

Business and Environmental History:

Introduction to the Thematic Section

Poslovna in okoljska zgodovina: uvod v tematski sklop

The economy appears to move through time at a leisurely pace of its own. Unlike the political landscape, which can shift overnight due to elections, revolutions, or other ruptures, the economy adapts to changing circumstances only gradually; it resembles a massive ship on an established course, capable of altering its trajectory only slowly and at considerable energy cost. The economy is thus profoundly shaped by the *longue durée*; consequently, it must remain attuned to all the factors that influence its functioning over the long term. In one way or another, no economic entity can ignore the spatial and temporal context in which it operates. Every entity must be acutely aware of its operating environment, as well as of what it extracts from it and what it gives back.

For a long time, and in many places, there was little regard for this balance; companies extracted water, timber, land, and labour to secure raw materials and energy for production, often “repaying” this by polluting air and contaminating water, groundwater, and soil – practices that, day after day and year after year, undermined the health of the local population. With the dawn of the modern era, calls for change grew louder, initially from individuals and eventually from entire organisations and government bodies, insisting that the status quo was no longer sustainable. Green and environmental movements began advocating for a cleaner environment, while legislative restrictions reined in corporate practices. Today, being “green” is fashionable, even if it often amounts to nothing more than empty rhetoric on paper, as we are reminded every few years by scandals involving supposedly eco-friendly manufacturers who manipulate data behind the scenes, prioritising the mathematical and financial logic of the free market over the environmental limits on pollution.

Within this historic development – perhaps portrayed in a somewhat pessimistic light – there are, of course, numerous examples that defy the rule. Every company has its own story and its evolving relationship with the environment in which it is situated. The historical evolution of the relationship between business and its environment

is a compelling yet relatively under-researched topic within both the European and broader contexts. An international workshop held at the Institute of Contemporary History in Ljubljana on October 23 and 24, 2025, the seventh in a series of workshops on the business history of Central and Eastern Europe organised under the auspices of the European Business History Association, sought to at least partially bridge this gap. Choosing the theme of historical links between business history and environmental history – the latter being a field the Institute's research group on economic, social, and environmental history has been intensively exploring in recent years – within the context of Central and Eastern Europe was a somewhat bold move. These are two relatively specialised research areas, and the intersection of their Venn diagram leaves only a handful of experts, even at a continental level. Nevertheless, the workshop was rich in innovative research topics, fresh methodologies, and vivid insights into both well-known subjects and virtually uncharted areas of research.

In this issue of *Contributions to Contemporary History*, we present three papers from that workshop covering diverse geographical and thematic areas. These papers demonstrate the various approaches to analysing the historical relationships between business entities and the environment. The first article focuses on the region closest to Slovenia – Austrian Styria – and examines specific companies that harnessed the abundant water resources of the hilly landscape for their production processes. Walter M. Iber and Christian Schmidt present case studies of three such companies, highlighting their centuries-long continuity spanning from the early modern period, or even the Middle Ages, to the present day. The authors seek to uncover the secrets behind this enduring continuity and corporate longevity, identifying a combination of factors: access to natural resources; a well-conceived business strategy (which sometimes necessitates radical changes to the company's core production function in response to evolving times); and, of course, a measure of good fortune. In the database of the oldest Styrian companies, more than one-fifth are involved in utilising water power. As Iber and Schmidt observe, this underscores the crucial importance of water, waterside locations, and water energy in establishing a business.

The second contribution does not exactly rummage through the dustbins of history; instead, it explores the history of waste dumps themselves. Recent research in environmental history has revealed that studying the history of waste and dumpsites can be highly illuminating, revealing what was discarded and how pre-modern societies, often wrongly assumed to have been virtually unfamiliar with the concept of trash, actually managed their refuse. Issues regarding dump locations, unpleasant odours, and the spread of disease have plagued many societies throughout history. Eduard Kubů and Barbora Štolleová present the history of waste in Prague during the 19th and 20th centuries, focusing specifically on remarkably early attempts to recycle organic waste by selling it as fertiliser to farmers in the city's fertile hinterland. This system persisted until the 1930s, longer than in many other parts of Europe, but it gradually declined and eventually ceased to operate due to factors such as the substantial increase in waste volume coupled with a drop in its utility, rising transport costs

to rural areas, and the greater availability of industrially produced fertilisers (which caused farmers to lose interest even if organic waste were offered for free).

The final contribution by Lilija Wedel, which extends the concept of Eastern Europe to its furthest geographical and semantic limits, examines the oil industry in Baku, Azerbaijan, during the era of Tsarist Russia. While the oil industry is often perceived as a relatively modern phenomenon, its roots lie deep in the 19th century; indeed, alongside the United States, Azerbaijan was a globally pivotal region for oil extraction. The author observes that the industry fundamentally shaped the local economy, while its extreme environmental impact necessitated regulation and intervention by local authorities. The complex negotiations, caught between the boom fuelled by oil profits and the adverse effects of extraction on the local community, reveal an early process that contains the seeds of a proto-ecological public debate, dating back to the reign of the Romanovs.

Styrian enterprises, Prague's refuse, and Baku oil offer a wide range of insights into the historical interplay between business structures and attitudes towards the environment. These insights confirm – as often happens when delving into the past – that the evolution of environmental awareness is not merely a phenomenon of recent decades but can be traced back to the more distant past, appearing in unexpected forms and places. Certain patterns of human behaviour appear to persist. To borrow a famous quote often – albeit erroneously – attributed to Mark Twain: history may not repeat itself, but it often rhymes.

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