

Wind Erosion and Dust Storms in the American Great Plains, 1830-1940 Reassessing the 1930s Dust Bowl

45. Minisymposium des Zentrums für Umweltgeschichte

Presentation:

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Abstract:

The 1930s “Dust Bowl” holds symbolic significance within American popular culture and provides the archetypal narrative of modern environmental history. The decade-long drought and dramatic dust storms challenged American farming and led to crop failure, bankruptcy, and out-migration. The popular version of the story presents farmers as heroic figures confronting nature and eventually prevailing, aided by enlightened government agencies who reformed agriculture into a sustainable system. The academic version makes capitalism the villain, as profit-hungry farmers ignored the land’s natural limits and created an environmental crisis. This paper expands the story’s chronological and geographic scope. It addresses not only the 1930s, but the history of Dust Storms since 1830. It also addresses Historical Geographic Information Systems (HGIS) as a methodology for environmental history, including the challenge of using an analysis tool designed for numerical data to assess historical information based in texts.

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