

“Why Is There So Little Green in Czech and Slovak History?”

Workshop and Poster Session on the Horizons of Multi- and Interdisciplinary Cooperation in Environmental History

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Nature knows no boundaries – sadly, the same cannot be said for environmental history. While scholars all around the globe – from the United States through Germany to China and New Zealand – explore effects of natural disasters, cultural significance of landscapes, histories of national parks, or human-animal relations, Czech historians still view environmental history largely as odd, ideology-ridden, and by no means essential for our understanding of the world we live in.

The workshop and poster session entitled “Why Is There So Little Green in Czech and Slovak History” which took place on March 28, 2014 at the Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic and which was organized by three young environmental historians, Doubravka Olšáková from the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic (Prague), Nicholas Orsillo from the Masaryk University (Brno) and Arnošt Štanzel from the Ludwig Maximilian University (Munich), was primarily concerned with the questions of how this lack of interest in environmental history came about and what are the possible ways to change it.

Before you get to love something, you have to get to know it first. In his keynote speech, Christof Mauch, the Director of the Rachel Carson Center in Munich and past President of the ESEH, outlined the main challenges and advantages of doing environmental history. According to Mauch, environmental history can be characterized as an “überdiscipline”, as it inherently requires an interdisciplinary approach: an understanding of both the social and political developments of human society and the dynamics of the natural world. Environmental historians also have to find ways to deal with the large variety of spaces that play a role in their stories, ranging from “wilderness” to urban landscapes, as well as ways to incorporate long natural transformations and sudden natural changes into their narratives.

Environmental history holds, however, not just challenges but also advantages for those who decide to devote to it their academic interest. Environmental history is not only one of the fastest growing disciplines in the humanities, but is also politically relevant, as it deals with some of the most pressing issues of the day, including climate change, food security, or environmental justice. By means of looking at the nature-culture relationship from a historical

perspective, environmental history helps us understand the long-term consequences and the unintended effects of our relationship with nature.

In the following paper, Leoš Jeleček, historical geographer from the Charles University in Prague and the doyen of Czech environmental studies, described the development of the discipline in Czechoslovakia and subsequently in the Czech Republic, as well as the institutional history of the field in Europe. The key part of his paper, however, was devoted to an overview of past and present research topics popular with Czech environmental historians. Whereas before 1989, according to Jeleček, main attention was directed to topics such as nature conservation or history of settlement, in the last twenty years the focus shifted towards research fields such as medieval archaeology or land use changes. As for desiderata, Jeleček sees potential primarily in the topics of landscape changes, development of agricultural technologies, or historical climatology.

Maybe it is exactly this choice of research topics that has kept the Czech historians away from environmental history for so long. When the discipline first became known in the Czech environment, it was mostly the sciences, not the humanities, which took hold of it and determined its course. This made the discipline quite naturally less attractive to historians, who did not share the geographers' and natural scientists' methods and research interests. To reverse this development and to convince Czech humanities scholars of how promising the field of environmental history really is will be one of the first tasks that lie before the slowly but steadily growing community of Czech environmental historians.

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