

Bianca Centrone, Princeton University

Abstract Title:

The Factory: Comparative Approaches to the Industrialization of Central-Eastern Europe.

What happens when a small town industrializes?

What is the social and economic history embodied in the sudden appearance of large workshops of bricks and reinforced concrete?

Traditional histories of industrialization measure and condense these transformations into all-encompassing terms like rationalization and mechanization, early and late development, and rural and urban economies. While unquestionably poignant, these generalizing insights into the history of industrial development point to a uniformity that only accepts the variable of time (*when* industrialization happens) and – sometimes – the geopolitical and ideological frameworks of economic transformation. My chapter proposes a dive into the *how*. It reads as a story that unfolds entirely within the walls of those factories that soon after World War I became the dominant spatial, economic, and social element in small towns like Zlín and Ivrea – in former Czechoslovakia and northern Italy. I use sources ranging from travel reports and architectural maps, production and organizational charts, worktime measurements, and psychotechnical assessments to reconstruct life inside the factory: a historical ethnography of the workplace. Weaved into the narrative, I show how “American production strategies” traveled to Southern and Central Europe and what was duplicated, modified, or rejected. Breaking down the monolith of Americanization, this chapter shows how, in the Italian and Czechoslovak cases, awareness of an “economic” delay prompted entrepreneurial interventions that resulted in a continuous negotiation and original redefinition of what industrialization ought to look like and the advantages it would bring locally.

In the context of a workshop designed to share strategies to rethink Central Europe comparatively, my presentation will include conclusions drawn from the introduction and other sections of my dissertation. In particular, I would be honored to participate in a discussion on the benefits – and drawbacks – of spatially rethinking the economic geography of Central Europe: its connections and similarities with other European and global spaces for new histories of Central Europe in the 20th (and 21st) Century Economic World.

Central European History Convention 2025

Project proposal

Name: Anna Remešová

Institution and position: Academy of Fine Arts in Prague, PhD student in History and Theory of Art

E-mail: anna.remesova@avu.cz

Title:

Bosnian Handicraft between Tradition and Industrialization. The Role of Czech Actors in the Austro-Hungarian Occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina 1878–1918

Annotation:

The presentation is based on the early history of the Provincial School of Crafts in Sarajevo, which was founded and directed in 1893–1907 by Alois Studnička, pedagogue from the Czech lands. The school played an important role in the Austro-Hungarian modernization reforms of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian educational system and also as a representative institution at world exhibitions presenting the "achievements" of the civilizing mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The history and conception of the Sarajevo School of Crafts shows the economic management of the country by the Austro-Hungarian occupation administration, but also reveals well the entanglements of conservative and liberal-progressive ideas in the process of musealization and commodification of folk crafts in the late 19th century. The research is based on previously unprocessed archival material at the State Archive of Bosnia and Herzegovina and City Archive of Sarajevo and is methodologically informed by the theory of inter-imperiality and global (cultural) history.

The research stems from a doctoral thesis at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague (in process) that is focused on the history of the Náprstek Ethnographic Museum in Prague (founded in 1873), where Studnička worked from 1862 to 1866 as a curator presenting industrial, ethnographic and craft collections. On the basis of provenance research focused on objects that came to this museum from the Provincial Museum in Sarajevo (Zemaljski muzej Bosne i Hercegovine), a closer examination of cultural, political and economic relations between the Czech lands and Bosnia and Herzegovina began. The presentation looks at these relations through the theory of the world-system, with the semi-peripheral position of the Czech lands – and Czechs sharing a linguistic affinity with the Bosnians – clearly showing their ambivalent role in the Austro-Hungarian colonialism at the end of the 19th century. Brothers one time, colonizers the other time.

Proposal for the Central European History Convention 2025

The scientification of meritocracy. Social engineering and the production of ideal employees in the Baťa shoe company, 1918–1941

Subjects: Cultural history, social history; administrative/bureaucratic History, business history

Baťa stands for affordable shoes- and radical social engineering. Based in Zlín, the company was one of Czechoslovakia's leading businesses in the inter-war period and a driving force behind the country's modernisation. Recent scholarship highlights Baťa's global trade and urban planning, but also the company's extensive efforts in the education and formation of its employee. This paper examines how the shoe company used scientific methods and bureaucracy to shape ideal employees.

I analyse how Baťa categorised individual employees and how these categorisations shaped the internal labour market. After conducting extensive research in the company's records at the Zlín State Archive, I enquire into the selection process for middle management and identify career paths within the shoe company. As Baťa promoted rational meritocracy, they selected successful men on the basis of their quantitative productivity and used psychological tests to substantiate such assessments. Baťa also evaluated loyalty and adherence to moral expectations. Examining knowledge production and the cultural practice of differentiation, I argue that Baťa's concept of merit was ambiguous, gendered, and varied according to the hierarchical position of those being evaluated. Rather than identifying productive or qualified employees, this scientific and bureaucratic meritocracy produced a prototype of the loyal and conformist employee, in the company's idiom the 'new industrial man'.

In this paper, I contribute to a broader understanding of social engineering both in the Baťa shoe company and in interwar Czechoslovakia. In particular, I shed new light on Baťa's appropriation of the social sciences and its use of international scientific experts. In conclusion, I argue that Baťa developed a model of human resource management in the 1930s that went far beyond American archetypes.