

Disaster Ahead: How Danube Floods Created Telegraph Networks

Michael Neundlinger



Viennese city dwellers get rescued after massive floodings in 1847. Source: ONB/Wien Bildarchiv Pk 3.662

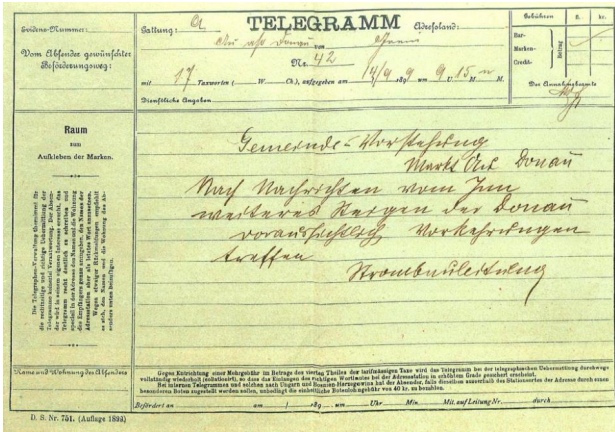
Painting by Leander Russ (1847)

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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.



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. Telegraf-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 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. Telegraf-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:

- Andraschek-Holzer, Ralf and Martin Schmid, „Umweltgeschichte und Topographische Ansichten. Zur Wahrnehmung und Transformation von Flusslandschaften an der Österreichischen Donau 1650-1950“, *Jahrbuch für Landeskunde von*

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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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