

The Century When the World Fell Apart

Connecting the “general crisis” and the climate crisis

[George Dillard](#)



Dutchmen play colf (think golf on ice) during the Little Ice Age ([The Getty](#))

When Louis XIV was just a boy, an angry mob burst into his bedroom.

The people of Paris were angry. Louis’ mother, Anne, who effectively ruled the country at the time, was a foreigner who empowered other foreigners. Louis’ predecessors had weakened the parts of the government that could check the power of the kings. France had been at war for a long time, and the conflict had ended with bands of former soldiers terrorizing parts of France. On top of all this, the government was raising taxes beyond what people could afford.

This general frustration culminated in a revolt called the Fronde, which was named after the slingshots that kids would use to take potshots at passing nobles, and the storming of the palace was one of its tensest moments. The politics of the Fronde were convoluted, but the mob essentially burst into the palace to make sure that the 12-year-old Louis was still there, as he was supposed to be their hostage. The terrified young king pretended to be asleep, and the invaders left peacefully.

The Fronde is often discussed as a formative event in the development of the French monarchy — historians generally [agree](#) that Louis was shaped by that February night in 1651 (the experience inspired him to move out of Paris — he built the palace at Versailles — and to crush any potential opposition before it grew too large).

But that night in Paris was just one chaotic moment in a century full of them.

Between 1600 and 1650 the world seemed to fall apart. It didn't just fall apart in France; it seemed like the established order was crumbling everywhere.

In China, the Ming Dynasty, which had ruled since the 1300s, fell. Even though it was unfathomably wealthy and powerful, China found itself at the mercy of famines, floods, and outbreaks of plague. Vassals rose up against the emperors' authority and fragmented power. Eventually, a peasant named Li Zicheng — who, as a younger man had been publicly humiliated by local officials — led an uprising of disgruntled soldiers and peasants who had tired of constantly rising taxes. The final Ming emperor, having lost control, committed a lonely suicide by hanging himself from a tree outside the palace walls.

Li couldn't hold onto power for long. His enemies in the military plotted against him and eventually allowed the armies of a rebellious vassal group, the Manchus, through the Great Wall. They invaded and slowly brought China under control, forming the Qing Dynasty.

China wasn't the only Asian power to experience upheaval. The Tokugawa rulers of Japan also found themselves under intense pressure in the early 1600s. Portuguese missionaries had arrived in Japan in the late 1500s, and Catholicism had exploded in popularity. The new faith might have been aided by unusual weather patterns that eventually caused a terrible famine. The Tokugawas [cracked down on foreign influence](#), banning Christianity and expelling the Portuguese. A [Christian rebellion](#) led by a teenage holy man rocked southern Japan, followed by a terrible famine that killed hundreds of thousands. The Tokugawa Shogunate survived, but its authority had been severely tested.

Many parts of the world suffered [famines](#) during the first half of the 1600s. In the Philippines and Indonesia, a terrible drought caused starvation in the early 1640s. Drought and floods killed a million people in Gujarat, India. West African societies experienced food shortages, as did the British settlers at Jamestown, who called their early years in Virginia "The Starving Time."

The settlers in Jamestown were, of course, part of a European invasion that was in the process of devastating the indigenous people of the Americas. In addition to war, the Europeans brought diseases that [killed](#) perhaps 90% of the population of the Western Hemisphere. The ancient American civilizations withered under the twin pressures of epidemic and empire.

And in Europe, the place for which we have the best documentation, the first half of the seventeenth century was a series of unmitigated disasters. Religious differences stemming from the Protestant Reformation led to conflict all over the continent. France's Fronde revolt — in which the mob stormed Louis' bedroom — was actually one of the more mild uprisings of this period. England's Civil War ripped the country apart. Spain and the Netherlands slogged through a long series of conflicts. And, worst of all, the Thirty Years' War engulfed most of Europe in a savage and disastrous conflict.

Globally, it was a disaster. Some historians argue that it was a “[demographic collapse](#)” on par with the Black Death. They tend to refer to the period with a name that’s both anodyne and bleak: the [General Crisis](#).

The General Crisis was, as I’ve tried to illustrate, an omnidirectional mess. There was political upheaval, as established governments faced serious opposition. War broke out all over the world, both in the form of civil wars and interstate conflict. Cruelty abounded, often driven by religious, cultural, and ethnic differences. And economies and ecosystems failed, leaving people without the basic necessities of life.

You can see one measure of the suffering on this chart of deaths in war from Our World In Data. The General Crisis in the first half of the 1600s stands out as clearly as the Napoleonic Wars, World War I, and World War II:

Global deaths in violent political conflicts over the long run



Data collated from historical records by Peter Brecke. The data seeks to include both combatant and civilian deaths in violent political conflicts¹ due to fighting, disease, and starvation. But records are incomplete, especially for the distant past and outside of Europe.



Data source: Brecke - Conflict Catalog (1999)

OurWorldInData.org/war-and-peace | CC BY

1. Violent political conflict (Conflict Catalog): A conflict between states, a state and a non-state armed group, between non-state armed groups, or between an armed group and civilians, that causes at least 32 deaths during a year. This includes combatant and civilian deaths due to fighting, disease, and starvation.

Why did the world's societies all seem to fall apart at once? Was it just a confluence of unlucky events? There was probably some element of chance but historians like [Geoffrey Parker](#) blame climate change. Parker's book *Global Crisis* pieces together disparate records from around the world to argue that these disasters were no coincidence. A climatic event called the "Little Ice Age" played a significant role in this half-century of human suffering and political upheaval.

The 1600s weren't really an ice age, of course, but the world did get a little cooler — maybe [half a degree](#) Celsius. The climate changed because of a combination of natural phenomena (reduced solar activity and volcanic eruptions) and human activity (the depopulation of the Americas led to reforestation, which pulled carbon out of the atmosphere). I don't need to tell you that we face a much more significant change in the climate in the coming decades (we're already more than a degree above the baseline). So what hints might the General Crisis be able to give us about what we're about to face?

First, we must understand that small changes in the climate can have significant effects on the human experience. Dagomar Degroot, a Georgetown professor who studies the Little Ice Age, says that even though the temperature change was small in the 1600s,

Temperature anomalies were probably longer-lasting and more severe than any had been for [millennia](#), especially in the Northern Hemisphere. They brought short-term changes in ocean currents and wind patterns that repeatedly drenched some regions in torrential rain, or afflicted others with landmark droughts. For those who lived through it, the Little Ice Age was no trivial matter.

A lot of people may look at one or two degrees of global warming and wonder what the big deal is. But the truth of the matter is that small climatic shifts can dramatically warp the natural systems on which we rely.

Second, environmental problems are deeply intertwined with other issues. If you learned about the Thirty Years' War in high school, you probably learned about it as a struggle between religious sects in Europe or a battle between the Habsburgs and their rivals for supremacy in Europe. And, yes, the war was about those issues. But, as Geoffrey Parker has explained, these tensions were exacerbated by the environmental problems of the early 1600s.

What caused the hostility between Catholics and Protestants to boil over into open, often shockingly cruel fighting? It seems likely that the material deprivation and resource conflicts of the Little Ice Age played a role in this. Similarly, as we enter the era of global warming, we may find that environmental stress, added to the political, cultural, or economic stresses that are already there, shifts a conflict into a new, perhaps worse, phase. It's also likely that we won't necessarily acknowledge the environmental factors that lie behind some of our political conflicts if we're zoomed in on the direct causes of them.

Third, it seems that our human failings may exacerbate our environmental difficulties. It would be nice to be able to say that, during the Little Ice Age, communities banded together and helped one another through the droughts, floods, and famines. Though this did happen on a local level, the shortages of the General Crisis seem to have led to more conflict, discrimination, and upheaval. I wouldn't be surprised if that's the case again.

Fourth, some good things might emerge from bad times; they certainly did during the General Crisis. A few resilient societies managed to do well during this period. Though Japan was rocked by the Kane'ei famine in the 1640s, its government — perhaps aided by the fact that, as an island nation, it could isolate itself from the chaos elsewhere — [managed](#) to reform the Japanese economy and emerge stronger than before. The relatively new Tokugawa Shogunate seems to have used the crisis to consolidate its power, expelling foreigners, putting down rebellions, and stabilizing Japanese politics.

Some societies even thrived. The “Dutch Golden Age” coincided with the Little Ice Age, according to [Degroot](#):

Much of the [Dutch] Republic’s economic dynamism stemmed from activities at sea, where complex changes in patterns of prevailing wind mattered more than cooling. These changes shortened Dutch commercial voyages and often helped Dutch war fleets more effectively harness the wind when sailing into battle.

Climate change did pose severe challenges for the Dutch and, when it did, the Dutch often adapted creatively. When storms sparked a series of urban fires across Europe, for example, Dutch inventors developed and then exported new firefighting technologies and practices. When winter ice choked harbours and halted traffic on essential canals, the Dutch invented skates and refined icebreakers. Merchants set up fairs on the ice that attracted thousands from afar, and pioneered insurance policies that protected them from the risks of storms at sea.

More generally, it’s worth noting that some other advances came out of this period. During the General Crisis, Shakespeare wrote his plays, Galileo advanced people’s understanding of the universe, and Descartes revolutionized philosophy and mathematics. Some historians see the crisis as [crucial](#) to the development of capitalism. The period of acute chaos in the early 1600s was followed, at least in Europe, by the scientific revolution and enlightenment, movements that shaped the modern world.

Looking back to the General Crisis may be instructive for those of us about to live through a new era of climate change. But there’s one big difference between the Little Ice Age and our modern era. The climate changes of the 1600s were transient, mostly the product of a coincidence of natural factors. Our climate change may be much more long-lasting. While many societies of the 1600s had a bad half-century from which they could later recover, we may be entering a “new normal.” The question is: can we be resilient forever?