern and modern conflicts, human societies and their environmental infrastructures "are at once the object, subject, and instruments of war."[1] Armies, in sustaining themselves, depend on living off the land, mobilizing populations, and denying opponents access to vital resources. As a result, war is never confined to battles between armies; it inevitably implicates civilian populations and the environments they inhabit. Throughout, war disrupts—and often destroys—the ongoing work of humans to reshape their natural surroundings, a process Kreike refers to as "environing."

Kreike's conceptualisation stands as one of the book's most compelling contributions. By centring environmental infrastructures in the conduct of warfare, he offers an alternative lens that expands the study of war beyond soldiers, states, and strategies. In doing so, he draws attention to the long-term humanitarian and ecological consequences of warfare, which are frequently neglected in mainstream military histories.

Another strength of the book lies in its impressive comparative scope. Drawing on case studies that span Europe, Africa, and the Americas from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries,

[1] Emmanuel Kreike, *Scorched Earth: Environmental Warfare as a Crime Against Humanity and Nature* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2021), 3.

Kreike illuminates the often-overlooked intersections between environmental history and military history. He demonstrates how violence directed at landscapes leaves enduring and transformative effects on societies. In his discussion of the Dutch Revolt of the late sixteenth century, for example, Kreike captures the destructive interplay of military strategy, human survival, and environmental manipulation. With a phrase that seems to allude to Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, he describes soldiers as "dogs of war,"[2] noting their diverse tactics—such as deliberate flooding and scorched earth—used both as defensive strategies and as punitive measures against civilian populations aligned with enemy forces.

Kreike's global approach to environcide is particularly illuminating in his chapters on colonial warfare in Asia and Africa. In Aceh, Sumatra (Indonesia), Dutch colonial troops waged a protracted war of conquest against local rulers and communities. Kreike details how the destruction of villages, crops, livestock, and irrigation systems formed part of a calculated strategy to cripple Acehnese resistance. The result was not only immediate physical devastation but also long-term social dislocation, as displaced populations were stripped of their livelihoods and forced into new forms of dependency. Similarly, in Namibia during the German campaigns against the Herero, Nama, and Oukwanyama in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, environcide played a central role. The deliberate destruction of wells and grazing lands in the region's arid landscape intensified human suffering and contributed to what Kreike argues became a genocidal process.

By highlighting the case studies from Aceh and Namibia, Kreike makes an important intervention in colonial studies. These examples demonstrate that imperial campaigns against Indigenous populations were seldom solely about defeating armed resistance or spreading "civilization," as Eurocentric scholars have sometimes suggested. Instead, colonial powers sought to make conquered populations dependent on imperial systems of production and exchange, thereby replacing local environing practices with externally imposed ones. Colonial conquest, therefore, did more than impose new political orders; it fundamentally reshaped entire environments, reconfiguring societies at the profound cost of environmental devastation.

The African case studies also carry significance for what they reveal about silences within African historiography. The story of the Great Trek—the nineteenth-century migration of Dutch-speaking settlers (Boers) from the Cape Colony into the South African interior—is well documented and often celebrated as foundational to Afrikaner nationalism.[3] Yet the experiences of African communities such as the Oukwanyama of present-day Namibia, whose environmental destruction Kreike foregrounds, remain marginal in mainstream narratives. Kreike's work implicitly highlights this historiographical silence by meticulously documenting the environcide inflicted on these communities. Across Kreike's case studies, a striking conclusion emerges: wars—from early modern Europe to colonial Africa and Asia—reshaped societies by reshaping their environments. Conflict does not end with peace treaties or military victories; its consequences reverberate across generations. These consequences are inscribed in farmlands, houses, streets,

[2] The origin of the phrase "dogs of war" is most commonly traced to William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. In Act 3, Scene 1, following Caesar's assassination, Mark Antony famously declares, "Cry 'Havoc!' and let slip the dogs of war," a line intended to rouse the people toward violence and chaos in the name of vengeance. The phrase functions as a metaphor for the unleashing of destruction, disorder, and unrestrained brutality upon one's enemies. It may also evoke the ancient practice of using trained dogs in battle, thereby layering the metaphor with both symbolic and literal resonances of violence.

[3] Great Trek**,** *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, accessed July 29, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/event/Great-Trek.

landscapes, and water systems, as well as in the formation of new societies by displaced populations forced into unfamiliar modes of existence after the destruction of their environmental infrastructures. Consequently, Kreike's argument that environcide should be recognized as a crime against both humanity and nature acquires considerable force. By placing environmental destruction at the centre of war studies, *Scorched Earth* equips historians with new conceptual tools for understanding how societies—across time and space—are transformed through the reciprocal shaping of conflict and environment.

