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## **Fighting ‚Slavic Expansionism’ in Western Europe: A Transnational European Movement against the Bata Company during the Interwar Years**

In the mid 1920s Bata became the largest exporter of footwear in the world. Tomáš Bat’a introduced mass-production techniques into a European industry that was dominated by batch production processes, and pioneered ‚team work’ practices that he had studied in the United States. The company’s aim was to produce a shoe that was cheaper than any competing product. The so called ‚Bata system’ of production and distribution attracted the keen interest of managers, engineers, economic theorists and politicians during the interwar years.

The main proportion of Bata shoes was exported to Western European countries. Wherever they were sold, they met with an enormous demand of consumers. Yet, before long, the circulation of Bata shoes in Europe encountered resistance by various political actors and became a phenomenon deemed a threat to all sorts of ‚traditional’ Western social values and business traditions. First of all the shoe manufacturers – German, Dutch, French, Italian, Swiss, Belgian, Austrian, Baltic and Skandinavian – called for tariff barriers and import quota in their respective countries in order to protect their domestic shoe industries from the fierce Eastern European competitor. Most of the national governments complied. When Bata resorted to establishing factories in those European countries as a response, the labour movements became involved in the conflict. The firm’s refusal to recognize trade unions and to uphold national agreements on labour qualification, wage rates and working hours led to widespread strike action. The habit of employing minors as cheap workers also stirred social conflict. Bata was described as a ‚dictator’, a destroyer of democracy, and the Bata factories as a gateway of ‚factory absolutism’ and ‚slavic expansionism’ in Western Europe. In a next phase even the consumers were recruited into boycotting Bata products.

The resistance against Bata shoes and against the expansion of the ‚Bata system’ all over Europe soon became a transnational movement that culminated in vast public debates and new national laws. International co-operations and unprecedented coalitions by manufacturers and trade unions emerged in the campaigns. As a result, Bata was ultimately forced to find new markets for their shoes overseas. The paper seeks to make the Bata company’s activities visible as a „transnational regime“ and to begin an assessment of its social, economic and cultural impact in the Western European countries, namely Germany, France, Britain, Switzerland and the Netherlands, where it established its first satellite towns.