Around 1800, Silesia had experienced an extended period of expansion of its rural textile industries, which had begun after the Thirty Years War. At that time it was one of the leading exporting regions in the world, specialized, however, almost exclusively on the export of linen.

This paper is to discuss the development of the Silesian textile industries in the 19th century when a long period of economic growth came to an end. The region which for more than a century had played a leading role in the world failed to keep up with the changing market conditions and thus experienced deindustrialization. The crisis of the linen industry played the most important part in this regional decline, even if a small cotton industry had developed in the late 18th century in a mountainous region of Silesia called the Eulengebirge. Other textile branches such as for instance the processing of wool were not part of the proto-industries as they were not geared towards export and had not expanded to the same degree as the linen branch which was omnipresent in the rural areas.

The sharp drop in Silesian exports coincides with the Napoleonic Continental System. The Silesian merchant guilds had specialized exclusively on the production of coarse linens, the main purchasers of which were the overseas plantations. As these markets where inaccessible during the sea blockage, other regions developed new starting points for industrial production gearing towards the demand on European markets. At the end of the wars, Silesian linen had lost all its comparative advantages and, in consequence, it could not win back its previous markets. On the other hand, due to the low quality of the linen, Silesia could not regain a profit from the increased demand on the European market. For instance, Silesia passed up the opportunity to introduce a niche product, such as fine linens could have been, to promote its industrialization in textiles.

The striking lack of innovative potential is linked to opportunities for development missed in the past. In the Silesian linen region, only a very rudimentary putting-out system developed. Ever since the 18th century the powerful merchant guides of the Silesian towns had been able to prevent the development of rural competition. Linen bills imposed severe restrictions on rural trade which prevented the establishment of intermediate traders. It was, however, exactly this class of traders that provided the first pioneer entrepreneurs in the early industrialization of many regions, while in Silesia next to no private machine spinning mill was established for decades.
Despite some industrial development in the *Eulengebirge* – the small cotton-dominated area – the Silesian textile industry experienced a period of deindustrialization lasting several decades. In the 1820s, the number of looms rose for a short period and the desperate weavers worked even harder than before. Ultimately, however, the region could not keep up with the industrialized linen industries, the leading region of which was Northern Ireland at the time. As a consequence, large numbers of the impoverished weavers emigrated; the region lost its industrialized character and changed into an agrarian society.