

Learning to Live with the Danube: Local Institutions and Community Knowledge in the Gemenc and Sárköz regions of Hungary in the Nineteenth Century

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Presentation:

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The control of riparian resources along the Danube formed an essential part of Hungarian rural life since the thirteenth century. In a land dominated by water, the reed-beds, water-meadows, alluvial forests and side channels that characterized the extensive flood plains provided both a vital supplement to the peasants' regular holdings and a significant source of income for their lords. Access to these common resources were regulated by village and estates institutions and governed by a complex mix of practice, custom and statute law. Following the revolution of 1848 and the end of Hungary's old rural order, traditional means of regulation that emphasised communal rights were supplanted by statute laws and state institutions. Furthermore, as river regulation gathered speed from the late eighteenth century, first under the auspices of the 'enlightened absolutist' rulers in Vienna and subsequently the reformist government in Pest-Buda, local concerns were threatened by the wider interests of state and nation. This paper will investigate how communities within the Gemenc and Sárköz region of Hungary adapted their everyday practices, institutions and customs to account for the shifting riparian environment of the Danube. In this, it will reveal how customary practices and institutions – the repositories of community knowledge – adapted to and were accommodated within the competing interests of lords, state officials and experts during the breakdown of Hungary's old rural order in the nineteenth century.

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