The Great Fear: The Polesine Flood of 1951

Wilko Graf von Hardenberg

Summary

One of the biggest natural disasters in Italy triggered by climatic conditions was the Polesine flood of November 1951. Following a rainy season the river Po had progressively risen. The breaking of levees at various points along its course had not been sufficient to reduce the water flow significantly. Moreover, the distance between the dykes at the river's mouth became too narrow, causing the water flow to further increase. At its zenith, the flood reached the Polesine, near the river's delta, and submerged hundreds of hectares of agricultural land lying below sea level, killing 84 people and leaving 180,000 homeless.



Break of the levees at Malcantone in Occhiobello (Province of Rovigo)

Anonymous / A.I.Po - Agenzia Interregionale per il fiume Po 1951.

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reached the Polesine, near the river's delta, and submerged hundreds of hectares of agricultural land lying below sea level, killing 84 people and leaving 180,000 homeless.

Embedded animated map of the flood by Giacomo Parrinello (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

The reasons for the flood were more complex than the simplistic and fatalistic, meteorological ones given directly after the event. Coherent policy aimed at organizing flood defenses for the whole Po river basin was lacking. Huge investments would have been needed to improve conditions along the Po's right tributaries, which had become dangerous due to the neglect of the river basins and high level of erosion caused by consistent deforestation. Moreover, levees had been poorly maintained and the river's gradient reduced by continuous deposits of detritus in the delta, leading to a heightened risk of storm surges. Experts had issued clear statements on all these risks long before the Polesine flood, but the Italian state reacted late and ineffectively.



The Polesine countryside

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Ruins of a building in the Po Delta

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However, the communist opposition's attempts to claim for human liability were labeled subversive and inhuman. The state turned down applications for damages linked to natural disasters and initiated an anti-communist witch-hunt rather than taking action to improve soil conservation.

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Water Histories

Further readings:

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- Lugaresi, Luigi, ed. *1951 la rotta, il Po, il Polesine.* Rovigo: Minelliana, 2001.

Related links:

- Collection of websources about the Polesine and its floods
  http://www.webcitation.org/5y8bZ4jwR
- Collection of related photographs
  http://www.webcitation.org/5y8bSQRPp

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Wilko Graf von Hardenberg is a modern historian focusing on socio-political aspects of nature perception and management in Europe and the history of the environmental sciences. He holds a degree in history from the University of Torino, Italy, and a Ph.D. in geography from the University of Cambridge. He was a postdoc, funded by the Autonomous Province of Trento, at the University of Trento, Italy, a Carson Fellow at the Rachel Carson Center in Munich, Germany, and a Scholar-in-Residence at the Deutsches Museum in Munich, Germany. His most recent research projects focus on the history of nature conservation, management, and rhetoric in the Alps and on the development of the idea of mean sea-level.
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