

# Navigating the Middle: Integration of Inland Navigation in Central Europe and the Second World War<sup>1</sup>

Jiří Janáč

## Table of Content

1.	Introduction	161
2.	Towards Riparian Internationalism: Institutions and Nation States	165
3.	Towards International Coordination of Shipping: Cartels and Regulations	173
4.	Towards an Integrated Waterway System: Projects and Experts	178
5.	Preliminary Conclusions	184
6.	References	186
7.	Appendix	191

## 1. Introduction

The traditional narrative on the history of integration in Central Europe tends to focus on the successive periods of empire-building rather than the formation of transnational and international cooperation. It is often implicitly assumed that the rise of nineteenth-century imperialism followed by Nazi and Soviet empire building left only a brief window between the two world wars during which unrestricted cooperation among Central European nation states could develop before their entry in the EU in the twenty-first century.<sup>2</sup> But from the perspective of infrastructural integration, the situation seems rather more complex. Empire building efforts require efficient infrastructural networks and push for their extension even beyond

---

1 Acknowledgments: This work was supported by the European Regional Development Fund project “Creativity and Adaptability as Conditions of the Success of Europe in an Interrelated World” (reg. no. CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16\_019/0000734).

2 See e.g. Loth, Wilfried / Păun, Nicolae (eds.): *Disintegration and Integration in East-Central Europe: 1919 – Post-1989*, Baden-Baden 2014.

the imperial core. Furthermore, military economy associated with imperial wars provided an additional stimulus for a maximally efficient management of available capacities. Indeed, empire building clearly often leads to a facilitation of implementation of administrative rules that enable high-performing operational regimes of existing networks even on an international level.<sup>3</sup> When arguing along these lines, Schot and Schipper even suggest that a certain continuity in cross-border integration of transport, which was maintained during the Second World War and during the period of Nazi empire building efforts, provided the foundation for a relatively fast launch of Western and pan-European transport integration after 1945.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, scholars of the Soviet Bloc have recently shifted their focus from repression and conquest towards studying the role of socialist internationalism and integration, thus challenging the narrative of a centrally controlled empire and opening space for a debate about the role of experts and institutions.<sup>5</sup>

This contribution focuses directly on continuities and discontinuities in ideas, actors, and procedures of cross-border operation of inland waterways in Central Europe during the Second World War. This chapter follows generally the actor perspective of contemporary experts and focuses on issues related to cross-border operation of shipping vessels. First, it discusses operational harmonisation achieved via establishment of an international regulatory regime (production and content of rules for cross-border transport). The second subchapter deals with changes in actual use of cross-border waterways by shipping companies, and the final part of this contribution focuses on efforts aimed at material connectivity (the construction and maintenance of waterways). In terms of territories covered, the present analysis is restricted to the three central European rivers which the Versailles Treaty declared to be international, namely the Elbe, Oder and the Danube. In part, this delimitation draws also on visions ex-

- 
- 3 Högselius, Peer / Kaijser, Arne / Vleuten, Erik van der: *Europe's Infrastructure Transition: Economy, War, Nature*, New York 2018.
  - 4 Schipper, Frank / Schot, Johan: "Infrastructural Europeanism, or the project of building Europe on infrastructures: An introduction", in: *History and Technology* 27/3 (2011), p. 245 – 264.
  - 5 Müller, Uwe: "Introduction: Failed and forgotten? New Perspectives on the history of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance", in: *Comparativ: Zeitschrift für Globalgeschichte und vergleichende Gesellschaftsforschung* 5 – 6 (2017), p. 7 – 25.

pressed by contemporary actors. Since mid-nineteenth century, variously defined notions of Central Europe (*Mitteleuropa*) provided a conceptual framework for the process of cross-border integration within this region, which consists of roughly the abovementioned three river basins. Chronologically, the paper's aim is to trace the transition from the liberal interwar period, characterised by tensions between national state geopolitics and border building on one side and the development of international and transnational initiatives aiming at cooperation on the other, to the Nazi "empire-building", itself torn between search for a new cooperative international order on the continent and German domination, and finally on to the ensuing formation of the Soviet Bloc.<sup>6</sup>

The majority of the limited number of existing academic studies which discuss inland navigation in Central Europe from the perspective of integration were written by economic historians. They tend to understand Nazi military system-building efforts as a major rupture in the integration process, which is why scholars interested in waterway integration usually focus on the interwar/post-war period and approach the issue from the perspective of either national history<sup>7</sup> or geopolitics.<sup>8</sup> Somewhat in parallel, experts on internationalism and international organisations follow the history of major international organisations, which either disappeared at the beginning of the Second World War or were bypassed by other, more direct forms of negotiations.<sup>9</sup> Rather tellingly, one recently published account of history of the European Danube Commission discusses developments during the war hardly at all and the short chapter dealing with the twentieth century outlines the "institutional metamorphosis during the in-

- 
- 6 Kirk, Tim: "Nazi plans for a new European order and European responses," in: Dafinger, Johannes / Pohl, Dieter (eds.): *A New Nationalist Europe Under Hitler: Concepts of Europe and Transnational Networks in the National Socialist Sphere of Influence, 1933 – 1945*, Abingdon 2019, p. 71 – 92.
  - 7 Jakubec, Ivan: *Železnice a lobská plavba ve střední Evropě 1918 – 1938: Dopravněpoliti-tické vztahy Československa, Německa a Rakouska v meziválečném období*, Prague 1997.
  - 8 Tulus, Arthur: "Geopolitics and Trade at the Danube Mouths during the Interwar Period: A Study Case on the German-British Rivalry", in: *Transylvanian Review* 22 (2013), p. 277 – 286; Teichova, Alice / Ratcliffe, Penelope: "British Interests in Danube Navigation after 1918", in: *Business History* 27/ 3 (1985), p. 283 – 300.
  - 9 E.g. Jeřábek, Miroslav: *Za silnou střední Evropu: Sřředoevropské hnutí mezi Budapeřtí, Vídňí a Brnem v letech 1925 – 1939*, Prague 2008.

terwar period and in post-war times”.<sup>10</sup> Inversely, a large part of older literature on the Danube focuses almost exclusively on Cold War disputes.<sup>11</sup> Last but not least, there exists a vast body of historical accounts focusing on the technical development of inland navigation on individual rivers and/or histories (biographies) of major companies. These accounts are usually written by experts in the field rather than by trained historians. This literature, however, while marginalised in academic debates, at least implicitly points to continuities across the Second World War.<sup>12</sup>

At this point, it should be noted that this contribution is only a fraction of the originally planned full-length paper. Due to Covid pandemic-related difficulties, several archives (and especially sources related to Danube commissions) have not been fully consulted and explored. As a result, this paper offers only a brief outline of the situation based mainly on author’s previous research in Archives of the Czechoslovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs, trade journals dealing with inland navigation in Central Europe, and secondary literature. To make up for this shortage of primary sources, I have decided to look in more detail on the Czechoslovak experts and engineers who were involved in efforts to make and keep Central Europe navigable. In the following, I also occasionally quote their opinions and describe their careers to illustrate the expert perspective.

Parts of the paper draw on my dissertation thesis, which attempted to analyse the long-term process of waterway integration in Europe through the lens of the Danube-Oder-Elbe canal, the never constructed but throughout the twentieth century negotiated connection between the Black, the North and the Baltic Sea.<sup>13</sup> The central argument of the thesis focused on the continuity of technocratic efforts across political shifts – such as the Second World War. But this paper significantly transcends the argumentation offered in the dissertation, especially on two levels. First, it corrects one of the major flaws in the original argumentation, namely the

---

10 Ardeleanu, Constantin: *The European Commission of the Danube, 1856 – 1948: An Experiment in International Administration*, Leiden 2020, p. 28.

11 Gorove, Stephen: *Law and Politics of the Danube: An Interdisciplinary Study*, The Hague 1964.

12 Švarc: Sedmdesát pět let Československé plavby; Hubert: Dějiny plavby v Čechách II; Völkl: Vom Biedermeier ins dritte Jahrtausend; Grössing / Binder / Fink / Sauer: Rot-Weiss-Rot auf blauen Wellen.

13 Janáč, Jiří: *European Coasts of Bohemia: Negotiating the Danube-Oder-Elbe Canal in a Troubled Twentieth Century*, Amsterdam 2012.

chosen chronology. The aim of the thesis was to show how technocratic ideas and projects survive and absorb political turbulences, how they deal with being reinterpreted by their carriers, that is, experts, again and again to fit ideological goals of changing political representations and ideologies. For that reason, I opted for a strictly political chronology. While that approach proved fruitful (plans indeed survived, albeit altered), I have realised that this framing had partly obscured the continuity of planning, of experts, ideas, institutions, and forms of cooperation.<sup>14</sup> Secondly, this paper refocuses the original storyline: this time, the emphasis is on challenging the centrality of the Second World War also by extending the notion of integration, looking beyond the actors involved directly in the negotiations of canal construction, and on the formation of a regulatory regime for inland navigation in the region.

## 2. *Towards Riparian Internationalism: Institutions and Nation States*

The exact date of outbreak of the Second World War on Central European waterways seems difficult to determine. Still, it seems that the critical turning point, a radical assault on the interwar international regime introduced after 1918, came with the infamous note of 14 November 1936, which announced a German decision to disregard the provisions of the Versailles Treaty concerning international regime on waterways on its territory. On the other hand, the situation deteriorated gradually ever since the Nazi rose to power. Already in 1934, German representatives led by Arthur Seeliger withdrew from participation in the League of Nations' Committee on Communications and Transit in a move that was a harbinger of the eventual demise of the ambitious program of internationalisation of all European navigable rivers and development of universal regulatory regime guaranteed by the League of Nations.<sup>15</sup> That step was then compounded by the note of 14 November 1936, in which Germany reject-

---

14 Discussed for the Czechoslovak case by recent social and economic history literature. See e.g. Rákosník / Spurný / Štaif: *Milníky moderních českých dějin: Krize konsenzu a legitimacy v letech 1848 – 1989*.

15 Letter from Vojtěch Krbec to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 14 February 1934 (AMZV, II, 617).

ed the concept of Articles of the Treaty of Versailles related to internationalisation of rivers.<sup>16</sup>

The Treaty of Versailles and subsequent Barcelona Convention and Statute on the Regime of Navigable Waterways of International Concern, which were concluded under the auspices of the League of Nations in April 1921, anticipated the formation of international administration (a river commission) for selected “river systems” “of international concern”. These river systems were those of Oder, which was formerly entirely German but now would serve also Czechoslovakia and potentially Poland by via its tributaries, the Elbe, which would serve Czechoslovakia and Germany, and the Danube, which used to flow through three empires but after 1918 flowed through seven countries: Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (S.H.S), Bulgaria, and Romania. This arrangement would cover the mainstream as well as some of the transboundary tributaries. Instead of traditional particularism characterised by domination of riparian countries and reciprocal arrangements, the new approach aspired at a formation of a universal “general regime” for future internationalisation of all (European) rivers.<sup>17</sup> This intention was clearly present in the repeatedly submitted (but failed) proposals for extension of the new regime to all navigable (i.e. not only transboundary) European rivers.<sup>18</sup>

All in all, the new regime introduced on the Elbe, Oder and Danube rested on two major premises: First of all, the laissez-faire articulation of the principle of freedom of navigation as a freedom of commerce (“communication and transit”, including free trading between ports of each riparian country), which limited the sovereignty of riparian countries over their use of the rivers (restrictions on tolls and taxes, prohibition of preferential treatment of domestic shipping companies, etc.) and virtually eliminated differences between vessels operating under the flags of riparian and

---

16 *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918 – 1945: Nov. 1936–Nov. 1937*, Washington 1983, p. 49.

17 Upreti, Kishor: *The Transit Regime for Landlocked States: International Law and Development Perspectives*, Washington, D.C. 2006, p. 40.

18 Report by Czech representative at the CCT Vojtech Krbec from 27 December 1933. Archives of the Czechoslovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs (AMZV), archival group II, box 617.

non-riparian countries.<sup>19</sup> Secondly, the introduction of a multilateral regulatory and administrative regime based on international river commissions formed on the basis of the principle of technocratic internationalism (in theory a depoliticised expert governance), which was designed to promote universalist principles and trade cooperation over national politics and protectionism.<sup>20</sup> The river commissions, consisting in theory of representatives of all countries (i.e. also non-riparian) interested in taking part in navigation on the river in question, were supposed to act as permanent and independent administrative bodies governing the use and development of navigation on a particular river and develop river-specific navigation acts that would reflect the specific situation within each river system.

Germany, as well as other riparian countries, had right from the start openly manifested their dissatisfaction with such envisioned “universal” international regime and successfully blocked its full implementation. As a consequence, the newly formed International Commission of the Danube (CID), which administered the upper, fluvial, part of the river, was not granted the same powers as the European Commission of the Danube (CED), an older body which had been governing the mouth (the maritime Danube) ever since 1856.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the final articulation of the Elbe Acts ratified in 1922 fell short of the original visions when Germany successfully blocked the formation of a permanent secretariat of the Elbe Commission (International Elbe Commission, CIE), which consequently instead of administering the river functioned merely as a supervisory body.<sup>22</sup> On the Oder, German and Polish delegates in the International Commission of the River Oder (CIO) even managed to prevent the ratification of new acts of navigation altogether, referring to the fact that at the time, the entire navigable stretch of the river between Gliwice (Gleiwitz) and Szczecin (Stettin) was located in German territory (internationalisation operated with an envisioned extension of the navigable stretch up-

- 
- 19 Vitányi: The Regime of Navigation on International Waterways. See also *Convention and Statute on the Regime of Navigable Waterways of International Concern*, League of Nations document C.479. M.327. 1921. VIII.
  - 20 Lagendijk, Vincent / Schot, Johan: “Technocratic Internationalism in the Interwar Years: Building Europe on Motorways and Electricity Networks”, in: *Journal of Modern European History* 6/2 (2008), p. 196 – 217.
  - 21 Ardeleanu: The European Commission of the Danube, p. 313.
  - 22 Jakubec: *Železnice a lábská plavba*, p. 100.

stream to Czechoslovak borders; see Figure no.1).<sup>23</sup> Indeed, disputes between the riparian countries, who bickered about conceding parts of state sovereignty over rivers, and the non-riparian parties significantly hampered the development of the international regime. Otto Popper, a leading Czechoslovak expert and the first secretary of the International Commission of the Danube (CID), in retrospect noted that the result was a dissatisfactory compromise trapped in-between grand visions and the dull practice of power politics.<sup>24</sup>

German rejection of the international regime established at Versailles was not driven by a refusal to accept the principles of internationalisation and infrastructural integration as such. German critique focused on the fact that the regime was discriminatory, citing among other things especially disproportional representation in commissions and non-reciprocal character of the multilateral regime. In fact, though, the limited power of riparian states in international river commissions in Central Europe – especially when compared to the situation on the Rhine, which was mostly administered by the Central Commission for Navigation on the Rhine, the CCNR (by 1929, 70% of delegates) – contributed to a revival of initiatives aimed at a formation of Central European, as opposed to pan-European network. Riparian countries' participation in the two Danubian commissions was 25% (European Commission of the Danube, CED) and 73% (International Commission of the Danube, CID), while in the Elbe and Oder commissions, they controlled 60% and 45% of seats, respectively.<sup>25</sup> Especially German experts voiced concerns over Central Europe being exploited by Western powers. As Fritz Krieg put it already in 1929: “How long must the law of parity and equality of all subjects of international law be infringed? How much longer must *Mittleuropa* alone keep its currents, the heart of its territories, open to foreign ships?”<sup>26</sup>

---

23 Jednání o německém přístupu k oderské plavební aktě v Drážďanech v únoru 1934. National Archives of the Czech Republic (NAČR), archival group Czechoslovak Office for Inland Navigation (ČPÚ), box.

24 Popper, Otto: “The International Regime of the Danube”, in: *The Geographical Journal* 5 – 6/102 (1943), p. 240 – 253, here p. 244/45.

25 Krieg, Fritz: “Das Weltbinnenschiffahrtsrecht und die Ströme Mitteleuropas”, in: Hantos, Elemer (ed.): *Mitteuropäische Wasserstrassenpolitik: Referate und Beschlüsse der Mitteleuropäischen Wasserstrassenkonferenz, Budapest, 11.– 13. Mai 1929*, Vienna 1929, p. 81 – 101, here p. 89.

26 Ibid., p. 94.

German representatives argued that international administration should be limited to technical issues of hydraulic structures, customs, navigation police, and social security of the personnel.<sup>27</sup> Actually, a German proposal for a revision of navigation acts for Elbe and Oder, which was finalised before the Note of November 14 in autumn 1936 and later revoked, replaced virtually all competences of the Elbe Commission with bilateral treaties and the principle of reciprocity. At the same time, though, it respected the principles of the freedom of navigation and even confirmed the validity of the Czechoslovak lease of the port area in Hamburg enshrined in the Treaty of Versailles. Furthermore, the proposal was accompanied by a draft of a new German navigation act that would allow free shipping on all German waterways also for foreign vessels under same conditions on the basis of reciprocity.<sup>28</sup>

After the Anschluss of Austria and the Munich Agreement, Germany became the dominant power on the Danube, Elbe, and Oder, and took steps towards developing a new mechanism of governance that would respect the Nazi vision of international character of rivers. In 1938, German delegate at CED Georg Martius proposed a far-reaching transformation of the existing regime. It was driven by the two crucial objections against the existing one and suggested that riparian countries would take control over the river and the commission would be replaced by an ad hoc summoned technical council consisting of representatives of riparian states.<sup>29</sup> Despite the initially rather reluctant response, this proposal was soon transformed into less radical Sinaia Agreements, which transferred most competencies of the European Commission of the Danube (CED) to Romania in a solution that roughly corresponded to the situation on the Elbe after 1937 and downgraded the commission to a status of consultative body.<sup>30</sup>

Administration of the now “German” fluvial Danube changed accordingly and brought a complete resetting. At a conference on the Danube, which was held in Vienna in September 1940, representatives of the riparian countries and fascist Italy disbanded the International Danube Commission (CID) and replaced it with a newly established “council of fluvial

27 Jakubec: *Železnice a labská plavba ve střední Evropě 1918 – 1938*, p. 103.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 100.

29 Kastory, Agnieszka: “Problem obecności Niemiec w Komisjach Dunajskich w okresie międzywojennym”, in: *Studia z Dziejów Rosji i Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej* 42 (2007), p. 75 – 89, here p. 80 – 83.

30 Gorove: *Law and Politics of the Danube*, p. 32.

Danube”. This council was supposed to administer the stretch of Danube between Bratislava and Braila as well as the mouth of the Danube (thus forming a single commission for the entire international Danube), which was international, but not the upper part of Danube from Bratislava, which was now German. A month later, the new body convened in Bucharest and discussed the formation of a new international regime along the lines of the previous German proposal – by then, the CED still formally existed.<sup>31</sup> After a dispute concerning the role of the USSR and persisting separation of administration of the maritime and fluvial Danube (since the European Danube Commission, the CED, still formally governed the mouth of the Danube), a new regime was drafted. It was based on a single commission for all of Danube and included the riparian states and Italy.<sup>32</sup> In 1941, the war broke out between Nazi Germany and the USSR and while it was still winning, Germany tried again to assume control of maritime Danube at another conference in November 1942. However, Romania, a Nazi ally, managed to prevent full implementation of the agreement by its more or less tacit obstruction.<sup>33</sup>

Soon after the turn of events on the war fronts in 1942, Gustav Königs, vice-secretary of state for inland navigation at the Reich Ministry of Transport, articulated a programme of post-war organisation of waterways in Europe, which reflected and summarised previous debates among German experts. He emphasised the crucial role of inland shipping in bringing about an economic integration of “Europe of nations states” under German leadership and repeatedly called for creation of a strictly international waterway system in Europe. Such system, described in opposition to interwar internationalism and river commissions, would grant freedom of shipping on national waterways to all nations “living in peace with Germany” and

---

31 Ghisa, Alexandru: “Romania and the first cracks in the implementation of the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1940: Germany’s guarantees granted to Romania at the Vienna Award and the Danube issue”, in: *Valahian Journal of Historical Studies* 16 (2011), p. 95 – 106.

32 Focas, Spiridon G.: *The Lower Danube River: In the Southeastern European Political and Economic Complex from Antiquity to the Conference of Belgrade of 1948*, Boulder, CO 1987.

33 Ardeleanu: *The European Commission of the Danube*, p. 318.

extend from the Atlantic to the Black and Caspian seas via newly built canals connecting the Rhine and Danube basins.<sup>34</sup>

Post-war geopolitical realities were not favourable to a return to any type of descendant of the liberal interwar international regime of administration of inland shipping in Europe that had been promoted by the Americans. In his speech at the Potsdam Conference, Truman even argued that “free and unrestricted navigation” on international (cross-border) rivers was an necessary prerequisite of peace and security on the continent.<sup>35</sup> Erection of the Iron Curtain, which stretched across the Danube and Elbe river basins and cut off the uppermost stretch of the Danube and the estuary of the Elbe from the rest of their systems, made such visions impracticable. Instead of the interwar universalist internationalism, the Soviet Union used its dominant position in the now solidified Socialist Bloc to enforce a return to riparian particularism.

Developments on the Danube offer an illustrative example. Not surprisingly, the USSR, a riparian country on the Danube since 1940, strongly opposed any reinstitution of the pre-war regime.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, Soviet policy since 1940 focused on the formation of a single commission that would govern the entire navigable stretch of the Danube and include only representatives of the riparian countries.<sup>37</sup> Under a motto “Danube for Danubians”, delegates of socialist riparian countries at a re-constitutive meeting of the Danube Commission accepted the Soviet proposal to limit participation in the unified Danube Commission to riparian states (thus following in the footsteps of the Nazi authorities). Moreover, competencies of this commission were to be limited to such an extent that it in effect functioned as merely a coordinator, while all real power remained in the hands of the riparian states.<sup>38</sup> Kaser in his seminal analysis on the working of the COMECON and socialist integration repeatedly mentions the European

---

34 Königs, Gustav: “Die Wasserstrassen im Europa-Verkehr”, in: *Süddeutsche Wasserstrassen* 1 – 2/19 (1943), p. 2 – 4.

35 Truman, Harry: “Radio Report to the American People on the Potsdam Conference”, in: Woolley, John / Peters, Gerhard (eds.): *The American Presidency Project*, available at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/radio-report-the-american-people-the-potsdam-conference>.

36 Paterson, Thomas G.: “Eastern Europe and the Early Cold War: The Danube Controversy”, in: *The Historian* 33/ 2 (1971), p. 237 – 247.

37 Ghisa: Romania and the first cracks in the implementation.

38 Kaser, Michael: *Comecon: Integration Problems of the Planned Economies*, London 1967, p. 95.

Danube Commission (1856–1918) as the closest analogy to the setup of the Cold War Danube Commission, which likewise consisted of national nominees.<sup>39</sup>

Contrary to the general consensus among scholars, this outcome was not the result of a purely Soviet dictate accepted, tacitly and sheepishly, by delegates from the satellite countries.<sup>40</sup> There were cautious voices of dissent. Czechoslovak experts, such as Ladislav Vavrouch, recognised the need for cooperation and insisted that some form of supranational administration covering the cost of maintenance of some stretches of the river is necessary.<sup>41</sup> Ultimately, though, the final agreement placed the responsibility for improvement of navigation in the Iron Gates and the Danube delta under bilateral administrations. Moreover, the agreement took place just a month after Cominform's resolution on the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, which heralded the Tito–Stalin split. Agreement to collaborate on waterway integration is thus a rather unique example of cooperation between Yugoslavia (former S.H.S. and a riparian country on the Danube) and the USSR at the time.<sup>42</sup>

On the Danube, Oder, and the Elbe, the principle of freedom of navigation remained in place but in a restricted form. Neither Czechoslovakia nor East Germany expressed interest in reviving the Elbe Commission and its navigation acts. Oder became due to the post-war westward shift of the Polish frontier a fully “socialist” river and again, neither of the people's republics showed interest in multilateral administration.<sup>43</sup> Navigation on the Elbe and Oder was regulated by bilateral agreements between riparian countries: Czechoslovakia and the GDR in 1954 concluded an agreement on mutual use of inland waterways, Czechoslovakia signed a transport treaty with Poland in 1947 and updated it in 1956, agreement between

---

39 Ibid., p. 41, 167.

40 See e.g. Ardeleanu: *The European Commission of the Danube*, p. 320.

41 Ladislav Vavrouch in his report on the first session of the new Danube Commission, AMZV, MO-OMO 55-65 O, b. 126.

42 Gulić, Milan: “Belgrade Danube Conference 1948”, in: *Tokovi istorije* 1 (2013), p. 173 – 202.

43 Techman, Ryszard: “Czechosłowacka żegluga na Odrze w latach 1947 – 1957. Part I”, in: *Przegląd Zachodniopomorski* 33/1 (2018), p. 145 – 167; Techman, Ryszard: “Czechosłowacka żegluga na Odrze w latach 1947 – 1957. Part II”, in: *Przegląd Zachodniopomorski* 34/1 (2019), p. 5 – 27.

GDR and Poland 1952)<sup>44</sup> and other minor agreements on customs on transit traffic (GDR – CZE 1959).<sup>45</sup> Moreover, on the Elbe, Czechoslovakia and West Germany operated their shipping until 1988 without it being based on any bilateral agreement at all and despite this – and although tariff policies favoured the socialist and now Polish Szczecin – Hamburg remained a primary trading centre for Czechoslovakia.<sup>46</sup>

### 3. *Towards International Coordination of Shipping: Cartels and Regulations*

Nazi transport policies were initially based on an introduction of state control through “transport coordination” and suppression of intermodal competition on the national level, thus reflecting a common reaction to the Great Depression in the transport sector in Europe.<sup>47</sup> These policies, introduced in the first half of 1930s in the form of compulsory cartelisation and harmonisation of tariffs (fixed rates) within individual river systems, naturally affected the operation of international waterways.<sup>48</sup>

It should be noted, though, that ideas aiming at harmonisation and more efficient management of competing transport systems and tariffs in politically fragmented interwar Central Europe were not a Nazi invention. Already before the Great Depression, experts on transport economics such as Elemer Hantos were convinced that closer cooperation of shipping companies and unification of the so far mutually competitive tariffs (on various goods and distances) is a primary and necessary instrument of achiev-

---

44 Hoblík, Karel: “Mezinárodní vnitrozemní vodní cesty”, in: Teklý, Vratislav (ed.): *Plavební příručka*, Prague 1962, p. 178 – 181.

45 Benda, Václav: “Výtah celních předpisů týkajících se mezinárodní lodní plavby”, in: Teklý, Vratislav (ed.): *Plavební příručka*, Prague 1962, p. 181 – 183.

46 Jakubec, Ivan: *Československo-německé dopravněpolitické vztahy v období studené války se zvláštním zřetelem na železnici a laskou plavbu (1945/1949 – 1989)*, Prague 2007.

47 Millward, Robert: *Private and public enterprise in Europe: energy, telecommunications and transport, 1830 – 1990*, Cambridge 2008.

48 US Office of Strategic Services, Research and Analysis Branch. Organization of European Waterways of international concern, R & A No. 2476, Washington: s.n., 1945.

ing a greater prosperity of Danube shipping and the region en large.<sup>49</sup> Faced with a complicated geopolitical situation and economic problems associated with competition from railways, major shipping companies operating on the river in the 1920s started to form cartels and pools. In fact, the situation of traffic on all three rivers, but especially the Danube<sup>50</sup> and the Elbe,<sup>51</sup> deteriorated after 1918 and lagged far behind the pre-war numbers. In 1926, cartels of shipping companies were established on both the Elbe and the Danube. On the Elbe, it was the new Elbe Shipping Association (*Elbe- Schifffahrts-Vereinigung*),<sup>52</sup> which guaranteed to each company a given share on a particular transport route, while on the Danube, the newly established Association of Danube Shipping Companies (*Betriebsgemeinschaft der Donauschiffahrten*) aimed at joint utilisation of vessels, docks etc.<sup>53</sup>

Initially, the introduction of new transport policies of the Third Reich played out differently on different international rivers. On the Elbe, the original cooperation of large shipping companies consisted in accepting orders only through the cartel association in return for guaranteed shares in river operations. By 1932, the national cartel association became mandatory for German carriers and the state introduced a system of fixed rates. This move was disputed at German courts as being incompatible with the Elbe Acts, but the court ruled that an association of national carriers does not amount to discrimination of foreign companies.<sup>54</sup> In February 1934, introduction of a corporative system of government in by now Nazi Germany led to incorporation of the association (*Vereinigung*) into the corpo-

---

49 Hantos, Elemér: “Einleitung: Mitteleuropäische Wasserstrassenpolitik”, in: Hantos, Elemér (ed.): *Mitteleuropäische Wasserstrassenpolitik: Referate und Beschlüsse der Mitteleuropäischen Wasserstrassenkonferenz*, Budapest, 11. bis 13. Mai 1929, Vienna, Leipzig 1929.

50 LON/CRID/AdmL/342/133/153 (1-3) Report by Walker D. Hines, 1925.08.01.

51 Kopper, Christopher: “Germany’s National Socialist Transport Policy and the Claim of Modernity: Reality or Fake?”, in: *The Journal of Transport History* 34/2 (2013), p. 162 – 176.

52 Hinsch, Werner: “The River Elbe — International: A Historical Perspective”, in: *Geo-Journal* 1/2 (1977), p. 45 – 48, here p. 47.

53 Švarc, Bohumil: “Vývoj podniku ČSPLO Děčín”, in: Košťál, Miloslav (ed.): *Historie plavby a obchodu po Labi*, Prague 1971.

54 US Office of Strategic Services, Research and Analysis Branch. Organization of European Waterways of international concern, R & A No. 2476, Washington: s.n., 1945.

rative organisation of the transport sector. Already prior to this decision, Czechoslovak *Československá plavební akciová společnost Labská* (ČPSL), the only major non-German operator on the Elbe, withdrew from the association citing as its reason that the guaranteed share of 30% of traffic to Czechoslovakia (calculated based on data from 1929–1931) fell far below the real potential of the company.<sup>55</sup>

On the Oder, the Czechoslovak Oder Shipping Company (*Československá plavební akciová společnost oderská*, ČSPO), owned by the state and the mining industries of the Ostrava coalfield, was since its establishment in 1924 highly dependent on cooperation with German shipping companies co-owned by the same mining industries, the *Ostreederei GmbH*, and *Oppelner Verlade und Lagerhaus Oppeln*, and its transport capacities served mainly German customers. While it did not directly participate in the reorganisation of transport introduced on the German Oder after 1932, it profited from it through its close contacts with the German operators.<sup>56</sup>

Unlike Oder and Elbe, Danube traffic experienced hardly any direct effects in consequence of introduction of the new transport policies in the Third Reich until the Anschluss of Austria in 1938. The pool formed initially by Austrian (*Donaudampfschiffahrtsgesellschaft*, DDSG) and Hungarian (MFTR) companies was early on joined by their German (*Bayerischer Lloyd*) and Dutch competitors (COMOS), and by 1934 also by virtually all major (seminational) fleet operators on the river, that is, the Czechoslovak Danube Shipping Company (*Československá plavba dunajská*, ČSPD), S.H.S.'s JRP, Romanian N.F.R., and the Bulgarian DU-NAV (which was itself owned by Austrian and Hungarian companies). Simultaneously, there formed three major associations for oil transport, cereals, and other goods, which operated under freight-allocation agreements.<sup>57</sup> Soon, however, a struggle for dominance within the organisation

---

55 Švarc, op.cit.

56 Jakubec, Ivan: "Odra jako 'československá' řeka", in: Jančík, Drahomír (ed.): *Pocta profesoru Zdeňku Jindrovi. K sedmdesátým narozeninám*, Prague 2003, p. 179 – 190, here p. 183–185.

57 Hexner, Ervín: "Československé kartely – přednesl JUDr. Ervín Hexner ve schůzi společnosti pořádané dne 27. února 1933", Prague 1933, p. 28.

between the leading (largest) fleet operators hampered cooperation and with the Anschluss, this cartel ended altogether.<sup>58</sup>

In practice, the immediate impact on transport of the German withdrawal from international regime in 1936 was quite moderate. This was in part due to the fact that Germany continued to adhere to the principle of freedom of transit, which was now agreed upon on a bilateral rather than multilateral or international basis.<sup>59</sup> While Czechoslovak experts feared that dissolution of the international regime would have a negative impact on river transport, the situation of Czechoslovak shipping companies on the Oder, Elbe, and the Danube remained virtually unchanged, although at least in the case of Oder and the Elbe, the companies concerned clearly depended on close cooperation with the German fleet.<sup>60</sup>

After the Anschluss of Austria, the Munich Agreement, and Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia, the situation had significantly changed. The ČPSL and ČSPO both came gradually more and more under control of German capital and became fully integrated in the transport sector of the Third Reich (as *Böhmisch-mährische Elbeschiffahrtsgesellschaft*). Czechoslovak Danube fleet passed to the Nazi puppet state of Slovakia.<sup>61</sup> On the Danube, all national shipping companies concerned – with the exception of the British Anglo-Danubian Lloyd and the French SFND, which, however, practically ceased operating on the Danube in 1939 – formed a compulsory *Betriebsgemeinschaft*. It was a cartel designed to make shipping on the Danube more efficient and centrally planned and controlled. It was headed by the DDSG, a formerly Austrian company, which was nationalised in 1938 now owned directly by the Third Reich as a part of the Hermann-Göring-Konzern. Under direct control of the Nazi Transport Ministry, the DDSG assigned all shipping companies their tasks and they had to

---

58 Enderle-Burcel, Gertrude: “Konkurrenz auf der Donau – Anfang und Ende der Betriebs-gemeinschaft der Ersten Donaudampfschiffahrtsgesellschaft mit der königlich ungarischen Fluß- und Seeschiffahrts A.G. in der Zwischenkriegszeit”, in: Matis, Herbert / Resch, Andreas / Stiefel, Dieter (eds.): *Unternehmertum im Spannungsfeld von Politik und Gesellschaft. Unternehmerische Aktivitäten in historischer Perspektive*, Vienna 2010, p. 171 – 184.

59 Jakubec, Ivan: “Via Danubiana. Význam Dunaje pro Československo v letech 1918–1938”, in: Šouša, Jiří / Jančík, Drahomír (ed.): *Kolize, řevnivost a pragmatismus. Československo-rakouské hospodářské vztahy 1918 – 1938*, Prague 1999, p. 219 – 246, here p. 226.

60 Jakubec: *Odra jako ‘československá’ řeka*, p. 186/187.

61 Hubert: *Dějiny plavby v Čechách. Part II*, p. 216.

make all their capacities available for the cartel.<sup>62</sup> The operation and use of virtually all transport capacities were coordinated: in addition to this cartel, a tanker pool and general cargo pool secured optimal utilisation of available vessels. In effect, they thus under different geopolitical circumstances maintained practices developed in the 1930s.<sup>63</sup> The fact that many shipping companies operating on the Danube reached record transport volumes in the early stage of the war, peaking in 1943, documents the relative success of such centralised organisation of trade on the river.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, transport statistics for the Elbe show a peak in 1941–1944 (for the period 1920–1960).<sup>65</sup> In practice, such arrangement served the needs of Nazi military efforts, which turned especially the Danube into a supply route for armies fighting on the Eastern Front.

After the war, Czechoslovak experts pleaded for a normalisation of transport relations and repeatedly argued for a broader cooperation in shipping, speaking especially against the dominant position of the USSR on the Danube, which was a direct outcome of the advance of Soviet troops.<sup>66</sup> Until 1954, the USSR had directly controlled the Romanian, Hungarian, and Austrian fleet and on top of that formed its own Danube shipping company, the DSGP. In 1950, Czechoslovakia initiated talks about a reinstitution of a consortium, *Betriebsgemeinschaft*, on the Danube. It emphasised the efficiency and profitability of such an arrangement in comparison with a “competition”, thus giving the proposal a proper “socialist” ideological underpinning. While some form of a cartel has been in place since the First World War, it was never as complex as the arrangement introduced by the Nazi Germany in the early 1940s, when the *Deutsche Schifffahrtsgruppe* was de facto in full control. Czechoslovak experts argued that “while induced by political and war events, it is impossible to deny the practicality of such an arrangement”.<sup>67</sup> It took another five years before the Bratislava Agreements, signed by state-controlled nation-

62 Sobol, Miroslav: “Hospodársky význam bratislavského prístavu do 1. pol. 20. storočia”, in: *Verbum Historiae* 2 (2015), p. 28 – 64, here p. 40 – 43.

63 Gorove: *Law and Politics of the Danube*, p. 21

64 This was true for especially for the DDSG.

65 Švarc: Sedmdesát pět let Československé plavby.

66 Svatopluk Hlava in the debate on “normalisation” of transport relations, AMZV MO-45-55 T – boxes 2 and 8.

67 Spolupráce plavebních podniků SSSR a lidových demokracií na Dunaji, 1950. AMZV, MO-OMO 45-55, b. 2.

al shipping companies of the Danube basin, provided for fixed tariffs and allocation of transport volume between the participating states, thus following on the path which the *Deutsche Schiffahrtsgruppe* had opened.<sup>68</sup> The positive effect of the renewed arrangement became soon apparent: between 1955 and 1956, transport performance of the ČSPD grew by 66%.<sup>69</sup>

On the Elbe and Oder, the development followed a different path: it relied on strictly bilateral arrangements, where state-owned companies co-operated mainly on the basis of intergovernmental treaties or direct agreements between shipping operators. On the Oder, Československá plavba labsko-oderská (ČSPLO, a national shipping company established in 1952 by a merger of previous national operators on the Elbe and Oder) renewed its activities under the Czechoslovak–Polish Transport Treaty of 1947. Its operation, however, remained highly unprofitable, mostly because the navigable stretch of the river did not reach the Czechoslovak territory. After a direct agreement between the ČSPLO and the Polish carrier Żegluga na Odrze (ŻnO), concluded in 1956, failed to limit the losses, despite guaranteeing the ČSPLO a fixed share in domestic transport of Polish coal and prices not below those of the railways on the same route, the Czechoslovak company limited its activities to the connection from the Polish port of Szczecin to the Elbe (via canals).<sup>70</sup> On the Elbe, which unlike the Oder cut across the Iron Curtain, the cooperation was based on tacit acceptance of the principle of internationalisation between the BRD and the Socialist Bloc (especially Czechoslovakia). State-socialist shipping companies, such as the ČSPLO, were allowed to use the West German part of the Elbe, but only for transit to Hamburg, and could not enter other West German waterways.<sup>71</sup>

#### 4. *Towards an Integrated Waterway System: Projects and Experts*

From the start, the expansionist policies of the Third Reich built upon the idea of a New Order for Europe and envisaged the continent in terms of *Grossraumwirtschaft*, that is, an integrated economy with Germany as its

68 Krajčovič (ed.): Bratislavské dohody.

69 Hubert: 75 let československé plavby na Dunaji. Part II, p. 8.

70 Techman: Czechosłowacka żegluga na Odrze w latach 1947 – 1957. Part II.

71 Jakubec: Československo-německé dopravněpolitické vztahy.

core.<sup>72</sup> Not to be dismissed as pure propaganda, the Nazi vision of a “New Order” for Europe built upon a long tradition of conservative right associated with the concept of *Mitteleuropa* (German-led Central Europe) and it had significantly influenced both political and economic decisions of the Nazi authorities throughout their existence. Starting from a traditional vision of a Central European framework, the territorial delimitation of *Grossraum* in the politics of the Third Reich gradually, in connection with the initial success on the war fronts, expanded so as to cover the entire continent.<sup>73</sup>

While historians identified various, often conflicting, strands in the Nazi discourse on Europe and international cooperation, ranging roughly from pure dominance to some sort of cooperative framework for selected nations,<sup>74</sup> the development of waterways (and transport infrastructure in general) occupied a central position in such visions.<sup>75</sup> Nazi *Grossraumpolitik* urged for a further development of technical standardisation of an envisioned transportation network that would facilitate *Grossraumwirtschaft* and focused on enlargement of transport capacities and construction of new canals interconnecting hitherto separate river basins with their diverse regulative regimes (especially Danube and Rhine) into a single system. The planners were well aware that their success depended largely on the quick development of the ties binding the territory.<sup>76</sup> The Danube has traditionally played a central role here as a gateway to the Balkans both as a resource of agricultural products and raw materials and a potential market for German industrial goods.<sup>77</sup>

- 
- 72 Bauer, Raimund: “‘Auch die neue europäische Wirtschaft muß organisch wachsen’ Walther Funks Rede ‘Die wirtschaftliche Neuordnung Europas’ vom 25. Juli 1940 im Kontext zeitgenössischer Europavorstellungen”, in: *Themenportal Europäische Geschichte* 2016, available at [www.europa.clio-online.de/essay/id-fdae-1669](http://www.europa.clio-online.de/essay/id-fdae-1669).
- 73 Janáč: *European Coasts of Bohemia*, p. 94.
- 74 Bauer, Raimund: *The Construction of a National Socialist Europe During the Second World War: How the New Order Took Shape*, London 2020.
- 75 Haushofer, Karl: “Grossdeutsche Wasserstrassen Geopolitik”, in: *Zeitschrift für Binnenschifffahrt* 1940, p. 1.
- 76 Mierzejewski, Alfred C.: *The Most Valuable Asset of the Reich. Vol. 2: A History of the German National Railway, 1933 – 1945*, Chapel Hill, NC 2003.
- 77 See e.g. Hamlin, David: “Water and Empire – Germany, Bavaria and the Danube in World War I”, in: *First World War Studies* 3/1 (2021), p. 65 – 85.

Such considerations underlay the Rhein–Main–Donau Gesetz of 16 May 1938, which one can view both as an expression of Nazi geopolitics and a revival of a traditional vision of navigation experts and economic circles in the region whose aim was to develop a standardised transnational waterway network in central Europe. Since late-nineteenth century, they continually discussed the technical and regulatory aspects of the future integrated network on various international – or rather transnational – fora, such as the *Deutsch – Österreichisch – Ungarischen Verband für Binnenschifffahrt* (est. 1896) or the *Mitteuropäischer Binnenschiffahrtsverband* (est. 1930) with the aim to overcome political and geographical boundaries limiting the development and integration of waterways in Central Europe. The concept identified three bottlenecks, three missing links, in the envisioned Central European network: Danube – Rhine, Oder (Elbe) – Danube, and Danube – Dniester – Bug – Vistula.

German domination on the formerly international Danube, Oder, and Elbe after 1938 initially speeded up constructions aimed at an improvement of shipping capacities and development of an interconnected waterway system in Central Europe. This ambition was clearly manifested in a large-scale investment programs for rapid enlargement of transport capacities on the river, the so called *Donau-Neuprogramms* and *Donau-Sofortprogramms*, which were introduced in 1939.<sup>78</sup> Construction of hundreds of new vessels should secure the Third Reich a position of clear dominance on the Danube, while a transfer of ships from the Oder and Rhine underscored the importance of connection to the Balkans in Nazi plans.<sup>79</sup> Enlargement of the port of Bratislava, which was designed as a future hub at the intersection of the Danube and a canal connecting the Elbe with the Oder,<sup>80</sup> as well as construction of the initial stretches of the envisioned Danube – Oder connection in Vienna (Lobau) and Gliwicz (so-called Adolf-Hitler-Kanal) launched in 1939 represented clear and decisive steps towards the development of an integrated infrastructural network, basically modelled on proposals of older initiatives centred around

---

78 Binder, Johannes: “Aufstieg, Größe und Ende – Die Donau-Dampfschiffahrts Gesellschaft seit 1829: Ein Resümee des letzten Generaldirektors”, in: *Völkl, Susanne (ed.): Vom Biedermeier ins dritte Jahrtausend – Versunken in der blauen Donau: 175 Jahre Erste Donau-Dampfschiffahrts-Gesellschaft 1829 – 2004*, Regensburg 2004, p. 25 – 70, here p. 29.

79 Grössing / Binder / Funk / Sauer: *Rot-Weiss-Rot auf blauen Wellen*, p. 139.

80 Sobol: *Hospodársky význam*.

the Rhine – Danube and Oder – Danube connections (see Figure 2). Julius Dorpmüller, the Reich Minister of Transport, in November 1939, in his celebratory speech at the opening of the Adolf-Hitler-Kanal (which was an upstream extension of the navigable Oder) painted a picture of a pan-European system stretching across the entire continent.<sup>81</sup> Centralisation of jurisdiction over water in the Reich territory under a newly established office of Inspector General for Water and Energy (*Generalinspektor für Wasser und Energie*) in 1941,<sup>82</sup> as well as the subsequent launch of the Reich waterway standardisation programme, clearly manifested the goal of establishing a broad and integrated system that would overcome the historically evolved differences in technical standards especially in the Rhine and Danube basins.

Organisation of the process largely followed in the footsteps of traditional internationalism, despite the fact that Nazi Germany either controlled or directly occupied formerly independent states in the region. Preparations for the construction of the Danube–Oder–Elbe Canal illustrate this rather well. In the mid-1930s, Germany reopened bilateral negotiations with Czechoslovak authorities on the construction of a link between the Oder and the Danube as a possible extension of the Danube waterway into German hinterland. It was part of a lavishly designed infrastructural development program. For most of the interwar period, the Czechoslovak authorities were rather reserved with respect to this project because it was perceived as benefitting the German rather than Czechoslovak interests. Nevertheless, Czechoslovak business circles and hydraulic experts along with their counterparts from Upper Silesia and Vienna, as well as “prophets” of integration of Central Europe, such as Hantos, continued to promote the plan. Following the Munich Agreement and occupation of Czechoslovakia a year later, the Czech authorities were forced to sign a protocol on inland navigation, which – alongside resignation from the Elbe and Oder commission – included the construction of the Danube–Oder canal and envisioned the creation of a joint expert commission for its construction and operation. While the commission and its agenda were dominated by Germany and its political goals, Czechoslovak experts co-

81 Anonymous: Otevření průplavu Adolfa Hitlera.

82 Stier, Bernhard: “Nationalsozialistische Sonderninstanzen in der Energiewirtschaft: Der Generalinspektor für Wasser und Energie 1941 – 1945”, in: Hachtmann, Rüdiger / Süß, Winfried (eds.): *Hitlers Kommissare: Sondergewalten in der nationalsozialistischen Diktatur*, Göttingen 2006, p. 138 – 158.

operated and some even welcomed the ability of Nazi Germany to finally realise the project. In particular, they noted with satisfaction that “negotiations in [technical] subcommittees continue smoothly”.<sup>83</sup>

The ambivalent nature of Nazi policies, which tended to oscillate between collaboration and extermination while, in the meantime, facing the contingencies of war, did not allow for actual implementation of the New Order.<sup>84</sup> On the other hand, it was this tension that eventually left a significant space to manoeuvre for experts who – as was the case of for instance most Czech hydraulic engineers and transport economists – embraced the idea of Nazi-led waterway integration and adjusted their particular technocratic visions of construction of a waterway network so as to be compatible with it.<sup>85</sup> Figures such as Kliment Velkoborský, Ladislav Vavrouch, Svatopluk Hlava, or Jan Smetana remained in high positions within the state administration before and after 1945. They kept promoting the idea of canal-building even in the new Cold War geopolitical context and represented Czechoslovakia at various platforms. On the other hand, individuals associated with the interwar internationalism lost their positions within the state administration of the Protectorate and never resurfaced in the future. This was the case of, for instance, Vojtěch Krbec, who even acted as head of the League of Nations transport commission, of Bohuslav Müller, originally a hydraulic engineer and later Czechoslovak representative in river commissions, or Otto Popper. This situation naturally hampered Czechoslovak participation in the post-war negotiations and undermined the position of liberally-minded experts within the Czechoslovak expert community.

A new chapter in the development of a material integration of waterways in Central Europe, delayed first by the war and then by the immediately post-war focus on reconstruction, had opened with the transition from a Soviet-led bilateralism towards a multilateral integration of the Soviet Bloc in the mid-1950s. This new approach was exemplified by creation of the COMECON (Council for Mutual Economic Assistance) whose explicit task was to overcome the economic nationalism of state social-

---

83 Zápis o poradě čs. plavebních expertů, konané dne 22/XI.38 v budově Čs. vyslanectví v Berlíně (Moravian Provincial Archive, (MZA), archival group Danube-Oder-Elbe Canal, b. 122, p. 5/6.

84 Klinkhammer, Lutz: “National Socialism and the Search for International Order: Comment”, in: *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 50 (2012), p. 27 – 38.

85 Janáč: *European Coasts of Bohemia*, p. 91.

isms and develop a “socialist” integration. In mid-1950s, the COMECON adopted a programme aimed at a comprehensive utilisation of the Danube. The goal was to turn the river into an artery of development that would provide hydropower, transport, and water supply for the envisaged “socialist” industrialisation of Eastern Europe.<sup>86</sup> The programme also revived the idea of the trans-watershed canals that would extend the navigable Danube network to Poland and East Germany via connections between Danube, Oder, and the Elbe. Leading Czechoslovak hydraulic experts, such as Jan Smetana, who developed water management plan of the upper Elbe for the Nazi waterway integration project, even considered a Euro–Asian waterway connection that would link Siberian rivers through Volga, the Black Sea, and the Danube to the Rhine system. Eventually, though, the special COMECON Commission on the Danube, established rather tellingly as a subordinate body of the Standing Commission on Electric Power, fell victim to a collapse of the Soviet–Yugoslav relations.

The idea of a physical waterway integration was then taken up by the COMECON Standing Commission on Transport. Simultaneously, the Soviet Union simultaneously presented a broader plan of construction of a pan-continental waterway network to the Committee on Inland Navigation of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) in 1957. Its aim was to relieve the overloaded railways in international transport within the Soviet Bloc.<sup>87</sup> While providing experts with a forum to discuss the technicalities of the proposed connections, these activities ultimately did not bear fruits. After lengthy debates, the COMECON dropped the waterway integration project in mid-1960s and focused instead on improving coordination of transport and other types of infrastructures.<sup>88</sup> Interestingly, the first and perhaps most visible result in the area of inland navigation was the intermodal tariff for rail–water transport on the Danube.<sup>89</sup>

---

86 Lagendijk: Divided Development.

87 Janáč: European Coasts of Bohemia, p. 167.

88 Flade, Falk: “The role of the CMEA in the construction of the transnational electricity grid Mir”, in: Jaješniak-Quast, Dagmara / Müller, Uwe (eds.): *Comecon revisited. Integration in the Eastern Bloc and Entanglements with the Global Economy*. Comparativ 5 – 6 (2017), p. 48 – 64.

89 Agreement on International Direct Mixed Rail – Water Transport on the Danube, (MZhVS), 19 December 1961. Protocols of Comecon Standing Commission on

## 5. Preliminary Conclusions

While some authors situate the end of “internationalisation” of waterways in Central Europe to the 1936 and link it to the rise of Nazism (see e.g. Jakubec referring to the Note of 14 November),<sup>90</sup> others identify the arrival of the Iron Curtain as the decisive moment.<sup>91</sup> Some, like Kastory, combine the two, seeing the Sinaia Agreements of 1938 as a turning point leading to a “de-internationalisation”, after which “the Danube became an internal river for countries of the Soviet Bloc”.<sup>92</sup> From the perspective of history of infrastructural systems, it seems that the main discontinuity was not linked to the wartime regimes and organisations, but rather with implementation of the liberal international system during the interwar period. Before that time – and then again during and after the Second World War and at least until the 1960s – the development and management of infrastructures in the region was highly dependent on geopolitical aspirations of large empires, namely the Austro-Hungarian Empire, (Nazi) Germany, and the USSR. Development was characterised by dominance of the riparian states, focus on administration of particular river basins, bilateral negotiations and agreements, and preference for commercial utilisation of individual rivers by national authorities over the formation of a universal regulatory regime. In fact, international commissions on the Oder and Elbe were revived only after 1989 and this took place mostly in response to environmental concerns. On the Danube, despite limited success of COMECON joint transport policies which evolved since the 1970s, administration likewise remained largely dominated by bilateral negotiations among riparian countries until the collapse of Communism. This was the case despite the existence of the Danube Commission, which reflected criticism voiced by Germany during the interwar period and now, after the war, included only representatives of riparian countries and limited its activities to technicalities.

---

Transport no. 4 1960 (NAČR, archival group Ministry of Foreign Trade (MZO-FMZO), branch 20, box 5.

90 Jakubec: *Železnice a lobská plavba ve střední Evropě 1918 – 1938*, p. 102

91 Binder: *Aufstieg, Größe und Ende*, p. 33.

92 Agnieszka / Zieliński, Bogdan: “The Diplomatic Dispute over the Rights of the European Commission of the Danube during the Interwar Period”, in: *Politeja* 10/1 (2008), p. 165 – 174, here p. 174.

Let me now return to the issue of chronology, continuities, and discontinuities. Apparently, the gradual dissolution of the liberal international regime established by the Treaty of Versailles that was characterised mainly by multilateral administration of rivers through river commissions went hand in hand with a growing involvement of nation states in inland shipping. Mandatory cartels supervised by national authorities, first proposed by experts in the 1920s and gradually introduced by the Reich in international shipping in the region throughout the 1930s, clearly illustrate this shift. It did not amount to a rejection the principle of freedom of transit but it did severely limit its scope. This approach did not end with World War II: in fact, after the war it was again adopted by the state-socialist policies on the Danube and generally in the transport sector. Emphasis on efficiency and coordination required an elimination, or at least regulation, of market competition even on international level, which moreover in this case fully corresponded with the ideology of state socialism.

It would seem that the growing involvement of state authorities significantly restricted the room for experts, but many experts supported, rather than opposed, the transition to a more state-controlled regime of operation on cross-border rivers because that viewed it as the most efficient form of organisation. While existing scholarship on the subject often views the Second World War as the major interruption in the development of international cooperation within technocratic circles, an examination of careers of Czechoslovak experts involved in efforts to make Central Europe navigable calls such interpretation into doubt. In fact, careers of leading representatives of the official interwar Czechoslovak waterway policy who were active in institutions of the liberal internationalism of the League of Nations ended abruptly in 1938 and never recovered (Popper, Krbec, or Muller). On the other hand, experts who operated in less politically exposed positions during the interwar period and then during the Second World War actively participated in implementation of Nazi policies, survived and continued their careers, often promoting principles associated with dissolution of the liberal regime in the 1930s (Vavrouch, Smetana, Velkoborský).

In comparison to the Rhine, Central European waterways experienced a relatively slower and less intensive integration, although some features, especially cartelisation as a major agent of integration in the 1930s–1950s, were rather similar. It seems thus questionable whether one can attribute

such difference in the quantity, rather than quality, to Cold War geopolitics, as some historians do.<sup>93</sup> While various initiatives aimed at closer cross-border cooperation (including the river commissions) indeed appeared swiftly after 1989, thus marking a rapid and clearly visible break with the state-socialist past, they were often driven by environmental concerns and roughly correspond to their counterparts on the Rhine. The intensity of transport on Central European rivers, and consequently also the need for more intense cross-border cooperation, has been more probably negatively affected by both the relatively less developed markets in the region (an argument mentioned in fact already by Hines and Popper during the interwar period) and by the fact that Central European rivers had not been developed to a level that would make it possible to consider them “natural” infrastructures in connection with which one could focus just on regulatory and control mechanisms, as it was the case in the Rhine basin especially after the Second World War.<sup>94</sup> Both the Elbe and Oder still constantly struggle with insufficient water levels in their navigable upstream stretches, i.e. in those parts that make them international, while shipping on the Danube remained split in three almost fully separate sections divided by the shallow stretch of Rajka – Gönyő and the Iron Gates well into the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>95</sup> Even today, the Danube Commission views deepening of the river as the best way of addressing the general dissatisfaction with a low (10%) usage of Danube’s capacity for navigation.<sup>96</sup>

## 6. References

Anonymous: “Otevření průplavu Adolfa Hitlera a zahájení stavebních prací na Odersko-dunajském průplavu”, in: *Zprávy veřejné služby technické* 21/ 2 (1939), p. 245 – 246.

---

93 Högselius / Kaijser / Vleuten: *Europe’s Infrastructure Transition*, p. 306.

94 Henrich-Franke, Christian / Tölle, Isabel: “Competition for European competence: the Central Commission for Navigation on the Rhine and the European Economic Community in the 1960s”, in: *History and Technology* 27/3 (2011), p. 331 – 352.

95 Chmelár, Vladimír: *Dunaj historický a dnešní*, Žilina 1993.

96 Louka, Elli: *Water Law and Policy: Governance Without Frontiers*, Oxford 2009, p. 104.

- Ardeleanu, Constantin: *The European Commission of the Danube, 1856 – 1948: An Experiment in International Administration*, Leiden 2020.
- Bauer, Raimund: “‘Auch die neue europäische Wirtschaft muß organisch wachsen’ Walthers Rede ‘Die wirtschaftliche Neuordnung Europas’ vom 25. Juli 1940 im Kontext zeitgenössischer Europavorstellungen”, in: *Themenportal Europäische Geschichte* 2016, available at [www.europa.clio-online.de/essay/id/fdae-1669](http://www.europa.clio-online.de/essay/id/fdae-1669).
- Bauer, Raimund: *The Construction of a National Socialist Europe During the Second World War: How the New Order Took Shape*, London 2020.
- Benda, Václav: “Výťah celních předpisů týkajících se mezinárodní lodní plavby”, in: Teklý, Vratislav (ed.): *Plavební příručka*, Prague 1962, p. 181 – 183.
- Binder, Johannes: “Aufstieg, Größe und Ende – Die Donau-Dampfschiffahrts Gesellschaft seit 1829: Ein Resümee des letzten Generaldirektors”, in: Völkl, Susanne (ed.): *Vom Biedermeier ins dritte Jahrtausend – Versunken in der blauen Donau: 175 Jahre Erste Donau-Dampfschiffahrts-Gesellschaft 1829 – 2004*, Regensburg 2004, p. 25 – 70.
- Chmelár, Vladimír: *Dunaj historický a dnešný*, Žilina 1993.
- Enderle-Burcel, Gertrude: “Konkurrenz auf der Donau – Anfang und Ende der Betriebsgemeinschaft der Ersten Donaudampfschiffahrtsgesellschaft mit der königlich ungarischen Fluß- und Seeschiffahrts A.G. in der Zwischenkriegszeit”, in: Matis, Herbert / Resch, Andreas / Stiefel, Dieter (eds.): *Unternehmertum im Spannungsfeld von Politik und Gesellschaft. Unternehmerische Aktivitäten in historischer Perspektive*, Vienna 2010, p. 171 – 184.
- Flade, Falk: “The role of the CMEA in the construction of the transnational electricity grid Mir”, in: Jaješniak-Quast, Dagmara / Müller, Uwe (eds.): *Comecon revisited. Integration in the Eastern Bloc and Entanglements with the Global Economy. Comparativ* 5 – 6 (2017), p. 48 – 64.
- Focas, Spiridon G.: *The Lower Danube River: In the Southeastern European Political and Economic Complex from Antiquity to the Conference of Belgrade of 1948*, Boulder, CO 1987.
- Ghisa, Alexandru: “Romania and the first cracks in the implementation of the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1940: Germany’s guarantees granted to Romania at the Vienna Award and the Danube issue”, in: *Valahian Journal of Historical Studies* 16 (2011), p. 95 – 106.
- Godard, Simon: “The Council for Mutual Economic Assistance and the Failed Coordination of Planning in the Socialist Bloc in the 1960s”, in: Michel, Christian / Kott, Sandrine / Matejka, Ondrej (eds.): *Planning in Cold War Europe. Competition, Cooperation, Circulations (1950s – 1970s)*, Berlin 2018, p. 187 – 210.
- Godard, Simon: *Le Laboratoire De L’internationalisme: Le Caem Et La Construction Du Bloc Socialiste (1949 – 1991)*, Paris 2021.
- Gorove, Stephen: *Law and Politics of the Danube: An Interdisciplinary Study*, The Hague 1964.
- Grössing, Helmuth / Binder, Johannes / Funk, Ernst-Ulrich / Sauer, Manfred: *Rot-Weiss-Rot auf blauen Wellen: 150 Jahre DDGS*, Vienna 1979.

- Gulić, Milan: "Belgrade Danube Conference 1948", in: *Tokovi istorije* 1 (2013), p. 173 – 202.
- Hamlin, David: "Water and Empire – Germany, Bavaria and the Danube in World War I", in: *First World War Studies* 3/1 (2021), p. 65 – 85.
- Hantos, Elemér: "Einleitung: Mitteleuropäische Wasserstrassenpolitik", in: Hantos, Elemér (ed.): *Mitteleuropäische Wasserstrassenpolitik: Referate und Beschlüsse der Mitteleuropäischen Wasserstrassenkonferenz*, Budapest, 11. bis 13. Mai 1929, Vienna – Leipzig 1929.
- Haushofer, Karl: "Grossdeutsche Wasserstrassen Geopolitik", in: *Zeitschrift für Binnenschifffahrt* 1940, p. 1.
- Henrich-Franke, Christian / Tölle, Isabel: "Competition for European competence: the Central Commission for Navigation on the Rhine and the European Economic Community in the 1960s", in: *History and Technology* 27/3 (2011), p. 331 – 352.
- Hexner, Ervín: "Československé kartely – přednesl JUDr. Ervín Hexner ve schůzi společnosti pořádané dne 27. února 1933", Prague 1933.
- Hinsch, Werner: "The River Elbe — International: A Historical Perspective", in: *Geo-Journal* 1/2 (1977), p. 45 – 48.
- Hoblík, Karel. "Mezinárodní vnitrozemní vodní cesty", in: Teklý, Vratislav (ed.): *Plavební příručka*, Prague 1962, p. 178 – 181.
- Högselius, Peer / Kaijser, Arne / Vleuten, Erik van der: *Europe's Infrastructure Transition: Economy, War, Nature*, New York 2018.
- Hubert, Miroslav: "75 let československé plavby na Dunaji. Part II", in: *Vodní cesty a plavba* 5/1 (1994), p. 5 – 11.
- Hubert, Miroslav: *Dějiny plavby v Čechách II*, Děčín 1997.
- Janáč, Jiří: *European Coasts of Bohemia: Negotiating the Danube-Oder-Elbe Canal in a Troubled Twentieth Century*, Amsterdam 2012.
- Jakubec, Ivan: "Odra jako 'československá' řeka", in: Jančík, Drahomír (ed.): *Pocta profesoru Zdeňku Jindrovi. K sedmdesátým narozeninám*, Prague 2003, p. 179 – 190.
- Jakubec, Ivan: "Via Danubiana. Význam Dunaje pro Československo v letech 1918–1938", in: Šouša, Jiří / Jančík, Drahomír (ed.): *Kolize, řevnivost a pragmatismus. Československo-rakouské hospodářské vztahy 1918 – 1938*, Prague 1999, p. 219 – 246.
- Jakubec, Ivan: *Československo-německé dopravněpolitické vztahy v období studené války se zvláštním zřetelem na železnici a labskou plavbu (1945/1949 – 1989)*, Prague 2007.
- Jakubec, Ivan: *Železnice a labská plavba ve střední Evropě 1918 – 1938: Dopravněpolitické vztahy Československa, Německa a Rakouska v meziválečném období*, Prague 1997.
- Jeřábek, Miroslav: *Za silnou střední Evropu: Středoevropské hnutí mezi Budapeští, Vídní a Brnem v letech 1925-1939*, Prague 2008.
- Kaser, Michael: *Comecon: Integration Problems of the Planned Economies*, London 1967.

- Kastory, Agnieszka / Zieliński, Bogdan: "The Diplomatic Dispute over the Rights of the European Commission of the Danube during the Interwar Period", in: *Politeja* 10/1 (2008), p. 165 – 174.
- Kastory, Agnieszka: "Problem obecności Niemiec w Komisjach Dunajskich w okresie międzywojennym", in: *Studia z Dziejów Rosji i Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej* 42 (2007), p. 75 – 89.
- Kirk, Tim: "Nazi plans for a new European order and European responses," in: Dafinger, Johannes / Pohl, Dieter (eds.): *A New Nationalist Europe Under Hitler: Concepts of Europe and Transnational Networks in the National Socialist Sphere of Influence, 1933 – 1945*, Abingdon 2019, p. 71 – 92.
- Klinkhammer, Lutz: "National Socialism and the Search for International Order: Comment", in: *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 50 (2012), p. 27 – 38.
- Königs, Gustav, "Die Wasserstrassen im Europa-Verkehr", in: *Süddeutsche Wasserstrassen* 1–2/19 (1943), p. 2 – 4.
- Kopper, Christopher: "Germany's National Socialist Transport Policy and the Claim of Modernity: Reality or Fake?", in: *The Journal of Transport History* 34/2 (2013), p. 162 – 176.
- Krajčovič, Jozef (ed.): *Bratislavské dohody*, Bratislava 1988.
- Krieg, Fritz: "Das Weltbinnenschiffahrtsrecht und die Ströme Mitteleuropas", in: Hantos, Elemer (ed.): *Mitteuropäische Wasserstrassenpolitik: Referate und Beschlüsse der Mitteleuropäischen Wasserstrassenkonferenz, Budapest, 11.– 13. Mai 1929*, Vienna 1929, p. 81 – 101.
- Lagendijk, Vincent / Schot, Johan: "Technocratic Internationalism in the Interwar Years: Building Europe on Motorways and Electricity Networks", in: *Journal of Modern European History* 6/2 (2008), p. 196 – 217.
- Lagendijk, Vincent: "Divided Development: Post-War Ideas on River Utilisation and their Influence on the Development of the Danube", in: *The International History Review* 1/37 (2015), p. 80 – 98.
- Loth, Wilfried / Păun, Nicolae (eds.): *Disintegration and Integration in East-Central Europe: 1919 – Post-1989*, Baden-Baden 2014.
- Louka, Elli: *Water Law and Policy: Governance Without Frontiers*, Oxford 2009.
- Mierzejewski, Alfred C.: *The Most Valuable Asset of the Reich. Vol. 2: A History of the German National Railway, 1933 – 1945*, Chapel Hill, NC 2003.
- Millward, Robert: *Private and public enterprise in Europe: energy, telecommunications and transport, 1830 – 1990*, Cambridge 2008.
- Müller, Uwe: "Introduction: Failed and forgotten? New Perspectives on the history of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance", in: *Comparativ: Zeitschrift für globalgeschichte und vergleichende Gesellschaftsforschung* 5 – 6 (2017), p. 7 – 25.
- Paterson, Thomas G.: "Eastern Europe and the Early Cold War: The Danube Controversy", in: *The Historian* 33/ 2 (1971), p. 237 – 247.
- Popper, Otto: "The International Regime of the Danube", in: *The Geographical Journal* 5 – 6/102 (1943), p. 240 – 253.

- Rákosník, Jakub/ Spurný, Matěj / Štaif, Jiří. *Milníky moderních českých dějin: Krize konsenzu a legitimacy v letech 1848 – 1989*, Praha 2018.
- Schipper, Frank / Schot, Johan: “Infrastructural Europeanism, or the project of building Europe on infrastructures: An introduction”, in: *History and Technology* 27/3 (2011), p. 245 – 264.
- Sobol, Miroslav: “Hospodársky význam bratislavského prístavu do 1. pol. 20. storočia”, in: *Verbum Historiae* 2 (2015), p. 28 – 64.
- Stier, Bernhard: “Nationalsozialistische Sonderninstanzen in der Energiewirtschaft: Der Generalinspektor für Wasser und Energie 1941 – 1945”, in: Hachtmann, Rüdiger / Süß, Winfried (eds.): *Hitlers Kommissare: Sondergewalten in der nationalsozialistischen Diktatur*, Göttingen 2006, p. 138 – 158.
- Švarc, Bohumil: “Vývoj podniku ČSPLO Děčín”, in: Košťál, Miloslav (ed.): *Historie plavby a obchodu po Labi*, Prague 1971.
- Švarc, Bohumil: *Sedmdesát pět let Československé plavby, Děčín* 1997.
- Techman, Ryszard: “Czechosłowacka żegluga na Odrze w latach 1947 – 1957. Part I”, in: *Przegląd Zachodniopomorski* 33/1 (2018), p. 145 – 167.
- Techman, Ryszard: “Czechosłowacka żegluga na Odrze w latach 1947 – 1957. Part II”, in: *Przegląd Zachodniopomorski* 34/1 (2019), p. 5 – 27.
- Teichova, Alice / Ratcliffe, Penelope: “British Interests in Danube Navigation after 1918”, in: *Business History* 27/ 3 (1985), p. 283 – 300.
- Truman, Harry: “Radio Report to the American People on the Potsdam Conference”, in: Woolley, John / Peters, Gerhard (eds.): *The American Presidency Project*, available at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/radio-report-the-american-people-the-potsdam-conference>.
- Tulus, Arthur: “Geopolitics and Trade at the Danube Mouths during the Interwar Period: A Study Case on the German-British Rivalry”, in: *Transylvanian Review* 22 (2013), p. 277 – 286.
- Upreti, Kishor: *The Transit Regime for Landlocked States: International Law and Development Perspectives*, Washington, D.C. 2006.
- Vitányi, Béla K.J.: “The Regime of Navigation on International Waterways: Part III: Substantive Rights and Duties”, in: *Netherlands Yearbook of International Law* 7 (1976), p. 3 – 90.
- Völkl Susanne (ed.): *Vom Biedermeier ins dritte Jahrtausend – Versunken in der blauen Donau: 175 Jahre Erste Donau-Dampfschiffahrts-Gesellschaft 1829 – 2004*, Regensburg 2004.

# 7. Appendix

Figure no. 1:  
Waterways between Oder and Vistula, League of Nations, 1930.

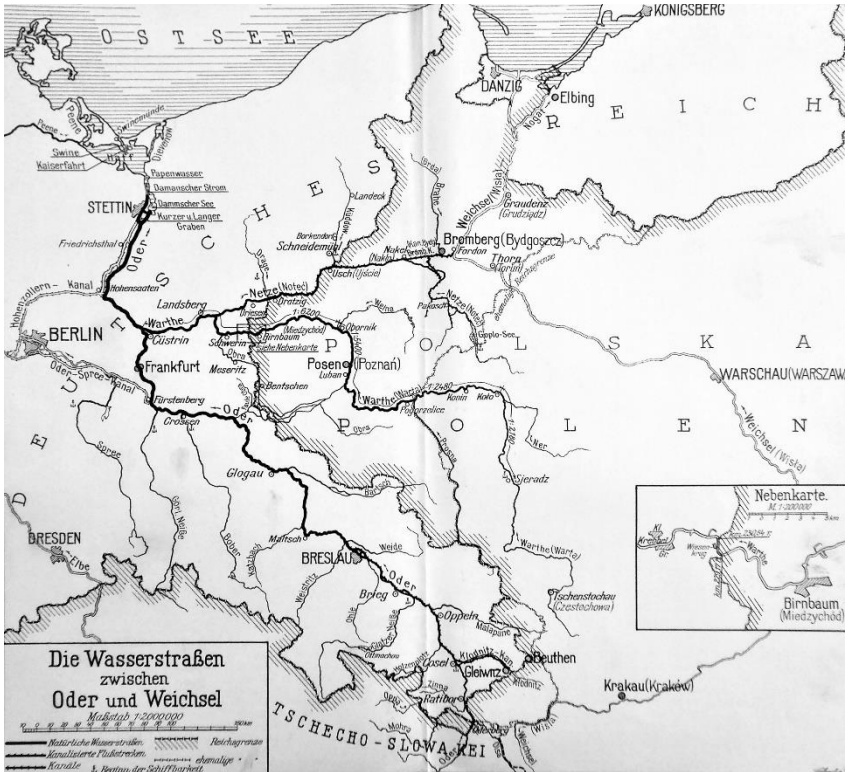


Figure no. 2:  
Waterways in Central Europe, Czechoslovak Map from 1930s.

