

Canalization of the Moselle River during the Second World War: Continuities or Departures between Nazi Policy and Long-Term River Improvement Plans?¹

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River transport is a major economic consideration in Europe. The continent's development through industrial revolutions and subsequent interdependence between different markets in European countries enhanced the role of major river routes, especially for the transporting of heavy materials such as coal and coke, iron ore, sand, and steel. River transportation was a factor of production for these products, and often led to the definition of actual pricing policies. Such transport was also essential for developing the trade flows of producing companies. However, beyond its economic aspects, river transport contributed to the networking of territories, and therefore included "social, military, and most certainly political" facets as well.² Another distinctive feature of major river routes is that their improvement, which most often requires large-scale works and considerable financing, unfolds over the long-term, either because the works are completed in sections of waterways gradually rendered navigable, or be-

1 Translated from the French by Arby Gharibian.

2 Dumoulin, Michel: „Les transports: bastion des nationalismes“, in: Dumoulin, Michel (ed.): *La Commission européenne 1958 – 1972. Histoire et mémoires d'une institution*, Luxembourg 2007, p. 457 – 469, here p. 457.

cause projects are planned, abandoned, and resumed on multiple occasions.

This was the case for the Moselle river, the main tributary of the Rhine, which it flows into at Koblenz. It also connects the major mining and steel producing areas of Western Europe, namely Lorraine in France, Luxembourg, as well as the Saar and the Ruhr, via the Rhine, in Germany.³ The plan to canalize the Moselle, which was envisioned in the early nineteenth century in order to connect these industrial regions by a waterway, was completed only in 1964. The river's canalization owes much to the early efforts to construct the European Community. Improvement works were initiated to compensate Lorraine steelmakers—the De Wendels in particular—for their acceptance of the Schuman Plan.⁴ In April 1952, Article 2 of the law authorizing the French president to ratify the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC)⁵ provided for the French government to initiate, “before the establishment of the Single Market [for coal and steel], negotiations with the respective governments for the rapid canalization of the Moselle between Thionville and Koblenz.”⁶ From that point forward, the matter was in the hands of the governments involved. The project was bogged down in various study commissions until 1955.⁷ After the Saar referendum in October 1955,⁸ Paris connected the future status of the Saar

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- 3 The Moselle, whose source is in the Vosges Mountains, is 550 kms long. Berger, Françoise: „Les enjeux de la canalisation de la Moselle et de la Sarre jusqu’au Rhin pour les industriels sidérurgistes du bassin Lorraine-Sarre-Luxembourg (jusqu’aux années 1950)“, in: Berger, Françoise / Rapoport, Michel / Tilly, Pierre / Touchelay, Béatrice (ed.): *Industries, territoires et cultures en Europe du Nord-Ouest XIXe-XXe siècles. Mélanges en l’honneur de Jean-François Eck*, Roubaix 2015, p. 137 – 145, here p. 138.
 - 4 Libera, Martial: „La chambre de commerce et d’industrie de la Moselle face au plan Schuman“, in: *Fare Cahier* 8 (2016), p. 35 – 48.
 - 5 Spierenburg, Dirk / Poidevin, Raymond: *Histoire de la Haute Autorité de la Communauté européenne du charbon et de l’acier. Une expérience supranationale*, Bruxelles 1993, p. 43.
 - 6 Chanrion, Fernand: *Une victoire européenne: la Moselle*, Paris 1964, p. 156.
 - 7 Three commissions were created between 1952 and 1956: the Surleau commission (April 1952 – January 1953), the French-German-Luxembourger study commission (January 1952 – July 1953), and the French-German governmental commission (September 1955 – February 1956).
 - 8 Two thirds of its electors voted for the Saar’s incorporation within the Federal Republic of Germany. See Poidevin, Raymond / Bariéty, Jacques: *Les relations franco-allemandes 1815 – 1975, seconde édition revue et augmentée*, Paris 1977, p. 334.

with acceptance of canalization of the Moselle in its negotiations with Bonn. After a year of bitter discussions, France, Luxembourg and the Federal Republic of Germany signed, in Luxembourg on October 27, 1956, the treaties and conventions on the Saar, the Canal d'Alsace, and canalization of the Moselle.⁹ The improvement works were completed in 1964. The new navigable route was inaugurated on May 26 by Charlotte, Grand Duchess of Luxembourg, and Presidents Heinrich Lübke and Charles de Gaulle.¹⁰ In order to allow 1,500 ton Rhine boats, with their draft of 2.5 meters, to navigate in all seasons, a channel was built along the bed of the Moselle river, reaching a width of 40 meters at its large bends. Seventeen dams equipped with locks were built between Metz and Koblenz to permanently maintain the three meters of water needed for navigation. Two years after its inauguration, annual traffic on the Moselle numbered 5 million tons.¹¹

However, the history of the canalization of the Moselle stretches further back than postwar initiatives. Throughout the nineteenth century, and then again during the interwar period, various actors—the business community, chamber of commerce circles, town councilors, political and governmental staff in France, Luxembourg, and Germany—proposed a number of Moselle improvement projects, with the goal of making it navigable. At the beginning of the Second World War, these canalization projects were resumed by Nazi Germany. I will use a diachronic approach to focus on German wartime projects in order to explore the continuities of the Nazi project, or on the contrary to identify any departures from the projects that preceded and followed them. There were clearly elements of continuity over the *longue durée* with regard to the contents of preparatory work, feasibility studies, and the interest of such a waterway; the competition that canalization of the Moselle faced from the improvement of other waterways, as well as from other means of transportation, railways in particu-

9 *Convention du 27 octobre 1956 entre la République française, la République fédérale d'Allemagne et le Grand-Duché de Luxembourg au sujet de la canalisation de la Moselle*, p. 49, Archives départementales de la Moselle (hereafter ADM: Convention Between the French Republic, the Federal Republic of Germany, and the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg on the canalization of the Moselle), 1547 Wd 262.

10 Caffier, Michel: *La Moselle. Une rivière et ses hommes*, Nancy 1985. p. 125 – 127.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 127.

lar; and remarkable long-term continuity, despite apparent differences, with respect to the political, economic, and even strategic considerations inherent to canalization of the Moselle.

1. *Expert Assessments for the Moselle Improvement Project: Remarkable Long-Term Continuity*

In 1939, just before the outbreak of the Second World War, Germany decided to reinitiate plans to improve the Moselle. The Reich Ministry of Transport tasked the Waterways and Navigation Board in Koblenz with developing a project to improve the navigability of the Moselle between Trier and Koblenz. After Germany's military victory and the armistice signed in June 1940, the project was even extended to the portion of the Moselle between Trier and Thionville on the French-German border,¹² which if it were carried out would make the waterway navigable until Metz, as the Moselle Iron Mines Canal running alongside the river between Metz and Thionville had been in service since 1932.¹³

The criteria identified in the Koblenz Memorandum, a preliminary study drafted by the Waterways and Navigation Board in Koblenz, explored the feasibility of the works, and provided projections for the flow of raw materials that could transit through the new waterway, and hence for its economic viability. The study clearly showed that the project was feasible. The improvement of the Moselle, which would regulate the river by widening the waterway and reducing its rapids, did not involve the large-scale works entailed by a genuine canalization. The construction of single locks, which are much less costly than double locks, would suffice for the planned improvements. The cost of the works would decrease as a result, as would their duration, estimated at 5 to 6 years, which is short for river improvements. Once navigable the Moselle would be a profitable transport corridor, firstly because boats would be loaded in both directions, with coal, coke, metal products and steel flowing toward Lorraine, and minette toward the Ruhr. The preliminary calculations for raw materi-

12 Vogel, Ludwin: *Deutschland, Frankreich und die Mosel. Europäische Integrationspolitik in den Montan-Regionen Ruhr, Lothringen, Luxemburg und der Saar*, Essen 2001, p. 68.

13 Berger: *Les enjeux de la canalisation de la Moselle*, p. 140 – 141.

als trade were particularly promising, and would make the Moselle, with nearly 7 millions tons of products transported annually, a leading transport corridor.¹⁴

The assessment of the Koblenz Memorandum was in keeping with the studies for canalization of the Moselle conducted during the nineteenth century. Under the German Empire, the steel producing interests of the Ruhr and Lorraine, which had advocated a canalization project for the Moselle and Saar rivers in the 1880s, came to the same conclusions. The cost of the works planned at the time, stretching nearly 300 km (240 km in Germany and 60 km in annexed Lorraine), would total 126,000 marks per kilometer, much less, for example than the 143,000 marks per kilometer needed to build the canal from Grondersingen to Sarreguemines. The duration of the works, which had already been estimated at 5 years, was considered an advantage. On an economic level, a navigable Moselle would considerably reinforce links and trade between the heavy industries of Lorraine, Luxembourg, and the Ruhr.

New projects were proposed after the Great War. Driven in 1919 by the French government, and then in 1926 by steelmakers from Luxembourg and the Trier Chamber of Commerce and Industry, these projects were also based on important technical and financial expertise. Their conclusions were positive.¹⁵ For lack of agreement among the different parties involved, work ultimately began only on the French portion of the waterway. Construction of the canal between Metz and Thionville, which was launched in 1928 over a length of 30 km, was dug for a portion of its length in the bed of the Moselle, and ran laterally to the Moselle for most of its length. Its construction costs were given less consideration, for it was mostly financed by Germany as part of the reparations it owed France. Its cargo volume, under 1 million tons during its first three years of operation, was far below the projections made in 1927 by the Consortium for the Canalization of the Moselle, which had counted on an annual volume on the order of 7.5 million tons before the Great Depression.

After 1945, the project was quickly resumed and led by the Moselle, Saar, Trier, Koblenz, and Luxembourg Chambers of Commerce and Industry, which joined together to form the *Communauté d'intérêts des chambres de commerce pour l'aménagement de la Moselle* (Community

14 Vogel: *Deutschland, Frankreich und die Mosel*, p. 68 – 72.

15 Berger: *Les enjeux de la canalisation de la Moselle*, p. 140 – 141.

of Interests of the Chambers of Commerce for the Improvement of the Moselle).¹⁶ The studies conducted by the chambers of commerce were very encouraging. On a technical level, the regularization of the Moselle did not present any obstacles. The digging of a channel—by reducing the river’s current, flow, and slope—would establish the same depth everywhere, and would allow convoys to both be towed and pass one another. The construction of five dams and locks was also planned. The works proceeded in stages. Upon completion of the first stage, the Moselle would already be navigable for two-thirds of the year. In total, the regularization of the Moselle would be completed within eight years, a short time span for such projects.¹⁷ The traffic seemed promising. The Moselle would connect “the steel and iron producing region of Lorraine, and the considerable industrial grouping of Nancy-Metz-Thionville, with the coalmining and industrial areas of the Ruhr, along with the major ports of the North Sea.”¹⁸ The rise and fall of overall traffic, consisting primarily of heavy goods and grains, would hover between 4 and 5 million tons per year, according to estimates that were voluntarily conservative in order to anticipate potential attacks. Given such cargo, the Moselle would be a highly profitable route, all the more so as the low cost of construction totaled, depending on estimates, between 8 and 12 billion francs in 1948, and would be paid by the Rhineland-Palatinate (nearly two-thirds), France (between a quarter and a third), and Luxembourg (approximately a tenth). The works would be carried out by an international corporation that would raise capital for that purpose. Financing would also be secured through tolls.¹⁹ The feasibility studies conducted in 1952, when the project was taken over by the French government, were along the same lines.

In sum, the preliminary studies and work conducted for each of the projects came to the same conclusions as the assessments made by the Third

16 Libera: *Diplomatie patronale*, p. 151 – 174.

17 Deux notes relatives à l’aménagement de la Moselle, ministère de l’Economie nationale, Inspection générale, XIV^e région économique (Nancy Metz), Fernand Chanrion (Two Notes Regarding the Improvement of the Moselle, Ministry of the Economy, General Inspectorate for Region 14, Nancy and Metz), 10.04.1948 and 30.07.1948, ADM 1547 Wd 245.

18 “Note relative à l’aménagement de la Moselle” (Note Regarding the Improvement of the Moselle), 30.07.1948; for details see the preceding footnote.

19 Libera, Martial: *Diplomatie patronale aux frontières. Les relations des chambres de commerce frontalières françaises avec leurs homologues allemandes (1945 – milieu des années 1980)*, Genève 2019, p. 168/69.

Reich during the Second World War. This continuity with regard to the essentially reassuring results of expert assessments for the project's viability proved that it was feasible and economically promising. This raises the question of why the canalization of the Moselle took so long to complete. The first reason, which also unfolded over the long-term, was that the canalization of the Moselle had to systematically compete with other river improvement projects, as well as with other types of transport.

2. A Project Systematically and Continually Subject to Competition

This was the case at the beginning of the Second World War. The Third Reich hesitated between two river improvement projects in its southwestern territory: the project involving the Moselle, and the construction of a canal from the Saar river to the Rhine river through the Palatinate, which would flow into the Rhine at Mannheim, and would eventually be extended to the west from Saarbrücken to Metz. This project, dating back to the interwar period and primarily supported by industrial actors in the Saar, presented a number of advantages. The primary one was that it would bring the Rhine within 133 km of Saarbrücken, or 161 km less than the route via the Saar and the Moselle. In addition, considering that the primary markets for the heavy industry of the Saar were, beginning in the interwar period, in Southern Germany, the distance would be reduced even further, by about 314 km, with Koblenz and Mannheim each being 153 km away via the Rhine route. The canal from the Saar river to the Rhine river would subsequently lead to major savings in terms of transport cost, thereby making the products of the Saar's heavy industry all the more competitive, especially compared to those from the Ruhr. However, the digging of a canal raised three problems. It would cost much more than the works planned along the Moselle, and the duration of these works was estimated by experts from the Waterways and Navigation Board in Koblenz to be 10 years, nearly double that planned for the improvements of the Moselle. Second, it would convey less cargo than the Moselle (5.22 million tons per year for the canal from the Saar to the Rhine, as opposed to 6.63 million tons per year for the Moselle). There was bitter competition between the two projects at the beginning of the war. Competing expert reports regarding the economic impact of the two waterways resulted in a confrontation between 1940 and 1942, between supporters for improving the Moselle and supporters for digging a canal from the Saar to the Rhine, with the latter believing that cargo projections for the Moselle,

based on statistics from the 1930s, were outdated and overly optimistic.²⁰ However, the need to quickly increase the Third Reich's supplies in coal and minette from Lorraine ultimately led German authorities to favor improvement of the Moselle, and to postpone the digging of the canal from the Saar river to the Rhine river. In 1940, work began on the Moselle route by breaking the rapids and deepening the riverbed. Upstream in Triers and Koblenz, dams were built to provide electricity. Unfavorable military developments prompted Germany to stop the improvement works in 1944.²¹

The Third Reich's decision to initiate works on the Moselle was a major departure from earlier decisions. Previously, the projects competing with improvement of the Moselle had always won out, as was the case at the turn of the nineteenth century. The German Empire gave priority to constructing the canal from the Rhine river to the Weser river, with support from industrial actors in Northern Germany, rather than improving the Moselle, which was defended by the steelmakers of Lorraine and the Ruhr. At the time, improvement of the Moselle also faced dual opposition from the Alsace-Lorraine and German railways, with the latter planning the construction of a railway on the same route running alongside the river. In short, the project initiated in 1888 was dead and buried in 1912.²²

During the interwar period, the Moselle improvement project was revived by various actors,²³ and once again subject to stiff competition. In Germany it was deemed to be of secondary interest, and hence was not given priority. The development of waterways was limited to three major canal projects at the time: the Rhine-Danube link, which advanced via a dual effort, one along the Main river until Würzburg (completed in 1940), the other along the Neckar river until Heilbronn (completed in 1935); and the central canal, operational in 1938, which set out from the Ems river and connected a series of cities in the country's center before reaching Magdeburg in 1938. The regulation of the Rhine river between Strasbourg and the Istein bar, which was completed in 1938, also took precedence over the Moselle, as did the construction of a canal running lateral to the Rhine from Kembs to Basel, which began service in 1932. In the late 1930s, the Moselle improvement project, which had the support of various

20 Vogel: *Deutschland, Frankreich und die Mosel*, p. 63 – 72.

21 Berger: *Les enjeux de la canalisation de la Moselle*, p. 141.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 139.

23 See the first part of this article.

actors and had received conclusive expert assessments, was still considered secondary.²⁴

This was also true after 1945, at least initially. Led locally in Moselle by the De Wendels, with backing from industry and officials in Metz, the river project was far from garnering unanimous support in France. With the support of their elected officials, the inland shippers and industrial actors of Strasbourg, who depended on trade along the Rhine river for their supplies and exports, represented a headwind for the Moselle improvement project, which would divert part of the Rhine traffic away from the port of Strasbourg. They countered by proposing a large canal that would closely connect the Rhine and Moselle departments to France, and Strasbourg to Metz and then Mézières. However, in the aftermath of the war, competition for canalization of the Moselle did not solely come from France. Within the Western European space, there were actors in inland shipping, represented in particular by the Rhine Union of Chambers of Commerce (RUCC), who pushed to complete the Rhine-Danube connection via the Main river, the Neckar river, and even through Switzerland and Austria via the Lake of Constance and the Inn river. While representatives from chambers of commerce bordering the Moselle river, or highly interested in its improvement—namely Moselle, Trier, Koblenz, and Luxembourg—made their voices heard, the priorities of the RUCC remained focused on trans-European links between the Rhine and Danube rivers, and then the Rhine and Rhône rivers. The Moselle project did not garner unanimous support in Germany either. The Saar business community hesitated to support it, for it was still counting on the construction of the canal from Saarbrücken to the Rhine river via the Palatinate.²⁵ Given these circumstances, the decision to proceed with canalization of the Moselle would require a miracle, but it actually occurred through a radical transformation of the geopolitical balance in the Rhine region between 1871 and 1945, one that was remarkably steady in terms of its essence.

24 Vogel: *Deutschland, Frankreich und die Mosel*, p. 59.

25 Libera: *Diplomatie patronale*, p. 151 – 175.

3. *Similar Strategic Projects Over the Medium-Term*

In French-German border regions, and hence along the course of the Moselle river, geopolitical patterns repeated from 1871, the date the German Empire was created, to the 1950s. Two overlapping factors were the cause: the growing interdependence between the steel producing areas of Lorraine, the Saar, and Luxembourg with those of the Ruhr, in addition to the alternating domination by France and Germany over the Rhine region. I will first examine interdependence within the Rhine steel industry. First, it was long-standing in nature—Lorraine traditionally depended on shipments of coke from the Ruhr and coal from the Saar to produce its steel—and increased during the 1880s, when the development of the Gilchrist-Thomas process made it possible to use minette from Lorraine, which was low in iron and remained untapped. From that point forward, the Ruhr, which did not produce enough iron ore for its steel production, and had to import it from Luxembourg, also bought minette from Lorraine. Power relations alternated cyclically throughout the period. Either Germany or France had domination over a region that included both the Upper Rhine (Alsace and Baden) and the left bank of the Rhine river (Moselle, the Saar, and what became after 1945 the Land of Rhineland-Palatinate). The stages are fairly familiar. In 1940, Nazi Germany proceeded with a *de facto* annexation of Alsace and Moselle. German hegemony followed the period from 1918 and 1935, when France—to which the Saar was economically connected—tried to make the Rhine region along the French-German border into a French space. The French policy was partly conducted in reaction to the German Empire's annexation of Alsace and Moselle following the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, one that was maintained over time, and came to an end only in 1918. The same pattern began after 1945 as France, which was one of the four powers occupying Germany, maintained an occupation zone in the country's southwest until 1949, and secured the economic and monetary attachment of the Saar until 1955. Each time the dominant power tried, with greater or lesser success, to impose its institutions on this space, and to create, with varying degrees, a unified political and economic region for which the Moselle naturally represented the shortest trade route between the interdependent industrial centers, as well as a powerful symbolic link.²⁶

26 Poidevin / Bariéty: Les relations franco-allemandes, *passim*.

This was the case in 1940. The project, which began in the summer of 1939 exclusively on the German section of the Moselle, was extended to the French portion of the river after the Third Reich's *de facto* annexation of the Alsace and Moselle. Germany's political control over Alsace and part of Lorraine allowed it to initiate economic projects: the improvement of the Moselle sought to facilitate trade between the steel producing and coal mining Lorraine and the Ruhr as part of a relation of subordination, in which products from the Lorraine, *minette* in particular, would meet the Ruhr's supply needs and help grow the Third Reich's steel production.²⁷ The organization of the Rhine economic region under German domination was part of a much larger plan for a "new Europe." On the economic level, Nazi Europe planned to integrate the Rhine regions — Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands — as well as Denmark and Norway within a close union with Greater Germany.²⁸ In light of this vast plan, the reserves that Saar-based industrial actors in steel and coal had regarding the profitability of the Moselle route, however justified — as well as their alternative proposition for a canal from the Saar river to the Rhine river via the Palatinate — seemed very secondary, and were swept aside. Without the external constraint of the evolving military situation, the German project for the canalization of the Moselle would have proceeded.²⁹

This was a genuine departure from the situation that prevailed before 1914. The German Empire nevertheless enjoyed considerable advantages: the left bank of the Rhine — Alsace and Moselle — was lastingly German, and the acceleration of the industrial revolution led to the development of trade and integration between the Empire's primary steel-producing areas, which prompted a rethinking of plans to improve the most direct waterway between the Ruhr, Luxembourg, the Saar, and Lorraine. The failure of the Moselle canalization project can be attributed to different actors: firstly to industrial actors in Northern Germany, who resisted the economic realignment of the German space around the Rhine, to the detriment of the traditional territories of Prussia³⁰; secondly to the German administration, which hindered "the development of the Lorraine metalworking industry by preventing it from cheaply obtaining the coke it

27 Vogel: *Deutschland, Frankreich und die Mosel*, p. 68 – 72.

28 Bloch: *Le III^e Reich et le monde*, *passim*, cited by Schirmann: *Quel ordre européen*, p. 263 – 265.

29 Vogel: *Deutschland, Frankreich und die Mosel*, p. 68 – 72.

30 Berger: *Les enjeux de la canalisation de la Moselle*, p. 138 – 139.

received from Westphalia”³¹; and finally German railways, which “transported minette to Westphalia at a very low price, but imposed very high rates for German coke headed for the Lorraine.”³²

After the First World War, it was now the turn for Paris to impose its views over the Rhine region. As a result of its military victory, France tried to inverse the power relations between the French and German economies, and to replace its rival as the leading steel-producing power of Europe.³³ The Treaty of Versailles made the Rhine into a French region, to the detriment of Germany: Alsace and Moselle were reintegrated, while the Saar was economically connected to France for fifteen years, and Luxembourg was no longer part of the Zollverein. Germany thus saw itself deprived of “80% of its resources in iron ore, over 40% of its cast-iron production capacity, and over 30% of its steel production capacity.”³⁴ The treaty’s economic clauses facilitated the development of the French steel industry, to which they lent considerably advantages. The industry also would enjoy, as part of war reparations, substantial shipments of German coal for many years. Canalization of the Moselle emerged as an option to facilitate transport from the Ruhr to Lorraine, and subsequently became a priority. This explains why after the war the Moselle canalization project received support from French interests, especially those from Moselle, as represented by the Moselle Chamber of Commerce. This time it was Germany’s rapid disinterest in canalization of the Moselle that made the project falter. For obvious strategic reasons, Germany preferred improving exclusively German river regions rather than canalizing the Moselle, which would notably benefit France. In addition, the German steel industry, now deprived of minette from Lorraine and ore from Luxembourg, quickly pivoted to Sweden for its iron ore supplies,³⁵ which further reduced its interest in improving the Moselle. The failure could also be attributed to French policy. Concerned, with understandable political rea-

31 Levainville, Jacques: „La canalisation de la Moselle“, in: *Annales de géographie* 206 (1928), p. 180 – 184, here p. 181.

32 Ebd.

33 Bariéty: Les relations franco-allemandes après la Première Guerre mondiale, passim.

34 Poidevin / Bariéty: Les relations franco-allemandes, p. 231.

35 Berger: Les enjeux de la canalisation de la Moselle, p. 140 – 141.

sons, about “orienting Lorraine toward France,”³⁶ at a time when it had been part of Germany for nearly half a century, the French government did not provide enough support for the Moselle improvement project, as the country’s economic interest should have prompted it to do.³⁷ The only moment of the interwar period in which the project seemed likely to be completed was a brief political window that emerged in Western Europe after Locarno, when cooperation between Europeans seemed possible. The French, Germans, and Luxembourgers who helped create the International Steel Cartel in 1926 agreed to complete canalization of the Moselle.³⁸ The bright spell did not last, as the economic crash of 1929 and the rise to power of the Nazis brought an end to any joint project to improve the Moselle.

The postwar period proceeded along the same lines as the interwar period. France once again dreamed of replacing Germany as Europe’s leading steel-producing power.³⁹ The conditions for the French dream to become a reality appeared to be in place this time: Germany was occupied by the Allies and disarmed, with its steel production severely limited, and its steel *Konzerne* broken up.⁴⁰ Also, as in the aftermath of the First World War, France obtained control over the Rhine region with the return of Alsace and Lorraine, the economic and monetary connection of the Saar, and Germany’s granting of an occupation zone along the right bank of the Rhine, including the entire course of the Moselle. Similarly, the canalization of the Moselle responded to French economic needs and interests, which expected large shipments of German coal as part of war reparations. However, this time the project was directly led by inhabitants of Lorraine. In 1948, foundry owners pressured the French government—via the Moselle Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and with support from local political authorities—to quickly proceed with canalization of the Moselle. The government procrastinated. In Alsace, the business community concerned by activity along the Rhine was strongly opposed to improving the Moselle, which would considerably reduce traffic in the port of Strasbourg. To counter this project, Strasbourg town councilors and business

36 Chanrion: *Les aspects internationaux de la canalisation*, p. 158, cited by Berger: *Les enjeux de la canalisation de la Moselle*, p. 141.

37 Berger: *Les enjeux de la canalisation de la Moselle*, p. 141.

38 Ebd.

39 Libera: *Un rêve de puissance*, *passim*.

40 Bitsch: *Un rêve français*, p. 313 – 329.

leaders in Alsace proposed constructing a large Northeast Canal that would connect Strasbourg to Metz, and later to Charleville-Mézières. Paris refused to decide between the two competing projects and delayed for two years, between 1948 and 1951.⁴¹

The situation changed as a result of the Schuman Plan. Beyond the French government's decision to canalize the Moselle, which was first and foremost done as compensation to Lorraine steelmakers for their acceptance of the Schuman Plan,⁴² the improvement project for the Moselle was made possible because, for the first time in nearly two hundred years, the Rhine economic region was not unified by a power using it as a base to dominate other countries along the river, but rather in the common interest of all interested parties. In this respect, the future implementation of the European Coal and Steel Community was a major departure in terms of objective. Some long-standing business leaders, such as Albert Houpert, the Secretary General of the Moselle Chamber of Commerce and Industry from 1919 to 1960, who had been following this issue since the interwar period, clearly perceived this historic change. They were all the more determined to see it through.⁴³

4. Conclusion

The Nazi project for canalization of the Moselle was clearly in keeping with earlier initiatives to make the Rhine's primary tributary navigable. By facilitating trade between the Ruhr and Lorraine, canalization would enable the dominant power of the moment—in this case the Third Reich—to impose the economic unity of the Rhine region solely to its advantage, and to use the coal and steel-producing resources of neighboring countries as part of a “center-periphery” logic of domination. Other elements of continuity also emerged. As in the past, preparatory work and feasibility studies emphasized the interest of such a waterway. The project also had to compete with other river improvement projects as well as other means of transport, on both the national and international level. Finally, once again as in the past, the decisions were difficult to make. In the end, Nazi policy

41 Libera: *Diplomatie patronale*, p. 151 – 175.

42 See the introduction to this article.

43 Libera: *Diplomatie patronale aux frontières*, p. 413.

clearly took its place within the *longue durée* of the Moselle improvement project. Nevertheless, while the latter was undeniably European by virtue of its route and implications, it was not at all in terms of its spirit. It is because of this reversal of paradigm that the canalization project conducted by the Third Reich during the Second World War cannot be compared with the project completed in 1964, a little less than twenty years after the war. For the first time in over a century, the unification of the Rhine economic region was envisioned within a truly European framework.

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