

Introduction

This Focus is the outcome of a Symposium planned in 2004 by Theo D'haen and Karl Fuchs and held in association with the Annual Meeting of the Academia Europaea in September 2005 in Potsdam, 250 years after the Great Earthquake of 1755.

That 'Great Event' was not only recorded as a physical disaster, but it had a profound effect on life in Europe not directly concerned with the local devastation. In the Focus you will find recorded the impression it made on Voltaire and the influence it had on the development of Kant's thinking, on Wesley's sermons and even on poetry in distant Holland.

What could not be foreseen was how timely this Focus would be, since 2004–5 was a period of great disasters due to tsunamis in Sumatra and Mumbai, a major earthquake in Kashmir-Pakistan, and the hurricane flooding in New Orleans and other parts of the American Gulf coast.

The accusations of incompetence of local authorities, central government and politicians follow the same pattern as 250 years ago! What is rather different is the perceived role of the Almighty; but, after all, the 1755 episode occurred on All Saints Day, a Sunday when the many who were in church at the time of the eruption, were among the most prominent casualties.

What is quite different is the realization due to the insight of Alfred Wegener, that the earth's crust is not continuous, but split into plates, some twelve in number, that are unstable where their edges are in contact – the areas of earthquakes. The development of the physics gives hope that in the future the understanding of these 'plate tectonics' may give the prospect of accurate early warning of approaching catastrophe.

Part I of this survey is concerned mainly with the physical aspects of the disaster. Part II, which will appear in July, will cover literary and other aspects.

