

An Environmental History of Knowledge and Politics: Forestry in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Hungary. By Róbert Balogh.

Budapest: Central European University Press, 2026. 185 pp.

Meta Remec 

Institute of Contemporary History, 11 Privoz, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia; meta.remec@inz.si

Róbert Balogh's *An Environmental History of Knowledge and Politics: Forestry in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Hungary* offers a compelling and methodologically sophisticated contribution to environmental history by fundamentally rethinking the role of forests in modern European history. The monograph is further distinguished by its comprehensive engagement with existing scholarship, providing a thorough and well-integrated overview of the relevant historiography in environmental history, forestry studies, and the history of science. Rather than treating forests as passive reservoirs of timber or as objects of technical management, the author approaches them as historically constructed spaces in which knowledge, power, economy, and ideology intersect. Focusing on Hungary between the mid-nineteenth century and the late socialist period, the book advances a clear and ambitious argument: forests are not merely natural environments, but dynamic sites through which broader processes associated with the Anthropocene—capitalism, state formation, nationalism, and scientific rationalisation—can be understood.

At the core of the study lies a productive tension that shapes both its empirical analysis and theoretical framework. On the one hand, human intervention in forests appears as a long-term historical constant. Landscapes have been shaped by human activity for centuries, if not for millennia. On the other hand, modern forms of intervention—especially those associated with industrialisation, scientific forestry, and state administration—introduce a qualitatively different scale and intensity of transformation. This dual perspective allows the author to move beyond linear narratives of environmental decline and instead emphasise the historical specificity of modern ecological crises.

A particularly strong dimension of the book is its exploration of the paradoxical status of forests in contemporary thought. Forests are simultaneously framed as victims of environmental degradation and as potential solutions to it, most notably through their role as carbon sinks. This duality reflects a deeper epistemological

tension: forests are increasingly conceptualised in mechanistic terms—as systems to be measured, optimised, and managed—yet it is precisely this instrumental logic that has contributed to ecological imbalance. By foregrounding this contradiction, Balogh situates the history of forestry within broader debates on the Anthropocene and the limits of technocratic approaches to environmental governance.

The transformation of forests into economic objects constitutes another central thread of the analysis. The nineteenth century emerges as a decisive period in which forests were progressively integrated into capitalist systems of production and exchange. This process was supported by legal reforms, administrative innovations, and the growing authority of professional foresters. The dissolution of common land use played a crucial role. While contemporaries often dismissed communal resource management as inefficient or backward, the book engages with environmental historical scholarship to demonstrate that such systems could sustain complex and resilient ecological relationships. Their replacement by state-regulated and market-oriented regimes thus represents not simply progress, but a profound reconfiguration of social and environmental relations.

In this context, the professionalisation of forestry appears as a key historical turning point. Foresters are not presented as neutral technicians, but as active agents in the production of knowledge and governance. Their work required reconciling two often competing logics: a quantitative, engineering-based approach aimed at maximising timber yields and the biological realities of forest ecosystems. The concept of ‘sustainable yield,’ frequently associated with early forestry, is thus revealed to be deeply embedded in economic rationality rather than ecological preservation in a modern sense. This insight significantly enriches current understandings of sustainability by tracing their historical roots to practices oriented toward long-term profitability.

At the same time, the book convincingly demonstrates that forestry cannot be reduced to economic or technical concerns. It was also deeply entangled with ideological and political transformations, particularly the rise of nationalism and the consolidation of the modern state. Forestry knowledge, shaped by transnational scientific networks—especially by German scientific forestry—was rearticulated within national frameworks. Forests became symbols of national wealth, territorial integrity, and cultural identity. The idea of the forest as ‘ours’ introduced a powerful emotional and political dimension, legitimising increasing levels of state intervention and reinforcing a distinction between those seen as legitimate national custodians of the forest and those whose presence and practices were cast as alien to it.

The interplay between scientific knowledge and nationalist politics is explored with particular nuance. Foresters emerge as intermediaries who have translated global models of environmental management into locally specific and politically

charged practices. Their institutional positions within state administration and professional organisations made them key actors in nation-building processes. This becomes especially evident in projects aimed at transforming marginal landscapes, where environmental intervention was framed as a civilising mission. Such initiatives often brought foresters into conflict with local populations, whose practices were recast as irrational or destructive. In these encounters, scientific authority and national ideology reinforced one another, legitimising the restructuring of both landscapes and social relations.

The analysis is further deepened through the examination of large-scale political disruptions, particularly wars and their aftermath. These are not treated as external shocks, but as integral components of environmental history. Wartime shortages of timber and shifting territorial boundaries forced a reconsideration of property relations and resource management strategies. At the same time, forests acquired new symbolic meanings, especially in the context of national loss and recovery. In the aftermath of the Treaty of Trianon (1920), forests came to embody both trauma and resilience: they marked territorial loss while also becoming essential for the economic viability of the reduced Hungarian state.

State-led environmental interventions during the interwar period and beyond illustrate how scientific ideas—even when based on simplified or flawed assumptions—can produce lasting material consequences. Afforestation programmes designed to regulate water levels or improve agricultural productivity reshaped entire landscapes, demonstrating the performative power of environmental knowledge. This theme continues in the discussion of socialist forestry after 1945. Here, the author makes a particularly valuable contribution by emphasising continuity alongside change. Although the socialist regime claimed to break with earlier systems, many of its practices—centralised planning, large-scale environmental engineering, and instrumental views of nature—built upon pre-existing foundations. Particularly noteworthy is the book's treatment of the socialist period, which foregrounds the historical significance of the fragmentation of what had previously been a relatively coherent space of forestry knowledge, legislation, and practice within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This perspective allows the author to illuminate how different political regimes reconfigured inherited structures, revealing both enduring continuities and new divergences in environmental governance. Balogh especially underlines that afforestation under socialism emerged as both an economic and an ideological project. It was closely linked to agricultural production, infrastructural development, and broader efforts to transform rural society. At the same time, it functioned as a tool of political education and mobilisation, reflecting the regime's ambition to reshape not only the landscape but also the attitudes of its citizens. The violent dimensions of post-war transformations, including nationalisation and

collectivisation, are not overlooked but integrated into the analysis as part of the broader reorganisation of human–environment relations under state socialism. The long-term ecological consequences of these interventions are brought into sharp focus in the concluding sections. The expansion of forest cover and the widespread introduction of non-native species, such as pine, reveal the extent to which modern forestry has produced what may be described as a “second nature”. Landscapes often perceived as natural are shown to be the outcome of deliberate political, scientific, and economic decisions. By tracing these developments across different political regimes, the author underscores the cumulative nature of environmental change in the Anthropocene.

One of the most significant achievements of the monograph is its ability to integrate multiple analytical scales and perspectives. It moves effectively from local case studies to global processes, from material practices to symbolic meanings, and from institutional frameworks to individual actors. In doing so, it avoids both environmental determinism and overly abstract theorisation, offering instead a nuanced and empirically grounded account of human–environment interactions.

Rather than presenting a closed interpretation, the book productively opens up new avenues for further research. Its emphasis on the interconnections between forestry, state power, and ideological frameworks provides a strong foundation for comparative studies across different European regions and beyond. By highlighting both the specificity of the Hungarian case and its embeddedness in broader global dynamics, the author invites scholars to reconsider established narratives and to explore similar processes in other contexts.

In sum, this monograph represents a significant contribution to the study of environmental history and the Anthropocene. Its central insight—that forests are not merely natural entities but historically contingent spaces shaped by competing visions, interests, and forms of knowledge—offers a powerful lens through which to understand both past transformations and present environmental challenges. By moving beyond technicist approaches and foregrounding the political and cultural dimensions of forestry, the book not only advances historical scholarship but also provides valuable perspectives for contemporary debates about environmental crisis and sustainability.

