The German forest has been well researched. German historians have studied the history of the German woods from various points of view, particularly since discussions about an impending destruction of forests and in the face of the oil crises of the 1970s. Most research focuses on the pre-industrial era, a period when wood in Germany was as important as oil is today. As everyone needed wood for various purposes, the distribution of the wood supply caused serious conflicts between all parties involved. The editors correctly emphasize in their preface that wood is found at the conjunction of ecological, political, economic and social interests (p. vii). The anthology under review concentrates on one aspect of these multifaceted conflicts that, according to the editors, has been hardly analyzed until now: the fight over energy resources within municipal bodies, and the fight over the "daily bread" of wood in the daily life of cities (p. vii). The volume focuses on the period 1750 and 1850, although each essay sets its own main emphasis. Seven cities are analyzed, all located in the densely forested Bavarian-Austrian area: Passau, Regensburg, Hallein/Salzburg, Klagenfurt, Nuremberg, Hof, Würzburg and Munich. The editors have to explain this selection, as these cities differ substantially regarding their political and legal constitution. Therefore, imperial free cities are analyzed as well as, for example, royal or ecclesiastical capitals (p. 7).

Each essay is based on an intensive study of archival documents, most of them analyzed for the first time. Each author sketches the background history of the respective city, the political and legal context, the structure and development of its demand for wood (especially in regard to demographic and economic developments), the ownership of the forests in relationship to the city's geographical location (which determined the circumstances of any necessary timber transport). The authors describe in considerable detail the respective administrative responsibilities and organizational structures for forestry, timber transport and timber trade as well as municipal management in the event of wood supply shortages. Each author takes up the classic, but still controversial question of whether there was a real shortage in wood supply at the end of the eighteenth century due to a genuine exhaustion of forests, or if these shortages were merely artificially and intentionally created by authorities for various reasons. However, not every author offers a clear answer to the question.

The case of the city of Würzburg seems representative: wood shortages in the pre-industrial era were due less to the exhaustion of forests than a result of organizational and political restrictions. They occurred as a result of power struggles between sovereigns and came out of a rejection of claims to political autonomy by municipalities.
Each essay illustrates convincingly how authorities took advantage of numerous possibilities for regulating the lumber industry. They installed a bureaucratic system to control prices as well as supervising the organizational structures of the lumber trade, lumber transport and trade relations. This state of affairs resulted in wood supply shortages, which were a further result of import restrictions, wood-cutting restrictions, tariffs or arbitrary bureaucratic orders, and, significantly, technical difficulties in lumber transport on naturally unsuitable rivers. These problems were exacerbated when wood had to be transported over long distances and even more so when imported wood was owned by foreign sovereigns. The imperial free city of Regensburg is an illustrative example of how the “wood weapon” was used in the same way as the “oil weapon” was in the 1970’s. The example of the city of Hof demonstrates that, in the first half of the nineteenth century, state regulations on forestry and the timber trade increased wood shortages rather than decreasing them (p. 138).

The essays show that it was not only increased bureaucracy that could cause wood shortages; a liberalization of lumber trade had the same effect. The cities of Klagenfurt (in the late eighteenth century, pp. 91-97) and Munich (in the first half of the nineteenth century, p. 149) demonstrate how liberalization of the timber trade caused shortages by increasing prices. On the other hand, the case of Würzburg shows that rising prices did not necessarily cause supply shortages (p. 169). Since most of the woods were owned by the state, people thought wood supply was a state responsibility (p. 144). Some cities (Klagenfurt [pp. 91-97]; Nuremberg [p. 122]; Hof [p. 136]; Würzburg [p. 167]) tried to manage shortages by creating lumber yards, which would guarantee that poor people in particular were supplied with sufficient and affordable wood, but these yards failed.

As was typical for the period under investigation here, efforts were made to organize forestry more efficiently and sustainably, as well as to switch to new energy resources in the cities under examination (pp. 15, 151). The example of Nuremberg reveals that reports on the condition of forests, as were typical for this period of time, were indeed influenced by the respective interests; in this case, reports were used by the rising citizens to offer proof of the mismanagement of the old authorities, who of course rejected this accusation (pp. 112-113) – the game of expertise and counter-expertise dominant nowadays has a long history.

Wood shortages finally came to an end due to three factors beyond regulation and deregulation tendencies. First, changes in economic structures sometimes caused a declining demand for timber, as happened in Salzburg, when salt mining declined. Second, the invention of the railway made timber transport easier and weakened the power of monopoly-structured price bargaining (for Hof, see p. 138; for Würzburg, p. 169). And finally, the railway allowed a shift to new energy resources such as peat and coal. Attempts to achieve a more efficient energy supply and explore new energy sources thus seem to be a constant in history.

Each of the essays is very well researched and written. However, it is a pity that the authors – the experts in this field – did not make comparisons to data from the other essays in this anthology or attempt to compare their own results with those of the other authors. Moreover, I would have liked to have learned something about whether and how the management of wood supply shortages differed from those of other shortages, for example in food.

For novices, the anthology is a challenging read; however, the literature given in the numerous footnotes will be helpful to those who want to familiarize themselves with this field. Particularly for specialists, this anthology provides valuable information.
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