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Beyond Borders

Baťa in Global Perspective

A workshop on the global paths of industrial modernity and cultural transfer

19th November 2026
10:30 – 17:30

Maison des Sciences Humaines, Université Libre de Bruxelles
Reception Room (R3.105), Building DE1, 3rd floor
Avenue Antoine Depage 1, 1050 Ixelles - Bruxelles

In the twentieth century, the Baťa Shoe Company became one of the most distinctive examples of an industrial enterprise whose influence reached far beyond business alone and well beyond the original Czechoslovak setting in which the company was founded. Through its expansion, Baťa developed a global network of production, trade, and cultural relations, within which ideas about work, modernity, social organisation, and the everyday life of the modern individual were shaped and reshaped across different contexts.

The workshop approaches Baťa as a global phenomenon whose expansion cannot be reduced to an economic or industrial strategy. It considers Baťa's growth as a broader cultural process, in which industrial production, communication practices, urban planning, and media representation played an active role in articulating particular visions of modern life. The discussion will explore how the Baťa model spread to different parts of the world, how it was received and adapted in specific local settings, and what forms of cooperation, tension, or negotiation accompanied this process.

The event aims to provide a space for interdisciplinary exchange among scholars from different fields, offering an opportunity to share ongoing research, source materials, case studies, and methodological questions related to the study of Baťa's global presence.

Organised by Barbora Svobodová (Modernitas, ULB) and funded by the European Union under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Postdoctoral Fellowship programme (Grant Agreement No. 101211819, Project MSCA PF – Lit-In-Soc).

Programme

10:30 – 10:40 Opening

Panel I - Baťa, Urbanism and the Making of Industrial Society

Chair: Markéta Křížová

10:40 – 11:00 Vendula Hnídková (The Czech Academy of Sciences): **Jan Antonín Baťa: Industrialist or Utopian Urbanist?**

11:00 – 11:20 Martin Jemelka (The Czech Academy of Sciences): **From Workers' Housing to the Factory Town: The Making of Baťa's Zlín**

11:20 – 11:40 Mária Halagardová (Masaryk University Brno): **Svit as an Experimental City: The Search for an Ideal Industrial Town**

11:40 – 12:20 Discussion

12:20 – 13:30 Lunch Break

Panel II - Baťa, Mobility, Identity and Everyday Life

Chair: Petra James

13:30 – 13:50 Lukáš Perutka (Palacký University in Olomouc): **Baťovci in South America**

13:50 – 14:10 Gregor Feindt (Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz): **A Global Town: Mobile Workers, Multilingualism and Everyday Life in Baťa's Zlín**

14:10 – 14:30 Barbora Svobodová (Université Libre de Bruxelles): **Raising Children for a Modern World: Baťa's Children's Magazines and the Global Industrial Ideal**

14:30 – 15:10 Discussion

15:10 – 15:30 Coffee Break

Panel III - Baťa, Expansion, Adaptation and Historical Perspectives

Chair: Barbora Svobodová

15:30 – 15:50 Milan Balaban (Tomas Bata University Zlín): **The Footprints of Modernity: The Bata Company in the Mediterranean during the Twentieth Century**

15:50 – 16:10 Antonia Schweim and Marie Huber (Leipzig University): **Baťa in the Global South and postcolonial context: Two Research Projects and an Agenda for Comparative Baťa Studies**

16:10 – 16:30 Ondřej Ševeček (The Czech Academy of Sciences): **A Century of Bata Studies: Rethinking Established Narratives and Exploring New Directions**

16:30 – 17:30 Discussion and closing remarks

19:00 Dinner

The link to join online via MS Teams:
MS Teams
Meeting ID: 388 242 547 204 783 0
Passcode: w6SA9wS2

Abstracts

Panel I - Baťa, Urbanism and the Making of Industrial Society

Jan Antonín Baťa: Industrialist or Utopian Urbanist?

Vendula Hnídková (The Czech Academy of Sciences)

Published in 1939, the book Industrial City (Průmyslové město) exemplifies Jan Antonín Baťa's visions of how to organize both an industrial city and society. Moving beyond the boundaries of industrial management, Baťa approached urban planning as a means of shaping social relations, everyday life, and the future of industrial civilization. His proposals invite us to reconsider the relationship between industrial capitalism and urban utopianism, asking whether Baťa should be understood primarily as an industrialist concerned with the efficient organization of production or as an urban visionary who regarded the city as an instrument of comprehensive social transformation.

The lecture situates Baťa's ideas within the broader genealogy of industrialist urban visions, from Robert Owen's experiments in social reform and the model communities of the nineteenth century to later attempts to reconcile industrial production, collective welfare, and rational urban organization. It examines how Baťa's vision related to these earlier projects while responding to the specific economic, technological, and social conditions of the twentieth century. Rather than treating the industrial city simply as a functional environment for manufacturing, the lecture explores how its spatial organization could embody a particular vision of society, linking the rationalization of work and everyday life to the promise of social progress.

By comparing Baťa's vision with those of other industrial entrepreneurs and their settlements, the lecture asks whether he should be understood as one of several industrialists who recognized the city as an instrument of economic and social organization, or as a particularly significant figure who sought to turn industrial urbanism into a comprehensive programme for modern society.

From Workers' Housing to the Factory Town: The Making of Baťa's Zlín

Martin Jemelka (The Czech Academy of Sciences)

How did housing for footwear workers become part of Baťa's project for a factory town? This paper traces the origins of the company's housing provision from the conversion of a former shoe factory into a hostel in 1911 to the expansion of residential construction in the early 1920s. It situates Zlín alongside three other footwear centres in the Czech lands: Třebíč, Hroubovice and Chrudim. The comparison examines how manufacturers housed their workers through direct investment, cooperation with private builders and the provision of communal accommodation. In Zlín, wartime demand and experiments with building materials and dwelling types shaped a housing stock that served workers' families, single employees and salaried staff. The paper asks which features of Baťa's early housing drew on practices common in the region, what evidence survives of direct borrowing, and how these experiments informed the larger undertaking that transformed Zlín and later became a reference point for Baťa's factory towns abroad.

Svit as an Experimental City: The Search for an Ideal Industrial Town

Mária Halagardová (Masaryk University Brno)

The publication The Ideal Industrial City of the Future – completed in 1937 in Zlín, though never published – presents a theoretical synthesis of experience in urban planning. Zlín served as the starting point for many of the Baťa company's urban and architectural concepts, but it was not the only setting where these principles were tested and developed. Baťa's architectural office extended its ideas to industrial satellite towns in Czechoslovakia and abroad. In present-day Slovakia, Svit can be identified as one such "laboratory."

The development of Svit began in 1934 on land belonging to the municipality of Veľká. Although construction commenced before the publication was completed, Svit allows the evolution and application of Baťa's planning principles to be traced. The year 1937 can be viewed as a symbolic milestone in the development of the company's urban concepts, allowing examination of the relationship between earlier experiments and the implementation of established principles. Svit is an intriguing case, as its urban design built upon experience gained during the planning of Zlín. Compared with Baťovany (present-day Partizánske), where construction began in 1938, Svit offers an opportunity to observe different manifestations of shared urban design principles.

This paper aims to situate Svit within the development of the Baťa company's urban planning and examine its role in the formation and application of the "Baťa planning" principles. It focuses on several urban plans for Svit, their evolution, and a comparison with the town's current form. As a "laboratory" for the industrial town, Svit offers insight into how visions of an ideal industrial town were translated into planning practice and how Baťa's urban planning principles evolved over time.

Panel II - Baťa, Mobility, Identity and Everyday Life

Baťovci in South America

Lukáš Perutka (Palacký University in Olomouc)

South America was a region of interest for the Baťa company as early as the interwar period. It was the livestock industry that attracted the company's interest, specifically regarding the supply of leather for shoe manufacturing. Consequently, the firm sent sales representatives to countries such as Argentina and Brazil; notable figures among them included Josef Otáhal and Jan Antonín Baťa. Personal connections played a key role in enabling Jan Antonín to establish himself—first in Chile and subsequently in Brazil—following his unsuccessful venture in the USA in 1939.

This paper focuses primarily on the settlements of Peñaflor and Batatuba, analyzing their situations during and after the World War II. Scholarly literature typically focuses on the positive image of Baťa towns in Europe and around the world, highlighting their social dimension. However, a certain dichotomy emerges when evaluating the figures involved: Tomáš Baťa and his son on the one hand, and his brother (uncle) Jan Antonín Baťa on the other. The latter is a source of considerable controversy, with opinions ranging from condemnation to fierce defense. Nevertheless, these issues are secondary to the present study, as its primary focus is on the employees themselves—those who arrived in Brazil and Chile and became part of the expatriate communities there. This paper draws on archival materials from Czech, American, and Canadian institutions. Its central theme is interaction: specifically, how did the integration and acculturation of the Baťa people unfold in South America? What was their relationship to Jan Antonín Baťa's projects, and in what way did they embody the ideal of the Baťa-style ideal town?

A Global Town: Mobile Workers, Multilingualism and Everyday Life in Baťa's Zlín

Gregor Feindt (Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz)

In the late 1930s, Zlín was at the heart of economic globalisation and a place where people from all over the world came together. Young men from all over Europe, as well as from Egypt and India, came to Zlín to train at the Baťa School of Work. At the same time, many of Baťa's Czechoslovak employees were interested in the world, learning foreign languages and hoping for a global transfer within the company. Contemporaries pictured this global quality of Zlín as 'cosmopolitan', while scholars such as Zachary Doleshal and Tara Zahra have preferred to describe the town and company as 'nationally indifferent'. Despite the interest in Zlín as a place where globalisation occurred, surprisingly little is known about the town's global and multilingual everyday life.
In my presentation, I will discuss potential research topics and strategies that will shed new light on Zlín's global culture. I will discuss how workers' mobility paved the way for a global company town, how mobility and experiences of the global impacted workers' lives, and which everyday practices deepened Zlín's global outlook. In particular, I will reflect on existing sources and the lack of documentation for such research. Based on this, I aim to outline potential research projects and discuss the associated challenges and benefits.

Raising Children for a Modern World: Baťa's Children's Magazines and the Global Industrial Ideal

Barbora Svobodová (Université Libre de Bruxelles)

The Bata shoe company was not only a major industrial enterprise but also a distinctive social and cultural project, one that aimed to shape a modern individual suited to the demands of industrial society. Yet the company's educational and promotional activities were not aimed solely at its young workforce, the "Young Bata Men" and "Young Bata Women," or at its adult employees. Through a range of educational and cultural initiatives, the company and its affiliated institutions also reached out to children.
This paper focuses on two children's magazines, Mladý Zlín (Young Zlín) and Malé noviny (The Little Newspaper), published within the Bata company and in interwar Zlín. It examines how these magazines conveyed the company's ideas about the ideal person, work, and the modern world. Rather than treating the children's press merely as a tool of corporate propaganda, the paper approaches it as a distinct space in which notions of a desirable way of life were shaped through entertainment, education, and imagination. Particular attention is paid to the global dimension of this educational project. As the Bata company expanded internationally, the ideal of the industrial person also came to be associated with openness to the world, technological progress, curiosity about foreign countries, and the ability to navigate international settings. Themes of travel, adventure, and discovery are therefore analysed as part of the broader image of modernity that the magazines presented to their young readers.
The paper thus seeks to show how the children's press translated the ideological and educational ambitions of an industrial enterprise into a form accessible to young audiences, and how it helped shape the image of a person capable of thriving in a modern, industrial, and increasingly interconnected world.

Panel III - Baťa, Expansion, Adaptation and Historical Perspectives

The Footprints of Modernity: The Bata Company in the Mediterranean during the Twentieth Century

Milan Balaban (Tomas Bata University Zlín)

This paper examines the expansion and transformation of the Bata Company in the Mediterranean during the twentieth century, focusing on the transfer and adaptation of its industrial, commercial, and organizational practices across different political, economic, and cultural environments. From the late 1920s, Bata developed an extensive network of commercial subsidiaries, retail outlets, and manufacturing facilities across the Mediterranean, connecting European markets with North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean.

Drawing on archival research and an ongoing book project, the paper explores the ways in which Bata's international model encountered different local conditions. Particular attention is devoted to Yugoslavia, Egypt, Palestine, Syria and Lebanon, and Algeria, where the company's activities were shaped by protectionism, local competition, colonial administrations, and emerging forms of economic nationalism. These cases demonstrate that the internationalization of Bata was not simply a process of transferring an established industrial and organizational model from Zlín, but involved continuous negotiations and adaptations to local circumstances.

The paper also considers how the Second World War, decolonization, and the nationalization of foreign enterprises transformed Bata's position in the Mediterranean. While some of its enterprises were incorporated into national industrial structures, others continued operating through new forms of cooperation and adjustment to changing political conditions.

By examining the history of Bata in the Mediterranean, the paper seeks to contribute to broader discussions about the global circulation of industrial practices, the relationship between multinational enterprises and local societies, and the uneven processes of economic modernization during the twentieth century. As a work in progress, it also raises methodological questions concerning the possibilities of reconstructing transnational business networks through fragmented archival collections and different national historiographies.

Baťa in the Global South and Postcolonial Context: Two Research Projects and an Agenda for Comparative Baťa Studies

Antonia Schweim and Marie Huber (Leipzig University)

This presentation introduces two research projects at Leipzig University that place Baťa's African and Asian operations at the centre of their inquiry. It also uses them to propose directions for future collaboration in Baťa studies. The ERC Starting Grant project MAGIC (2026–2031) studies Baťa's factories in colonial and postcolonial Africa as sites where manufacturing shaped, and was shaped by, states, local communities and competing visions of economic development. By comparing several subsidiaries of the same firm, the project holds corporate strategy constant while tracing how local labour markets, politics and environments produced divergent outcomes. The Franco-German DFG-ANR project TRIBECA (2026–2029) places Baťa within a broader history of business responsibility. It asks how multinational enterprises presented workforce training and management development as contributions to development between the 1920s and the 1970s, and how these public commitments related to internal resistance to giving up managerial control.

Both projects have only recently begun, so the presentation focuses on research design, sources and

open questions rather than findings. It outlines the archival corpus assembled so far, the challenges of working with dispersed corporate, state and community sources, and the potential of digital and AI-assisted methods for processing them. It closes by proposing three areas for closer cooperation: mapping archival holdings across the company's global network - comparing subsidiaries beyond Europe - studying how workers and managers in the Global South received and contested the Baťa model.

A Century of Bata Studies: Rethinking Established Narratives and Exploring New Directions

Ondřej Ševeček (The Czech Academy of Sciences)

Research on the Bata company has a history spanning nearly a century, shaped by different national, political, and disciplinary contexts. In the Czech and Slovak environment in particular, Bata has become both an important element of regional identity and a national success story, influencing not only its public memory but also the ways in which its history has been researched and interpreted.
This paper offers a critical reflection on the historiography of Bata and its future directions. What has a century of research contributed to our understanding of the company? To what extent does the existing literature reproduce established narratives and questions, and which aspects remain insufficiently explored?
Despite a substantial body of scholarship, significant chronological, geographical, and thematic imbalances persist. Research has concentrated heavily on the interwar period, while other periods, locations, and dimensions of the company's activities have received less attention. Although social and cultural approaches have considerably enriched the field, a modern, comprehensive economic history of the Bata concern remains to be written, despite the existence of numerous valuable specialised studies.
The paper argues for moving beyond narratives of Bata's uniqueness towards broader historical contextualisation and comparative perspectives. Drawing on ongoing research into the life cycles of Bata products, it explores how questions of production, distribution, consumption, and material culture can open up new avenues of inquiry and connect business and economic history with wider social and cultural processes. More broadly, the contribution seeks to stimulate discussion about the methodological challenges, research priorities, and future directions of Bata studies.