

Disaster Prevention in Japan 1885-1978: Natural Disasters, Scientific Expertise and Global Transfers of Knowledge

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Located on the Pacific Rim and surrounded by the Pacific and Japanese Seas, Japan has both profited from the resources of the ocean and suffered from its dangers. With industrial modernity and urbanization magnifying the risk of large-scale natural disasters, disaster preparedness became increasingly viewed as vital to success on the global stage.

Around 1900, Japan became an internationally trusted source for disaster-related knowledge, especially concerning earthquakes and tsunamis. On the other hand, Japan imported European and American scientific knowledge concerning flood control and coastal protection. In the 1920s and 1930s, Japanese society began to develop a national disaster preparedness system, which relied heavily on scientific and expert knowledge. Firstly, natural disasters were fought by altering urban and rural environments with the means of urban planning, earthquake engineering and civil engineering. Secondly, the Japanese state institutionalized disaster response and tried to engage the population via disaster trainings and education in schools. Disaster preparedness developed heavily influenced by wartime air defense, while disasters provided a smoke screen for war preparations. After World War Two, the Japanese state concentrated on building environments that were supposed to be both safe and profitable. The disaster preparedness system was finally institutionalized by the Basic Act of Disaster Control Measures in 1961.

This project traces how natural disasters influenced Japanese society, what strategies were implemented to prepare against them, and how they were influenced by political settings at the time. The Japanese case is set into a global context and takes the global circulation of disaster knowledge into account by asking which knowledge was selected for dissemination and how it was adapted to the natural environment.