Conflict and Climate Change: Lessons from the Little Ice Age

Between 1250 and 1850 CE, a complex mix of natural forces cooled Earth’s climate, and patterns of oceanic and atmospheric circulation responded. In particularly chilly periods of this so-called “Little Ice Age,” subsistence strategies broke down in diverse societies battered by cold snaps, droughts, or torrential rains. A wave of new scholarship by historians and archaeologists has established that resource shortages repeatedly provoked or worsened rebellions within societies, and even wars between them. Yet new research into societal adaptation and resilience to Little Ice Age climate changes has revealed that cooling could also benefit armies and fleets on the battlefield. Climate change therefore altered the character of violence in the early modern world, in ways that may provide parables for our warmer future.

featuring Dagomar Degroot
Assistant Professor of Environmental History
Georgetown University

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