

Evaluation thesis Jiri Janac – for Cum Laude procedure

Ernst Homburg, 21 November 2012

Janac's book is a very rich, well researched, and clearly written study on numerous attempts during the 20th century to construct a system of canals between the Danube, Elbe and Oder. One of the most superb aspects of the book undoubtedly is the choice of the case itself. Firstly, because those attempts took place under totally different political regimes, making it possible to investigate the relationship between the main "European" ideologies (to use this shortcut for a far more complicated story) during those regimes and the canal construction efforts. Secondly, because it was highly illuminating to see that despite of the fact that during most of the period the canal plans were on the territory of one nation, nevertheless transnational and "European" aspects played a great role throughout. For these two reasons, the case just is fascinating.

A second cornerstone of the high quality of the book is the excellent architecture of the four core chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5. They are full of rich historical material, have all a similar, and therefore transparent, structure, and all start with in-depth conceptual analytical histories of four key-concepts.

On the basis of these two features, the book certainly belongs to the best 10% of all dissertations in the field of the history of technology, and probably even to the best 5%. Looking more specifically to the formal requirements of the cum laude judicium, my conclusion is that most, but not all, are fulfilled. The research is innovative because of the links it constructs between discursive, institutional and technical aspects, it is clearly written, evidently based on Janac's own research, and the historical analysis is excellent. The only major flaw is the relation between the chapters 1 and 6 on the one hand and the core chapters 2-5. In chapters 1 there is some ambiguity on the formulation of problem statement and methodology, and in chapters 6 the role of experts gets an emphasis not justified by chapter 1. Despite this, there is in fact a rigorous (but a bit too implicit) methodology guiding the analysis of chapters 2-5. Therefore, despite some imperfections, I think giving the cum laude can be defended.