Transforming Rivers into Streets: How the Nineteenth Century Scheme to Improve Shipping on the Vitava, Elbe and Danube Failed

Stephan Brabec

Summary

In the second half of the nineteenth century, projects aimed at improving ship-based commerce by connecting various rivers boomed. One such project was the establishment of an Elbe-Vltava-Danube canal. Approved in 1895, the canal promised reliable water levels throughout the year. Sluices and dams were built on the Vltava and Elbe River but the canal was never an economic success and the project stopped with the onset of World War I.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, projects aimed at improving ship-based commerce by connecting various rivers boomed. One such project was the establishment of an Elbe-Vltava-Danube canal, which, however, was never completed.
A connection to the Danube was a fanciful dream beyond the capacities of engineers at the time. Only a canal suitable for shipping between the Vltava and Elbe was built between Prague and Usti nad Labem.
The construction project was approved in 1895, and work began in 1897. A commission for the channeling of the Vltava and Elbe River in Bohemia was created, which dutifully reported on problems and successes from 1897 to 1912. Economic interests were the main driving force for this comprehensive transformation of river landscapes into an “Organic Machine” (White 1995); flood protection played no role. Low water tables had been a hindrance for ship and raft transportation alike; the canal promised reliable water levels throughout the year. Sluices and dams were built in Prague, Troja, Klecan, Libschitz, Miřowitz, and Wrañan/Horín on the Vltava River, and on the Elbe in Beťkowic, Wegstädtl, Raudnitz, Leitmeritz, and Lobositz.
The canal was never an economic success. Shipping statistics between 1882 and 1916 show that, from the beginning of the twentieth century, the number of transport vessels actually sank. Rafts had to be towed as the flow of the water had been diminished. The construction never fulfilled the hopes placed upon it. World War I meant the end of the project, which, however, had a lasting effect on river ecosystems. Most of the buildings are still in place; only locks and sluices were modernized. After World War II, the integration of water power plants or kayak courses added new forms of use.
Comparison of the raft sluice in Raudnitz 1912 (left photo) and the situation in 2009 (right photo)

Left image: Historic photo modified by Stephan Brabec 2009

Right image: The raft sluice was modified into a kayak course. 2009 Stephan Brabec
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