**The Tallinn Dissertation Prize Awards 2021**

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| The Dissertation Prize aims to support early career environmental history scholars **based in Europe** or those **based outside Europe but whose work contributes to European environmental history**.  The Tallinn Dissertation Prize was established by the ESEH to reward innovative doctoral dissertations based on original research in **European environmental history**. The Prize was named after Tallinn, the city where it was awarded for the first time at the 10th ESEH Biennial Conference in 2019. | **A picture containing sky, outdoor, building, tree  Description automatically generated** |

**The 2021 Prize Committee:**

Libby Robin (Chair, Australia), Onur Inal (Austria), Ana Isabel Queiroz (Portugal, who replaced Inês Amorim, who had to retire due to illness), Simone Schleper (Netherlands) and Dan Tamir (Switzerland).

**The Candidates for the Prize:**

We received 29 applications by closing date, 28 of which were eligible for the 2021 prize (the other dissertation was submitted in 2017, so not in 2019—2020 catchment indicated). The quality of all the dissertations was high.

All dissertations are now included in the ESEH Dissertation online database ( <https://www.zotero.org/eseh-nextgate/library> ), thanks to the work of Noémi Ujházy and Monique Palma.

Men =21 (72.5%) Women=8 (27.5%)

19 of the dissertations were in English, 10 in other languages.

**English** (19) is the majority language, but English was *not* the mother tongue for most of these authors. Their first languages included Hebrew, Greek, Swedish, German, Dutch, Turkish, Bosnian, Romanian, Lithuanian. Native knowledge of a language was often crucial to historical language research (including, for example documents in Ottoman Turkish, Middle High German etc). Only four applicants have citizenship in places where English is a first language (and all these presented their dissertations in English).

**Portuguese** (4) was the biggest non-English group – reflecting the growing interest in the Lusophone world in environmental history, and in ESEH. We also had **German** (2), **French** (1), **Italian** (1), **Polish** (1) and **Hungarian** (1).

Our Committee had a good range of languages from which to draw, and every candidate provided a long abstract, specially drafted for the prize in English. This enabled us to shortlist among diverse candidates.

**Principles of the Prize:**

For the prize, we wanted to identify an independent thinker and writer, not just someone who assembles or crunches data or organises archives. A good dissertation needs an original argument and great sources. It should also connect detailed local studies with global concerns and the widest possible literature. The environment is a scholarly space, and it is also a practical space – the best dissertations speak to both. The central questions we started with when identifying prize-winning dissertations for the ESEH Tallinn Prize 2021 were:

* Is the research question original?
* Are the sources innovative?
* Is the dissertation something that shows “what environmental history can do for the world”?

Since these are the sorts of things ESEH supports, we wanted the prize-winning dissertation to reflect them. We remained open to a broad definition of what constitutes environmental history, diverse ways of doing it and diversity in the subjects and periods studied.

In addition, we considered how well candidates engaged with environmental history and cognate literature, their methods and approaches, and whether their abstracts had a clear and convincing argument/thesis statement.

We took a broad and inclusive definition as our starting point, but we did expect the prize winner to explore historical questions. This did not rule out the ones that used natural science methods to explore history. Some candidates used technical or unusual archival data to develop excellent historical arguments. Others just assembled lots of data, but did not show sufficiently how this fitted into the conversations of environmental history. There were also some good “policy” theses that asked 21st century questions of earlier periods without really engaging with historical context.

We took the view that using historical facts to support a present idea is helpful to environmental policy, but it isn’t *environmental history*. A good historian builds a picture from the moment in history upwards that may shed light on the present or — by contrast — show how the world has changed. History shows *change over time*, in the context of its own times and places.

Environmental historians make nature, the landscape or animals and plants the *agents* of action, not just the background to human history. The changing history of ideas is also relevant as it frames the ways historical actors understand nature. This was a strong element in many of the dissertations presented.

We expected our winner to show that they understand how their work contributes to the wider environmental history literature. In most cases, applicants showed that they read secondary sources in environmental history, often alongside sources from many other disciplines. They also showed mastery of diverse sources – from medieval manuscripts, artwork and archives to databases from dendrochronology, vulcanology, and other technical sciences, as well as recent digital and modelling sources developed in the 21st C.

Sourcing original material in environmental history often requires casting a wide net, and reading and interpreting material at many scales, in several languages – including the languages of science, modelling and visual art. This group of scholars showed remarkable initiative. Our new generation of scholars demonstrated that they could integrate with the growing body of environmental history and also develop new directions and connections for the field. Together their work suggested some new hubs of scholarship beyond environmental history that have significant bearing on our field.

Disciplinary dexterity is incredibly important as future work for our new generation may not end up in a traditional history department, or even at a university. Many showed brilliantly how they will bring environmental history disciplinary skills to *whatever* scholarship they are working on next. Many have come through doctoral programs that build “team” skills (through efforts such as co-authorship). Such skills are increasingly urgent for historians working in climate science teams and other interdisciplinary initiatives.

It was sometimes hard to compare dissertations written in different languages and under different academic traditions, but we considered:

* histories of Europe written in Europe (we had some terrific regional studies written in English of places where the language has few native speakers or has changed significantly since historical times)
* histories of Europe written from other places (3 US, 1 Brazil)
* histories of other places or transnational history written from various European bases.

The subjects of the dissertations, the citizenship of candidates and the university base for their work were as follows (numbers don’t always add to 29 – sometimes there were multiple places of reference, or dual citizenship):

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Country | Subject of  Dissertation | Citizenship if indicated | University of Dissertation (no in bracket indicates the number of candidates at that institution) |
| Austria | 1 |  | 1 (Innsbruck) |
| Belgium | 2 |  |  |
| Bosnia | 1 | 1 |  |
| England | 3 | 1 (British) | 1 (Hull) |
| France | 4 | 1 | 1 (Paris-Est Créteil) |
| Germany | 5 | 5 | 6 (VU Berlin, TU Darmstadt, FS Jena, LMU Munich (3)) |
| Greece | 1 | 1 |  |
| Hungary | 2 | 2 | 2 (CEU and ELTE, both Budapest) |
| Ireland | 1 | 1 | 1 (TC Dublin) |
| Iceland | 2 | 1 | (Icelandic adviser to scholar based in Austria) |
| Italy | 2 | 2 | 3 (EUI Florence, IMT Lucca, SNS Pisa) |
| Lithuania | 1 | 1 |  |
| Macedonia | 1 |  |  |
| Netherlands | 2 | 1 | 1 (Amsterdam) |
| Poland | 1 | 1 | 1 (PAS Warsaw) |
| Portugal | 3 | 2 | 2 (Lisbon (NOVA), Porto) |
| Romania | 1 | 2 | 1 (Bucharest) |
| Russia | 1 |  |  |
| Scotland | 2 |  | 1 Edinburgh |
| Spain | 1 |  |  |
| Sweden | 1 | 1 | 2 (both KTH, Stockholm) |
| Switzerland | 2 | 1 | 1 (Zurich) |
| Turkey | 2 | 1 | 1 (Boğaziçi) |
|  |  |  |  |

**Outside Europe Place Citizenship University**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Argentina | 1 |  |  |
| Atlantic Ocean | 3 |  |  |
| Brazil | 3 | 2 | 1 (Rio) |
| Canada | 1 | 1 |  |
| Egypt | 1 |  |  |
| Iraq | 1 |  |  |
| Israel |  | 1 |  |
| North Sea | 1 |  |  |
| Japan | 1 |  |  |
| Pacific Ocean | 1 |  |  |
| Panama | 1 |  |  |
| Sudan | 1 |  |  |
| Transnational/Global | 9 |  |  |
| USA |  | 1 | 3 (Columbia NY, Kansas KS, Princeton, NJ) |

The diversity of these people, their subjects for study and the universities where they undertook doctorates are all important to the future of a flourishing ESEH.

**What does our field tell us about Environmental History in Europe in 2021?**

Strong growth areas in environmental history were highlighted in the new doctoral scholarship presented for the Tallinn Dissertation Prize 2021. (The list below totals more then 29, as many dissertations covered a range of categories.)

There was continuing interest in traditional environmental history topics:

* agricultural history (4 )
* environmental activism (3)
* fisheries history (5)
* forest history (3)
* historical landscape change (2)
* history of sciences (6)
* history of medicine/health (3)
* history of technology/ “envirotech” (3)
* mining history(1)
* religious environmental history (1)
* water history (1)

There are also many strong new “core areas” developing and reshaping the historical field, many of which reflect the historical depth of present environmental concerns:

* animals in history (3)
* Anthropocene (2)
* climate history (4)
* disaster history (3)
* energy history (3)
* environmental architecture (1)
* expertise for environmental management (2)
* food and nutrition studies (2)
* history of ideas (6)
* marine and ocean studies (5)
* migration (4)
* military history (1)
* pandemic history (2)
* urban environments (2)
* whaling (2)

Transnational, comparative and interdisciplinary studies were strong too. It was pleasing to see that historical work is increasingly “mainstream” for interdisciplinary teams, and that transnational implications informed the majority of histories.

Finally, the mix of historical periods was also diverse:

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| --- |
| 10th C and earlier 3  11th-14th C 3  15th-17th C 13  18th C 11  19th C 14  20th C 11  21st C 4 |

There were a number of studies shaped by climatic events, including the medieval warming and the Little Ice Age, which spanned several categories above.

**What is missing from our field?**

**Geographically speaking**, Oceania, most of Asia and Africa south of Sudan were not represented, but these will be strengths of other environmental history groups: there is not much of North America here, but plenty of North American environmental history in the American Society of Environmental History. Oceania and Asia are better represented in the Australian and New Zealand Environmental History Network, and the Association for East Asian Environmental History. These groups come together under the auspices of the International Consortium of Environmental History Organizations (<http://iceho.org>). Indian environmental history has strong connections with British environmental history, but also has its own national organizations, sometimes labelled *geography* rather than environmental history. ESEH has strong links with Russia and Kazakhstan, and also supports Southern African environmental historians through mentorship programs such as NEXTGATe (<http://eseh.org/call-for-applications-for-the-eseh-next-generation-action-team/>), which in 2021, included several participants from South Africa and Zimbabwe.

Not all the “research” areas in ESEH are captured by the Tallinn Dissertation Prize. We only considered final dissertations and from the sources named in the terms of the prize. We feel the combination of “European histories written anywhere in the world” and “Environmental histories of anywhere in the world written in a European university” is broad enough to create a strong field, and also to give ESEH a sense of the directions of the field it supports. It is important that the ESEH also offers NEXTGATe writing mentorships beyond these categories.

Socially, the category “Europe” creates biases, which is something the ESEH Diversity Committee is working to counter. While ASEH is working hard to build black histories (and the same is true in Australia and New Zealand), the dissertations presented to this prize in 2021 are very “white”. However, migrants and refugees have a very long history in Europe, and while European slavery is hard to research, the rise in climate and other environmental refugees arriving in Europe is leaving an impression on the field. There was one abstract that specifically referenced African slavery in Brazil in a European context. The shift away from emigration studies and international diaspora towards immigration and internal diaspora in Europe itself is a sign of our times, and of the importance of globalization and climate change in environmental history.

It is important that ESEH continues to support diversity, including gender diversity. Noting that undergraduate studies in environmental history in Europe and elsewhere are undertaken by at least 50% women, it is surprising to find that only 8/29 candidates in this field were women. Perhaps the restrictions of Covid in 2020 had restricted women more than men, but gender and other sorts of diversity (including race, colour, ablism) is something that ESEH needs to continue to support, and it is terrific that there is a Diversity program, chaired by Katie Holmes addressing this. (See: <https://whitehorsepress.blog/2021/03/30/the-eseh-diversity-committee/>)