

The Toxic Cloud of Seveso: Environmental Anxieties in 1970s Italy (Abstract)

Matthew Sohm, Ph.D. student, Department of History, Harvard University

“The Toxic Cloud of Seveso: Environmental Anxieties in 1970s Italy” examines the aftermath of a dioxin leak at a cosmetics plant in the town of Seveso, outside Milan, in 1976. It argues that this profoundly destabilizing yet little-studied event prompted anxieties in Italy and across Europe that quickly led to dramatic results. Seveso caused Italians to question the breakneck pace of the country’s post-war industrialization and quickly recast older ideas of progress and modernity in environmentalist terms. Within a matter of months, Seveso opened the door to the legalization of abortion in Italy, since it was in ideas about the fetus that the many countervailing forces of the disaster’s impact intersected. Anxieties coalesced in the material embodiment of the future in part because Seveso led to a wider crisis of confidence both in the future of a contaminated planet and in the ability of scientists to predict and prevent further devastation. The paper is organized around the themes of uncertainty, the politics of scientific knowledge, and contamination, but is also an argument in favor of the power of events in environmental history. Especially in an age when humans are confronted with a seemingly new nature, the event becomes an increasingly important catalyst, capable of sharpening underlying fears and anxieties, and quickly leading to new, and often unpredictable, social and political outcomes.