Call for Papers

# Beyond Centres
# New Perspectives on (Post)Colonial Business History

Organisers
Anka Steffen (University of Vienna) | Gijs Dreijer (Erasmus University Rotterdam)

Place
Vienna (Austria), 15-17 April 2027

The business history of colonialism, imperialism and decolonisation has largely been written from the perspective of the centres of the “classical” colonial powers, rather than from territories that are not usually associated with colonial rule. As a result, the (post)colonial dimensions of businesses based in, for example, Central European regions stretching eastwards from the Oder-Neisse and Moldau rivers to the Balkans, or in parts of Central Asia, have received comparatively little attention. Many of these regions were themselves under foreign rule or subject to strong forms of occupation and external influence.

In practice, a growing body of literature on the business history of colonialism in the early modern period has focused on major chartered companies such as the Dutch and English/British East India Companies. For the modern period, the British Empire has often served as the proverbial gold standard against which other cases have been measured. In recent years, however, historians have increasingly moved beyond these established cases by highlighting the transnational dynamics of European colonialism and imperialism between the fifteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as its aftermath in the postcolonial period. Nevertheless, this (post)colonial business history still tends to overlook the many cases in which actors – entrepreneurs and their businesses – from the so-called “margins”, “hinterlands”, or “peripheries” contributed to, facilitated, or profited from colonial and/or imperial expansion.

This workshop seeks to broaden this debate and to rethink what may constitute (post)colonial/imperial business history beyond the established framework of the “classical” colonial empires, particularly Britain, France, (West) Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium and their activities in Africa, the Americas, and Asia. It explicitly asks whether, and in what ways, entrepreneurs and businesses located outside the conventional centres of colonial power can be integrated into the study of (post)colonial business history. We therefore welcome paper proposals that explore (post)colonial/imperial business histories from “noncentres”, broadly understood. This may include actors from “smaller” states who participated in the well-studied processes of European (post)colonialism/imperialism in the Global South. It may also include actors in or from regions and countries that are not commonly understood as (post)colonial/imperial in mainstream academic debates, such as Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, or Central Asia. Papers may be empirical, based on specific case studies, or theoretical, for example addressing the question of what should be understood as “(post)colonial”. We particularly welcome contributions that challenge established geographical, conceptual, or historiographical boundaries. Topics may include, but are not limited to:

- Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, or Central Asia and their business and entrepreneurial relationships with (post)colonialism and imperialism, and/or the region’s relationship with its own history from below, including the legacy of serfdom, as well as its imperial heritage;
- Business actors from smaller states/understudied regions in Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, or Central Asia operating within, and in relation to, (post)colonial/imperial structures of other powers;
- The applicability of the concepts of (post)colonialism beyond the Global South, including the concept of “(post)colonial business history”, and its potential development;
- Decolonisation and its impact on actors and institutions located in the “noncentres” of global economic systems;
- Historiographical and theoretical interventions into the conceptualisation of (post)colonialism and imperialism, including questions of how these concepts can be applied beyond their conventional geographical and historiographical frameworks.

**Practical information**

To facilitate discussion and ensure that all participants have the opportunity to engage with each other’s work, the workshop will be kept small, with approximately 10–12 participants. Participants will be asked to submit a draft paper approximately one month before the workshop, by 15 March 2027. We may also invite senior scholars to serve as discussants for individual sessions.

The workshop organisers envisage that selected papers will be developed for submission as a special issue to a leading journal specialising in global and/or imperial history. Further information will be provided during the workshop.

The workshop will take place at the University of Vienna, Austria. Accommodation and refreshments during the workshop will generally be covered by the organisers. In some cases, we may also be able to contribute towards participants’ travel expenses. Priority for travel funding will be given to participants from underrepresented backgrounds and from the Global South. Applicants who wish to be considered for travel funding should indicate this in their submission and provide an approximate estimate of the amount required.

Please submit an abstract of 300–350 words together with a brief biographical statement by 10 December 2026 to the organisers, Anka Steffen (anka.steffen@univie.ac.at) and Gijs Dreijer (dreijer@eshcc.eur.nl). Applicants will be notified of the outcome by 10 January 2027.

**Key dates**

- Submission of abstracts: 10 December 2026
- Notification of acceptance: 10 January 2027
- Full paper due: 15 March 2027
- Workshop: 15–17 April 2027