

European Perspectives on a Disaster: Courrières (1906)

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ABSTRACT

Disasters have an international echo and reveal national characteristics. In 1906, all Europe was shocked by a mining accident in Courrières, the biggest industrial disaster suffered by France in modern times (with over a thousand fatalities). While at first reactions of solidarity were unanimous, fears of social unrest later began to break the initial harmony. But in the case of Courrières, German rescuers came to the aid of French miners: this episode briefly transformed the tragedy into a symbol of hope for peace among men.



Arrival of German rescue workers after the Courrières catastrophe (1906).

Major natural disasters and technological catastrophes usually have an impact that transcends national boundaries. They thus reveal deep anxieties and unspoken fears, as well as stereotypes between neighbouring peoples. In some cases they can even lead to humanitarian and pacifist movements. All these features can be found in the discourses surrounding the Courrières disaster in 1906: a kaleidoscope of reactions reflecting an unusually strong desire to overcome deep-rooted antagonisms.

Self-centred perspectives

On 10 March 1906, France suffered its worst industrial disaster in the modern era: in the Pas-de-Calais region,

1099 miners were killed in a pit belonging to the Courrières mining company, which had previously been known for its good safety record. Emergency assistance, which even came from Germany, failed to bring up any survivors. The shock was immense: never before had a single region or a single profession experienced such a trauma. Two major occurrences followed the events of 10 March: firstly, a group of survivors (the French word 'rescapés' dates from this disaster) was miraculously brought to the surface several days after the tragedy; secondly, a very strong strike movement developed in the weeks that followed.

The day after the disaster, the Courrières disaster was front-page news throughout Europe. It is noticeable, however, that the coverage devoted to this event in the European press quickly waned as numerous other important events took place elsewhere, including the Algeciras Conference and the San Francisco earthquake. Nevertheless, for several days, there were numerous appeals for donations for the victims of Courrières.

The press in neighbouring Belgium highlighted above all the number of Belgian victims: 43 of the 44 foreigners missing were Belgian nationals. It was thus quite normal that Belgian newspapers were concerned about the question of compensation by the Courrières company. When the situation became strained, coverage of the strikes also revealed the concerns of the Belgian press. On 3 April 1906, there was even an attempt by the striking miners to blow up the bridge between Belgium and France in Quiévrain to prevent Belgian workers coming to work in French mines. On several occasions, the Belgians were attacked by the strikers, including on Belgian territory on 15 April 1906.

Across the Channel, the press remained firmly Anglocentric. The *Pall Mall Gazette* explained, for instance, that the mask used by the German rescuers was of British design. Violent demonstrations were also a concern: even if the repression of the strikes were to be 'difficult and painful', the English press wanted calm to be restored, especially since, as the conservative newspapers noted with dismay, three British trade union leaders had been received in Lens. A risk of the strike spreading was always possible. A description of Paris in the run-up to 1 May portrayed a city in a state of siege, deserted by its inhabitants, and where the only imperturbable people were, supposedly, British tourists window-shopping! Conversely, the Spanish press highlighted the solidarity among the French and the usual reliability of French industrial installations that contrasted sharply with Spain's backwardness. However, if even the French, known for their dependability, could experience such a disaster, then Madrid was to draw lessons in issues of safety, new methods of emergency assistance and the need for information at a time of crisis. Moreover, Courrières came to reveal the divisions between Castilians and Catalans, and between socialists and moderates: the newspaper *El Socialista*, for example, launched its own appeal, different from that organised by the municipality of Madrid. The Swiss press was characterised by its desire to reflect on the meaning of catastrophe itself: could it open the way to a better future? Should one be fatalistic by telling oneself that disasters are inevitable but that the world would always need miners? Technological risk, said many newspapers, went hand in hand with progress: there would be other victims in the future, but the accidents caused by one technical flaw would subsequently be avoided thanks to further technological advances. In addition, the Swiss noted that social ties should be strengthened in times of grief, or a disaster could ruin everything. Accordingly, the Swiss press initially showed some sympathy with the strike movement. When it became violent, however, the conservative press demanded a firm response from French troops, all the more so because Switzerland was experiencing strong social movements at the same moment.

A path to peace in Europe?

While the discourses circulated by the European press were often ultimately rather inward-looking, there was a subject on which press commentary tried to rise above narrow self-interest. Almost immediately after the disaster, the Germans responded by sending 25 fully equipped men to Courrières from the mines of Westphalia. This exceptional event in an otherwise extremely tense Franco-German context was of particular interest to the Swiss, who feared a conflict on their doorstep. As the German-speaking Swiss newspaper *Nebelspalter* put it on 24 March

1906: 'what the diplomats have not been able to bring about, can be achieved by misfortune: bringing nations together'. In Germany, postcards were also printed showing the Westphalian miners in France. While some showed Kaiser Wilhelm II in full uniform reviewing the heroes of the hour, other postcards were accompanied by captions with strong Christian overtones ('love thy neighbour as thyself'). However, this wave of solidarity came up against less generous sentiments. A statement by the German rescuers in the *Gazette de Bruxelles* emphasised that the French engineers were 'sixty years behind', a remark that was of course received badly in the French press.

A few years later, Europe was torn apart by war for four years. Despite the political circumstances of the 1920s, one film took up the lesson of humanity provided by Courrières and proclaimed that borders have no importance when one's neighbour is suffering: Georg Pabst's 1931 feature, entitled *La tragédie de la mine* in French and, far more symbolically, *Kameradschaft* (comradeship/camaraderie) in German. A text displayed in the opening title sequence recalled the Courrières disaster and the German gesture towards the French miners. This film begins by depicting the tensions between the French and German populations in a mining region on the frontier (the trauma of war is never far away). Then, when the disaster takes place in a French mine, one sees the spirit of solidarity among German miners towards their French comrades trapped underground. The film depicts Frenchmen and Germans speaking in their own language and is impressive in its realism. Pabst believed in the abolition of frontiers and in class solidarity. Courrières thus became a way of reinterpreting the present in order to avert future anxieties. Yet the final scene is not very optimistic. In order to make rescue work easier, French and German workers had blown up the metal grille that marked the frontier between the two countries; the closing scene shows French and German soldiers officially checking that the metal bars were firmly back in place.

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