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 HIS495 Rhine River Analytical Paper
 19 September 2011

The Winding Rhine River: Starring the Historical Rewinding, Physical Unwinding, and the Socio-Economic and Political Undermining

Waterways are more than proverbial guests at theatre enjoying the show; rather, they are the producers in a boundless film called “Life,” and we, ladies and gentlemen, are the directors, the editors, the extras, and the onlookers. Just as a film is unable to exist without producers and directors working in direct correspondence, rivers and humankind can survive only when the latter looks selflessly to the needs of both entities. In his article “Time Is a Violent Torrent,” David Blackbourn weaves two threads of ideas together as he reveals his framework of intangible, cultural construction and tangible, manipulating reconstruction as symbiotic transformations of the Oder and Rhine Rivers in Germany.¹ Marc Cioc goes one step further in his work “Seeing Like the Prussian State” as he seeks to demonstrate how and why the industrial and corporal water manipulations have produced negative and ongoing repercussions under the guise of increasing production and the subsequent profit.² My purpose is concisely to identify and analyze each historian’s argument and evidence in order to show how these ideas fit squarely into the larger drama of river history and historiography.

Blackbourn’s metaphorical title “Time Is a Violent Torrent” and subsequent introduction in which he provides examples of German river imagery and symbolism from classical literature (i.e. “time flows like a river”), endorses his argument that culture is an inseparable aspect of

¹ David Blackbourn, “Time Is a Violent Torrent: Constructing and Reconstructing Rivers in Modern German History,” in Christof Mauch and Thomas Zeller, eds., *Rivers in History: Perspectives on Waterways in Europe and North America* (University of Pittsburg Press, 2008), 12; entire article spans pages 11-25.

² Marc Cioc, “‘Seeing Like the Prussian State’: Re-Engineering the Rivers of Rhineland and Westphalia,” in T. Tvedt and E. Jakobsson, eds., *A History of Water: Volume 1: Water Control and River Biographies* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 240; entire article spans pages 239-250.

Rhine, as are the physical alterations to the river.³ In Germany and throughout the world, associations with rivers and dams were far from being unbiased and lukewarm.⁴ German scholars, political leaders, and ordinary citizens often spoke of rivers and damming projects in metaphorical terms.⁵ According to Frederick the Great of Prussia during the eighteenth century, damming the Oder River was like freeing the land from barbaric hands.⁶ Frederick desired to cultivate the marsh lands around the river basin in order to discourage army runaways and criminals from converging nearby and subsequently to facilitate a more consistent growth of important agricultural products.⁷ As the Oder River was reconstructed under Frederick the Great's leadership and Dutchman Simon Leonard Haerlem's engineering expertise, an epic journey of dividing and conquering had dawned, and cultural and political notions of water manipulation were born simultaneously with this dawning, a process Blackbourn calls construction.⁸ While the benefits included fertile lands for crops, grazing pastures, and the eradication of malaria, the long-term effects from altering the Oder River were apparent.⁹ In reference to the flooding problems, Ernest Breikreutz declared, "The conquered river still 'rattled its chains mightily.'"¹⁰ Each proposed flooding solution only created further problems and more faulty solutions well into the twentieth century.¹¹

Successive engineers of the Rhine River damming projects used the Oder River transformation as the model. Hopeful Germans believed making the Rhine stable would cause

³ Blackbourn, 11; "Time flows like a river" was coined in the nineteenth century by German historian Leopold von Ranke.

⁴ Ibid., 12.

⁵ Ibid., 13.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

the territorial issues with the French to cease.¹² Although attempted rectification of the Rhine began shortly after 1789 under the guidance of engineer Johann Tulla, it was not completed until near a century later.¹³ The lower river valleys resulted in an interrupted ecological state, complete with an altered climate, decreases in native flora and fauna, gold deposits losses along the banks.¹⁴ A cultural construction occurred with the devaluation of the once significant and classic German locales mentioned in books.¹⁵ Amidst these negative repercussions, the growth of industries and subsequent pollution problems claimed the spotlight.¹⁶ Nineteenth-century August Becker described the reconstructed Rhine “like one great garden.”¹⁷ While the river was being manipulated and hailed for its successes, Blackbourn mentions that the guidebooks for tourists during this time actually denounced certain sections of the Rhine as fake, not the true essence of the river.¹⁸ This paradox provides valuable circumstantial evidence as it depicts the differing cultural perspectives of the people living on or near the transformed Rhine.

Those who had doubts concerning the large-scale projects were undermined as the question in water manipulation changed from “Should dams be built?” to “How should they be built?”¹⁹ Under the guidance of Otto Intze and his motto “[We need a] battleground against the forces of nature,” the upland streams of the Rhine succumbed to dozens of dams during the twentieth century in order to provide irrigation to farmers, prevent flooding, and provide fresh water for drinking and industrial use.²⁰ Although “to date, no German dam has failed” apart

¹² Ibid., 17.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 18.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 22.

²⁰ Ibid., 19-20.

from the destruction of dams during wars, effects such as silt build-up, weakened water reserves, extinction of flora and fauna, and alterations to fish migratory patterns were inevitable.²¹

Through objectivity and balance, Blackbourn does a concise job of driving home the importance of learning about river history and its evolution by asking the big “So what?” question.²² Rivers have impacted people through the use of water imagery and symbolism. The Germans’ ideology of rivers changed as they physically changed the rivers.²³ Secondly, the ways in which societies manipulate their waterways display who they are and what they stand for in the political, economic, religious, and social realms.²⁴ The creation of dams is synonymous with the social and political hierarchies that were altered and formed.²⁵ Lastly, environmentally speaking, rivers and their watersheds have changed, for better or for worse.

Cioc asserts the changes are for the worst as he explores the Rhine River manipulations since the mid-nineteenth century in the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia.²⁶ With the government’s consent, the industries situated around the Rhine re-engineered the waterways, big and small, to increase production and profit, creating a hydraulic regime.²⁷ American conservationist Aldo Leopold believed “German passion for unnecessary outdoor geometry” created their political and environmental mess.²⁸ After shrinking the height, width, and depth of the Rhine, the Prussian Navigation Project served as a model for future water manipulation projects.²⁹ Private and governmental agencies were designed to protect the interests of the industries along the Rhine. While some Rhine River streams were used for fresh water and

²¹ Ibid., 21-22.

²² Ibid., 23.

²³ Ibid..

²⁴ Ibid..

²⁵ Ibid., 24.

²⁶ Cioc, 240.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 242.

others as waste basins, the Emscher water basin became intensely polluted with festering diseases.³⁰ Unfortunately, extensive tests showed North Rhine-Westphalia to contain some of the highest contaminated streams in Europe after 1945.³¹ The water contaminants have decreased with cleanup projects in the latter half of the twentieth century, but Cioc adverts that it is not enough; there also needs to be “habitat restoration” for the insects, birds, mammals, and especially the salmon.³² Cioc displays the negative effects of river manipulation in a convincing and honest manner.

Prior to the 1970s, the modernization of nature, specifically waterways, was seen by the majority as a new and positive change.³³ When studying the histories of rivers, it is important to look at them through universal and local perspectives, *microhistory* and *macrohistory*.³⁴ Amidst the framework of the twentieth century emerging field of river historiography, Marc Cioc closely mirrors Richard White when he asserts that “the modern multipurpose river is developed but not dead.”³⁵ Both historians contend that there must be a balance, a homeostasis, between the energy contained in rivers and our manipulation of it, because we are symbiotically related to nature. The choices we make directly and jointly affect the history of humankind and nature. Although both entities are players in the game of life, we are the playwrights, and the rivers are the producers, figuratively and literally. However, David Blackbourn meanders away from a focus on the politics surrounding rivers to a more generalized approach as is the trend for historians

³⁰ Ibid., 243-245.

³¹ Ibid., 246-247.

³² Ibid., 248-249.

³³ Blackbourn, 12.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Christof Mauch and Thomas Zeller, “Rivers in History and Historiography: An Introduction,” in Christof Mauch and Thomas Zeller, eds., *Rivers in History: Perspectives on Waterways in Europe and North America*, (University of Pittsburg Press, 2008), 7; Richard White’s book *The Organic Machine* based on the Columbia River focuses on these ideas of looking at the river as a whole, not simply as a machine for economic and political gain or as a purely natural force devoid of human intervention.

who write about European rivers.³⁶ Blackbourn concentrates on the interdependence of rivers' cultural and physical transformations, their construction and reconstruction.³⁷

Changes to rivers throughout the world have ripple effects that will be felt by all those who live in our global society. Cioc succinctly states that "an industrialist's river is not an ecologist's river."³⁸ However, a return to nature apart from modernization is not the answer, nor is a departure from nature toward the reconstruction of everything natural any closer either. Blackbourn makes an important plug: There is no line of reference with which to compare modern day manipulated rivers to ancient *au natural* rivers.³⁹ Furthermore, "a return to nature" is rather preposterous, irrelevant, and impossible according to Richard White.⁴⁰ What we have done to nature cannot be reversed. We must work with nature to preserve the future of the environment and our future because it is a symbiotic relationship.⁴¹ Rivers have minds of their own and cannot truly be controlled by humankind; they ebb and flow at their whims, and we are ultimately editors and screenwriters at the mercy of these producers.⁴²

³⁶ Mauch and Zeller, 7.

³⁷ Ibid.; Blackbourn, 12.

³⁸ Cioc, 241.

³⁹ Blackbourn, 25.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Mauch and Zeller, 6.

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