Disaster Ahead: How Danube Floods Created Telegraph Networks

Michael Neundlinger

Summary

In 1849 the Habsburg Empire installed the first telegraph lines along the course of the Danube, connecting upper Austria and Vienna. This development was triggered by the constant threats posed by Danube floods. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, floods had regularly caused major damage to cities and settlements along the river. The introduction of wide-reaching telegraph networks enabled Habsburg authorities to receive early warnings that enabled them to protect Vienna as well as other downstream settlements.

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Viennese city dwellers get rescued after massive floodings in 1847.

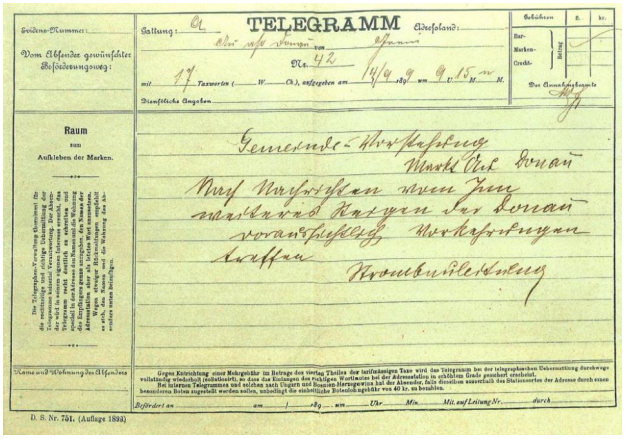
Painting by Leander Russ, 1847.
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Rivers flood, some more regularly than others. The more infrastructure humans construct in floodplains, the more vulnerable to extreme hydrological events they become. Thus, when Danube floods hit Vienna, a Habsburg residence and the most important city of the monarchy, its waters regularly swept over lower parts of the city center and its expanding suburbs. High floods, such as the *Allerheiligengieß* in 1787 or the great flood of 1847, arrived without warning. They caused massive damage to urban infrastructure and shocked residents. Protection measures, such as dykes, were destroyed and washed away by the force of the swollen river. During the most intense floods of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, city dwellers time and again had to retreat to their rooftops to save their lives, as reported in contemporary media.

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Telegrams were commonly used to send flood warnings.

1899 Telegram of the Strombauleitung Grein warning against a flood at the Donau floodplain
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In the Viennese k.k. Telegrafen-Centrale flood warnings arrived from upper stretches of the Danube.

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The introduction of telegraph networks that spread across a large part of the Habsburg Empire promised to

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lessen threats posed by Danube floods. In 1849 the first telegraph lines were installed along the course of the Danube, connecting upper Austria to Vienna. Telegrams were then used to send flood warnings from the upper stretches downstream to the capital city, where the k.k. Telegrafen-Centrale subsequently disseminated the warning to city dwellers.

In January 1850, an ice-induced flooding was reported near Linz, in northern Austria. Immediately, telegraphs were used to inform Habsburg authorities that the flood was expected to hit Vienna two days later, giving the city time to prepare. Viennese residents were no longer at the mercy of the river, as they had learned to gain advance knowledge of its behavior, if not to physically control it. Telecommunication would prove to be a powerful agent of change, and its role in helping people to deal with changes in nature should not be forgotten.

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Further readings:

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Related links:

- Center for Environmental History
  http://www.umweltgeschichte.aau.at/index,3179.html
- Environmental History Database Austria (EHDA)
  http://www.umweltgeschichte.aau.at/index,3183,EHDA.html
- Danube Environmental History Initiative (DEHI)
  http://www.umweltgeschichte.aau.at/index,3184,DEHI.html

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Michael Neundlinger studied social anthropology and history at the University of Vienna. In 2010 he completed his MA in Social Ecology and Environmental History at the University of Klagenfurt. Currently, Neundlinger is interested in the Environmental History of the Danube, Urban Environmental History of Vienna and city-river-relations in Early Modern Times.