

DFG Research Group "Thinking with Wetlands"

Research Project "Bukovina and Its Natural Features: A Vertical Civilizing Mission for Wetlands and Peoples"

Bucovina as an Amelioration Project, 1775–1918 – How the Habsburg Empire set out to "civilize" wetlands and peoples together

We tend to think of wetlands horizontally – as surfaces on a map, as expansive moors to be drained. In mountainous regions such as the Bucovina, however, the vertical dimension of amelioration and drainage systems also becomes apparent. Verticality likewise describes the politics of the nineteenth century: chains of decision-making ran from the emperor down through the central ministries and the diet in Czernowitz to the individual municipalities.

When Vienna annexed the province in 1775, Bucovina was considered backward and in need of reform. Long Ottoman rule had left behind neither a local aristocracy nor established self-government. The easternmost province of the monarchy was therefore treated as a tabula rasa, while serving at the same time as Austria's showcase towards the East. The diversity of its population was unique: the region was inhabited by Romanians, Ruthenians, Germans, Poles, Jews and Armenians, with no single group forming a majority. Beech forests covered wide stretches of the territory. Around 1900 some three quarters of the population still lived from agriculture. While the capital, Czernowitz, earned the epithet "Little Vienna", the surrounding countryside remained structurally weak. Against this background, Vienna pursued through the so-called ameliorations not only an "improvement" of the landscape but, with it, an "improvement" of its inhabitants. Amelioration – that is, drainage, tile drainage, stream and river regulation, and irrigation on both small and large scales – was never merely agricultural technology but a civilizing mission. Nature and people alike were to be cultivated.

The following research questions can be addressed within a doctoral dissertation:

- (1) How was this policy negotiated along the political vertical? No single institution in Austria's long chain of decision-making could finance an amelioration project on its own. Statehood appears here as a network of empire, state, crownland, the Bucovinian Religious Fund, municipalities and private entrepreneurs. Did Habsburg decentralization have an empowering or an inhibiting effect? How did the various linguistic, religious and social groups articulate their relationship to water, swamp and amelioration, when the narrative of progress was at home above all in the German-speaking camp? What becomes visible is an empire that could not simply dictate policy from above but had to negotiate locally.
- (2) How did knowledge about amelioration travel, and what went unsaid? A biographical approach to the experts concerned with Bucovina, for instance at BOKU in Vienna, makes it possible to trace how expertise circulated between centre and periphery –

from Moravia via Bucovina to Bosnia, from northern Italy and the Netherlands back to Vienna. The reverse side of this is equally decisive. The experts knew the unintended consequences of amelioration, waterlogging and salinization, from their own observation. They warned against improper execution without calling the measures themselves into question. Was this knowledge passed on in the course of transfer, or was it withheld?

- (3) What do the maps show that the files do not record? Because the administrative and expert texts are statistically precise, the planned interventions can be located in historical cartographic material. As a militarily sensitive border region, Bucovina was surveyed early and with unusual accuracy: the Josephinian Land Survey (1781–1784) records rivers, streams and ponds alongside individual farms and field paths. The Franciscan cadastre (1817–1856) covered the entire province. Military maps add further decades. Many of these sheets were kept secret and were unavailable precisely to those who decided on amelioration. Today, by contrast, they can be read differently: what transformations of landscape and land use emerge when these layers are superimposed? And what becomes legible of the consequences that contemporaries passed over?

The project is situated between imperial and administrative history, environmental history, postcolonial approaches and historical geography. The weighting of the questions outlined above can be determined by the candidate. There is particular scope for the use of Digital Humanities: the map layers can be georeferenced in a GIS and compared as superimposed strata. Those who wish to work digitally will find a methodological profile of their own here. The sources are held in the state archives in Chernivtsi, but above all in Vienna as well, and in Romanian holdings; specialist journals such as the "Bukowinaer Landwirtschaftliche Blätter" (1897–1914) are likewise important. German is indispensable as a source language. Reading knowledge of Ukrainian or Romanian is welcome.