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Vincent Lagendijk has written a compelling article on river development and dam construction in the context of Cold War Europe. Using the Danube as a case study, Lagendijk reconstructs the steps that led the Soviet Union to try to establish itself as a leader in river development in the region. However, as Lagendijk shows, the difficulty of coordinating large-scale projects that involved several countries, and tensions within the socialist bloc, frustrated Soviet hopes.

The article sees river development as a significant aspect of Cold-War competition. Lagendijk reminds readers that “river development had a prominent place in the economic arsenal of both the Soviet Union and the United States” (82). During the late 1920s and 1930s both countries obtained vast experience in building dams and hydroelectric power plants, enterprises that were crucial for the first Soviet Five-Year Plan and for America’s economic recovery following the Great Depression. After the end of World War Two, both the U.S. and the USSR were keen to export abroad their ideas and know-how in the field of dam construction. Competition was therefore unavoidable. Lagendijk writes that “in the West, the Soviet style of river development was seen as undemocratic and totalitarian” (83). In the view of its advocates, the American style of river development was instead “a democratic take on planning and an inverse version of the Soviet totalitarian model which was associated with dictatorship and coercion” (83).

The Danube occupied a special position in the possible competition between the American and the Soviet styles of river development. Shortly after the war, the U.S. had played an important role in planning for the development of the Danube. The international organizations that coordinated the reconstruction effort in Europe, as well as American experts who operated through the U.S. occupation zones in Germany and Austria, believed that the economic future of the region depended on the establishment
of a ‘Danube Authority,’ modeled on the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). However, the Soviet Union, whose influence after World War II extended to most of the countries through which the Danube flows, had no intention of tolerating American interference. Thus, initial plans to imitate the TVA were scrapped, as plans to develop the Danube came to be coordinated by the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA, the economic cooperation organization that in 1949 reunited all Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe).

The article’s overall assessment of intra-CMEA relations – “co-operation with Moscow did not necessarily revolve around a dominant imperial power and helpless colonies” (87) – is hard to contest. Managing the needs and aspirations of different CMEA members caused the USSR considerable headaches. The Danube was no exception. Initially, the split between Moscow and Belgrade caused most development plans to be put off indefinitely. Only after Joseph Stalin’s death and the re-establishment of relations with Tito, new plans to build dams and produce electricity were drafted. The general policy was that CMEA would step in only when the project involved more than one country, leaving other schemes to be pursued by member states individually.

Progress was slow. As the availability of nuclear energy decreased the importance of hydroelectric power, and the different governments quarreled about their interests in and contributions to the projects, most development plans never reached the implementation stage, let alone neared completion. The ‘Iron Gate’ project (a bilateral enterprise between Romania and Yugoslavia to produce electricity and improve navigability on the Danube) was completed only in 1972. The Czech-Hungarian Gabcikovo-Nagymaros twin-dams project was even less successful. Hungary withdrew from the project in 1981 due to environmental concerns, reducing the impact of the Czech dam, which was eventually completed in 1989. Following the end of communism in Eastern Europe, the rise of environmentalism, and the entry of the European Union as an actor in the region, all other plans for large-scale river development on the Danube were abandoned.

The article is informative and it focuses on an aspect of economic competition and cooperation that has received limited attention. For these reasons, Lagendijk’s work should be praised. Future research might consider whether the Cold War lens is the most useful for understanding river development on the Danube. In fact, direct competition between the West and the socialist bloc was virtually absent in this region. The U.S. and Western-led international organizations were active in the Danube area only very briefly after WWII, and then again after 1989, when the socialist bloc ceased to exist. Furthermore, the article suggests that the Soviet and American styles of river development were different, but this difference is somewhat difficult to gauge. From the technical point of view, there could be no significant difference in the way dams were designed, constructed, and used. Lagendijk himself writes that the CMEA plans to exploit the Danube to produce electricity were “not unlike the TVA” (87). Moreover, “Central and Eastern European engineers sometimes named Western projects like the TVA and the development of the St Lawrence River as examples” (87-8).
The difference between the Soviet and American approach, as understood by the American advocates of exporting U.S.-style river development abroad, was allegedly not in the projects themselves, but in the way they would be realized – ‘democratic’ projects in the U.S. case, ‘totalitarian’ and ‘coercive’ in the Soviet one. However, the assumption that Moscow would have imposed on the Danube region the same methods it had used during the 1930s at home is a highly contentious one. The overall political, strategic, and economic context was of course completely different. It is again Lagendijk himself who points out that “the exported version of Soviet river development lacked the murderous element, as well as the breakneck pace and strong centralization so apparent in Soviet domestic projects” (91). Thus, if American and Soviet plans to develop the Danube had virtually identical goals, to be achieved using similar techniques and technology, and the USSR was unable or unwilling to resort to brutal methods, can one really talk about distinct Soviet and American ‘models’ of river development, at least in the context of the Danube?

Ultimately, the article reveals more about the difficulties and tensions within the socialist bloc than about broader trends related to the global or European dimension of the Cold War. Indeed, it would be useful to know more about the contrasts and disagreements between different CMEA members that took part in the attempted development of the Danube. The East German sources the article is based on do not reveal the full extent of the tensions that existed between the socialist governments involved in the development projects, and do not allow scholars to assess the attempts that were made to solve them whether bilaterally or through CMEA. Accessing sources in Belgrade, Bucharest, and Moscow would make it possible to delve deeper into these troubled relationships and to make an important contribution to our knowledge of communist Europe and the mechanics of intra-bloc cooperation. In conclusion, Lagendijk’s article is a useful exploration of regional politics on the shores of the Danube. One hopes to read more about it in the near future.

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