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FEDERICA LETIZIA CAVALLO¹

NAZI WETLAND RECLAMATIONS AS “TERRITORIAL TOTALITARIANISM”

«Can the papyrus grow up without a marsh?
Can the rush grow without water?
While it is still green and not cut down,
yet it withers before any other plant.
So are the paths of all who forget God» (Job, 8:11-13)

Introduction: the link between wetland reclamations and authoritarian power

This article focuses on wetland reclamation works carried out, or merely planned, by the Nazi regime, both within German borders and in the Occupied Eastern Territories. The aim of the paper is to propose an interpretation of Nazi wetland reclamation as a manifestation of what we might term “territorial totalitarianism”.

From the standpoint of a well-known study on “oriental despotism” (Wittfogel, 1957) – in which the author argues the existence of a “genetic” relationship between hydraulic societies based on large-scale of artificial irrigation and the ancient and current Asian despotic systems that would be at their origin – we could say that any huge hydraulic achievement implies a political will, exerted directly over land and water arrangements, which is at least powerful, if not indeed despotic or tyrannical.

Contemporary wetland reclamations and impolderings are no exception, but more specifically, wetland reclamation played an important role in the land transformation policy of the dictatorships of the first half of the 20th century, as seen under Fascism (Cavallo, 2011). An extensive discourse of fascist political ecology, with its various actions and narratives, has recently been provided by Armiero, Biasillo, Von Hardenberg (2022). More generally, major hydraulic works and new hydraulic paradigms have been considered, or imagined, as important factors in the modernization process under the dictatorships of Stalin (Oldfield, Lajus, Shaw, 2015) and Franco (Fernández Soto *et alii*, 2011; del Río Sánchez, 2014; Swyngedouw, 2007; Swyngedouw, 2015, pp. 39-66).

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Such a link between land reclamation and 20th-century dictatorships implies a series of specific and recurrent features: an element of challenge to nature (presented, for example, as a “war against the marshes”), stress on technocratic and modern planning, a connection with pro-natalist policies (“new lands” providing space for settlement and increased food production), and a special relationship with propaganda, since land reclamations were employed to obtain both internal consensus and foreign appreciation (Piastra, 2010). On the other hand, this propaganda has also largely rested on the centuries-old construction of a “demonic” view of wetlands, centred, above all, on the marsh-malaria connection. More generally, a tradition of negative representations typical of a large part of western culture has formed the background for the policies of reducing and draining wetlands through reclamation land operations (Cavallo, 2014).

The meanings, particularly those of a propagandistic nature, assumed by land reclamation and large-scale hydraulic works in general, are not a specificity of dictatorships, nor even less so of European ones (see for example: Blackmore, 2020), having also found wide representation in democracies. Rather, they can be said to belong to modernity and indeed constitute one of its most important characterising factors. But it is precisely in this aspect that the peculiarity of Nazi Germany emerges; a country more modern than others in key fields such as technology and propaganda (Brüggemeier, Cioc, Zeller, 2005, p. 4) and in which the reclamation projects therefore end up taking on the “totalising” modalities and meanings that will be highlighted in the article through the three proposed cases.

Based on these introductory remarks, we lean towards considering any wetland reclamation (and even more so, any modern one) by its nature as an authoritarian act – a projection of, broadly speaking, a despotic power onto a geographical space. Notions such as despotism and dictatorship in the 20th century have of course been deeply reconsidered, especially with the rise of Nazism, within the category of “totalitarianism”. The literature on totalitarianism and reflections on the modernity of the Third Reich in its most terrible biopolitical outcomes (i.e., the reduction to slavery and extermination of millions of human beings), reveal their similarities and the consonance of their rhetoric when applied to land reclamation techniques. Wetland reclamation works and projects conceived by the Third Reich can therefore be seen as a manifestation of modern totalitarian concepts and attitudes towards natural and human geographical features.

To clarify the point being made here, under Nazi rule modern wetland reclamation was not a simple tool but a performative totalitarian act in itself, employed to force environment, space, and landscape (or try to do so) into a territorial construction typified by absolute coercive land planning, a mirror image of the contemporaneous social and racial policy being undertaken.

After a theoretical framing of the topic of wetland reclamation, the connection between “race reclamation” and land reclamation as a product of Nazi

totalitarianism is proposed. Its coherence in the context of “vital space” policies is subsequently exemplified through the analysis of three significant cases.

Wetland reclamation as a geographical dimension of totalitarianism: the theoretical framework

If we consider Nazi land reclamation works and projects as an expression of “territorial totalitarianism”, occurring, not accidentally, at the historical climax of modernity, the link between wetland reclamations and authoritarian power, stretching from ancient despotism to 20th-century dictatorships, must also be reallocated within the totalitarian category.

To do so it is expedient to assume an authoritative theoretical definition of totalitarianism. According to Hannah Arendt’s classical definition, totalitarianism is an exercise of absolute control and annihilation of subjectivity (Arendt, 1951). Totalitarianism is, therefore, conceived as a form of political oppression, essentially different from others as being characterized by total domination and the use of terror to control the masses, taken to its climax in extermination camps, which under the Nazis went far beyond any previous kind of slavery, penal colony or religious persecution (Rogozinski, 1993). Since Nazi land reclamation projects consisted (or were intended to consist) of absolute control over land and water arrangements, in addition to the annihilation of any existing socio-spatial subjectivity, can we, from this perspective, consider them as an expression of “territorial totalitarianism”?

As an alternative to the Arendt concept, we can refer to the more recent, but no less authoritative, conceptualization by Giorgio Agamben, in whose view modern totalitarianism is seen as

«the instauration through the state of exception² of a legal civil war allowing the physical elimination not only of political opponents, but of entire categories of citizens who, for whatever reason, are not integrated in the political system»³ (Agamben, 2003, p. 11).

One of the essentials of National Socialism was the assumed sameness of descent between the *Führer* and the Aryan people he spearheaded. However, the Nazi doctrine also assumed a shared identity between Aryan blood and German soil. The recurring expression was *Volks- und Kulturboden* (“peoples’ and culture’s soil”), in other words an ethnocultural German area, liable to go far beyond the national German borders resulting from the 1919 Treaty of Versailles. Under the

² The term “state of exception” dates back to Carl Schmitt (1921) and appears again between 1934 and 1948 (Agamben, 2003).

³ «L’instaurazione, attraverso lo stato di eccezione, di una guerra civile legale, che permette l’eliminazione fisica non solo degli avversari politici, ma di intere categorie di cittadini che per qualche ragione risultino non integrabili nel sistema politico». Translations from Italian and German are by the author.

Third Reich's rule, the "non integrated" (nor possible to integrate) people were those whose "racial" or psychophysical conditions were not consistent with this perfect correspondence between the Chief, the race (expressed by the genetic-allusive metonymy of "blood") and, no less important, the geographically manifested element of "soil". Whoever or whatever was marked with the stigma of incongruity became the target of a sharp heterophobia (Bauman, 1989).

Agamben's vision of Nazi totalitarianism includes an explicit biopolitical dimension, stating that racism functioned to introduce caesuras in the biological continuum: between Aryan and non-Aryan, and (among non-Aryans) between Jew and mixed-race, in a process of increasing degradation culminating with the threshold separating the death-camp prisoner from the *muselmann*⁴ (Agamben, 1998). Such a threshold takes shape in the overlapping of the topographical and topological spatialities of death camps, mirroring the overlapping of the cold rationality and barbaric violence of Nazi spatial attitudes (Giaccaria, Minca, 2010). From the biopolitical dimension of totalitarianism derives the mission to obliterate every spurious human being – all those not conforming to the breed of the *Volk* – and produces, in the same way, the creation of the *muselmann*, «the ultimate biopolitical substance isolatable in the biological continuum»⁵ (Agamben, 1998, p. 79), whose elimination could not even be considered as "murder". But thereof also derives the will to suppress or re-design landscape features and, of course, hydrological and paedological structures not conforming to the preached idea of German territory, as well as of German dominated vital space in Eastern Europe.

So, in the light of Agamben's definition, we could rephrase our question: can we consider Nazi wetland reclamation projects and practices as a means to normalize landscape and hydro-paedological features seen as alien and potentially pernicious for the geographical body of the Nation, analogous with the excision of non-integrated persons from its socio-political body?

Based on this hypothesis, the article intends to demonstrate the possibility of reinterpreting wetland reclamation actions as a coherent part, i.e. driven by the same intentions, of the broader totalitarian socio-territorial project implemented by Nazism.

Nazi Totalitarianism, Shoah and land reclamation: the leading thread of modernity

Before answering the questions above, some other considerations should be considered. I refer to the leading thread of modernity which connects Nazi totalitarianism *per se* with its most ineffable "race reclamation" outcome and with its, much more prosaic, land reclamation works and projects.

⁴ The term *muselmann* was widely used by concentration camp inmates to refer to one on the very brink of death from starvation.

⁵ «L'ultima sostanza biopolitica isolabile nel continuum biologico».

If it is impossible to deny the strictly modern nature of Nazi Germany, the concept of totalitarianism itself must be seen in the light of modernity. The Nazi regime represented the more extreme and amoral actualization of principles typical of modernity: efficiency, serial standardization, bureaucratization, and technocracy. This was evident in the setup of an industrial productive system, in the systematic support for scientific research and its technological applications, in the re-organization of state apparatuses, and in the development of infrastructures. In this sense, wetland reclamation projects, being at the same time infrastructural equipment, land planning devices, and boosts to agricultural productivity, were no exception (Cavallo, 2011).

However, the principal evidence for the modern-totalitarian nature of the Third Reich lies in the organization of the Shoah, where modernity revealed, behind the mask of hyper-efficiency, its most disturbing facet. Many authors have underlined the nature of the Nazi extermination of European Jews as an industrial-bureaucratic modern device (Levi, 1989; Feingold, 1993; Hilberg, 2003; Browning, 2004).

Amongst these scholars stands out the voice of Zygmunt Bauman, for whom modernity (with its tensions and powerful instruments of action) was the necessary condition for the Shoah to occur (Bauman, 1989). Being modern (i.e., rational, planned, scientific, and bureaucratic), the extermination went far beyond its premodern equivalents:

«it towers above the past genocidal episodes in the same way as the modern industrial plant towers above the craftsman's cottage workshop, or the modern industrial farm, with its tractors, combines and pesticides, towers above the peasant farmstead with its horse, hoe and hand hand-weeding» (Bauman, 1989, p. 89).

We could equally say: in the same way as modern land reclamation carried out through huge hydraulic and planning projects, large employment of pumping stations, mechanic dredges or reinforced concrete dams, towers over traditional draining strategies.

It should be recalled, however, that the Third Reich's (and Shoah's) modernism was somehow a "reactionary" one, due to the significant role played by mythological, irrational, and primitive violence (Herf, 1986) and to the strong presence of rural and traditional references (Barnes, Minca, 2013; Barnes, 2015).

Whether reactionary or modern, Bauman defines the totalitarian State as a "gardener State", which looks at society as a plot of land not to be left to its spontaneous evolution, but to be designed and maintained according to a precise design. If this happened at a social level, it did so also at a geographical one: totalitarianism, acting as a "social gardener", was simultaneously a heavy-handed area planner, environmental engineer, and landscape architect. Besides gardening, medicine also supplied models for totalitarianism: useful plants/damaging weeds and health/pathology were the reference metaphors. Cancerous or infected tissues were to be removed before their malignant consequences could extend to the entire social body. Hitler's language was full

of images of putrescence, disease, and pestilence (Bauman, 1989): the same rhetoric employed at that time for swamps and marshlands.

Geography, planning, territory, and (vital) space

The notional support for the formulation of a spatial theory and the operational arm of the “gardener State” (taking Bauman’s definition as a synthetic expression for “land planning, environmental engineer, and landscape architect State”) was found in certain scholarly and professional groups, among whom geographers had a relevant role (Rössler, 2001; Preston, 2009; Barnes, Minca, 2013; Barnes, 2015; Giaccaria, Minca, 2016).

The concept of *Lebensraum* (vital space) is a directly geographic one, used for the first time by Friedrich Ratzel. The notion, although originally phyto-zoogeographic, was soon transposed by its conceiver to the anthropo-geographical level, employed to indicate that part of the globe required by the natural vital and expansion needs of a healthy and strongly structured State (Ratzel, 1901). In the cultural context of social Darwinism, the idea of a vital space for people was embraced by Karl Hausofer’s geopolitics: a discourse that found fertile ground in Germany, both at academic and popular levels, aided by the revanchist mood there following the Treaty of Versailles. Moreover, in the 1920s the racial and genetic components of *Lebensraum*, substantially absent in its first formulations, gained ground. Hitler employed the term in *Mein Kampf* (1924) and, with the National Socialist rise to power culminating in 1933, transformed it to a political project, associated with racist assumptions and totalitarian ideology in both words and actions. A similar trajectory can be traced for the *Ostforschung* (“Research on the East”) tradition, born in the Weimar Republic and then merged into the Nazi *Drang nach Osten* (“Thrust Towards the East”; Haar, 2005): the quest for vital space was driven in an unequivocally clear geographical direction.

Initially, the expansionist goals concentrated on the so called *Volks- und Kulturboden*, a sort of ethno-cultural Germanic area on several levels: first, of course, the German Reich initially included within the borders agreed at Versailles; second, the Germanic *Volksboden* (“ethnic territory”), indicating a wider region inhabited by ethnic Germans (even those minorities requiring re-Germanization) and sometimes including the assumed ancient breeding grounds of the Aryan race; and finally, the *Kulturboden* (“cultural area”), an even wider area where German cultural influence, in a broad and never totally clarified sense, was considered preponderant (Rössler, 2001).

With the occupation of Poland and the Soviet Union, *Lebensraum* went far beyond what could be technically considered the *Volks- und Kulturboden*. The ideal totalitarian space drawn by Nazism, for Germany and more evidently for the occupied East, was about deterritorialization and re-territorialization (Barnes, 2015): removing non-integrated peoples and geographies, obtaining a territorial *tabula rasa* and creating new totalitarian geographies for people selected through racial and political criteria (i.e., those who could be genetically considered as

Germans and able to be totally re-Germanized; Heinemann, 2005). In 1943, a Foundation for Geographical Studies, led by Wilfried Krallert, was created for collecting data on Eastern European populating, the basis for “desettlement” (of “incongruent” locals) and resettlement (of ethnic Germans; Rössler, 2001).

Re-territorialization planning was mainly based on central place theory, developed by Walter Christaller, who worked for Konrad Meyer’s *Hauptabteilung Planung und Boden* (Soil and Planning Department⁶; Dwork, Van Pelt 1996; Preston, 2009; Giaccaria, Minca, 2010). The theory entangled a combination of modernist rationality and medieval German archetypes of town-countryside relations. It was then applied in Warthegau (Central Poland) and adopted for some other Polish, Soviet, and Czechoslovakian occupied territories.

Modern land reclamation projects and works, in a broad sense, are found throughout the Nazis’ Chinese-box-like spatial conceptualization of the multi-level *Volks-und-Kulturboden* and vital space (levels to which the forementioned racial degrees or biopolitical thresholds correspond: from the superior Aryan race to the Slavic inferior one, to the Jewish “underman”, to the *muselmann*). Land reclamation was promoted or planned within the borders resulting from Versailles, as well as in German inhabited areas outside Germany and in the “vital space eastwards”, especially within eastern Europe, martyr of contemporary history, where so often wetlands have become, in Snyder’s words, “bloodlands” (Snyder, 2012).

Often land reclamation was a physical precondition of reterritorialization, since it supplied a hydraulically stable and cultivable substratum for central place theory application and resettlements, giving the illusion of operating freely on a totally isotropic space (as it was in Christaller’s model). Moreover, land reclamation acted in labour, concentration, and extermination camps, whose status is highly emblematic: extraterritorial islands in a topographic sense and totally immersed in the topological spatial dynamics of the whole Reich (Giaccaria, Minca, 2010).

At this stage, to better understand how land reclamation projects and practices could be considered an expression of territorial totalitarianism, at least three major cases can be considered: first, the new polders in Schleswig-Holstein; second, the land reclamation project for the Pripet Marshes; and, finally, land reclamation’s metaphor and reality within the Nazi concentration and extermination camp system (fig. 1).

⁶ Sought by Himmler under the *Reichskommissar für die Festigung deutschen Volkstums* (Reich’s Commission for the Strengthening of Germandom).



Figure 1. Location of the areas considered. 1) Dieksanderkoog (formerly Adolf Hitler Koog); 2) Pripet marshes; 3) Auschwitz II-Birkenau

First evidence: Nazi internal land reclamations - the Schleswig-Holstein polders

During the Third Reich some land reclamation was achieved within the borders of Germany to obtain new land for inner colonization. This happened in continental Germany, in the moors of Westphalia and Saxony (Blackbourn, 2006) and, most significantly, along the North Sea shores of Schleswig-Holstein, where some new polders were created (Amenda, 2005; Trende 2011).

The example of Italian Fascism must have had a grip on Hitler's mind. As is well established, land reclamation was central to fascism: it represented the most important land transformation, the greatest public works campaign, and one of the main applications of advanced techniques ever driven by Mussolini (Cavallo, 2011)⁷. For Hitler's Germany, the same role was mainly carried out by the highway network and by massive river regulation works (Schivelbush, 2006), but even direct land reclamation played its role; and some mutual imitation arose here between the two totalitarianisms. In fascist Italy, land reclamation works were also promoted as a means of improving public health (in the fight against malaria) and as a social and moral cleansing, since the wetland peoples' way of

⁷ The most emblematic fascist reclamation being the Agro Pontino (1930-1940).

life was portrayed as primitive, lawless, and passive⁸. But, above all, land reclamation was a cornerstone of Mussolini's propaganda machine, with its capacity to gain vast internal consensus and significant foreign appreciation, including Germany's. This, although some significant differences have been highlighted between the views of nature and logics governing reclamation in the two dictatorial systems (Binde, 1999).

In 1933 the Nazi party leader Hinrich Lohse launched the ambitious ten-year *Generalplan für die Landgewinnung in Schleswig-Holstein* ("General Reclamation Plan for Schleswig-Holstein"), whose goals were to reclaim 43,000 hectares by dams within 10 years, employing 14,000 workers to create 43 new polders (fig. 2) to settle 2,900 people (Trende, 2011). The local tradition of dykes and impoldering was reinterpreted as an instance, but also as a metonymy, of the Nazi battle for space. The press and the radio disseminated Lohse's slogans such as: «Like the smaller polder of Schleswig-Holstein's western coast, so is the whole German Reich»⁹ (Trende, 2011, p. 190).



Figure 2. Sheep grazing along the coastal areas of the Adolf Hitler Koog (personal license, Alamy)

⁸ In the late Thirties, when the racial turn of fascism gathered momentum, land reclamation even assumed a "genetic" connotation, asserting that malarial wetlands caused a degeneration of the "Italic race".

⁹ "Wie der kleinste Koog an der schleswig-holsteinischen Westküste, so ist auch das ganze deutsche Reich ein Koog".

With the 1,333 hectare Adolf Hitler Polder (now called Dieksanderkoog), the 585 hectare Herman Göring Polder (now called Tümlauer-Koog), and some smaller ones, the Schleswig reclamation plan was only very partially realized. Nevertheless, it had a strong symbolic value and a commensurate propagandist resonance, being presented as a triumphant victory over nature, imposing the national socialist industrious order onto the coastal marshes.

Adolf Hitler Polder was conceived of as an exemplary Nazi new land (and landscape) construction: planned by the Reich's offices, it was equipped with serial buildings merging modern rationalism and the traditional Germanic farmhouse style (fig. 3) and dominated by the architect Richard Brodersen's town hall, brimming with Nazi symbols (including the statue of a shovel-wielding worker, symbol of land reclamation and agriculture). The *Neulandhalle*, a community meeting and training centre for the local farmers and their families, is an element of recognised heritage today.



Figure 3. Landscape of the *Adolf Hitler Koog* with its farms (personal license, Alamy)

Effectively, the colonization was managed according to the principle of “blood and soil”: the 93 settlers of the polder were carefully selected through strict criteria of race and proven National Socialist faith, attested by their early enrolment in the party (Amenda, 2005). It is no surprise that the model polder, on 29 August 1935, was inaugurated by Hitler in person.

After 1937, Nazi land reclamation works slowed down, faced with hydraulic and economic difficulties, and then were put aside. With the increasingly aggressive politics of the Third Reich, war was looming: the vital

space, where a new ideal National Socialist landscape was to be built, would no longer be conquered, authoritatively but pacifically, along the seashores, but would be aggressively sought for inland. Once the battle against water moved eastwards, it would combine with much more bloody struggles.

Second evidence: the “Lebensland reclamation” project for the Pripet Marshes

As the urge to conquer new vital space for Germany increased, the obsession with total planning (not only area, but also economic, demographic, social, and racial planning) grew stronger. With the invasion of Poland in 1939 and further with the launch of the *Barbarossa Operation* in 1941, the land reclamation strategy, having been tested internally, was projected onto the conquered spaces of Eastern Europe.

The drainage project for the Pripet (or Pinsk) Marshes in Polesie was one of the more significant plans: a longed-for, but never achieved land reclamation. This project would have exceeded even *Volks- und Kulturboden*, being a truly “Lebensland reclamation”. It was in perfect accord with the aims of Konrad Meyer’s planning office of the *Reichskommissariat für die Festigung des deutschen Volkes* (Reich Commission for Strengthening of Germandom) and with the *Generalplan Ost*, conceived by Heinrich Himmler for the re-landscaping and territorial, ethnic, and social re-organization of vast eastern regions, not only in Poland, but also in Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, and even Caucasus and Kazakhstan (Corni, 2005).

The Pripet Marshes are the largest wetland area in Europe¹⁰: a low-lying plain, stretching mainly along the meandering Pripet River, between today’s southern Belarus and northern Ukraine (with some offshoots in Poland and Russia), where ponds, open swamps, and marshes alternate with wet or flooded forest. In the 1930s, the wetland area, although interrupted by “islands” of dry land¹¹, covered approximately 8,000,000 hectares (Riccardi, 1935), sparsely inhabited by a heterogeneous population (Polish, Ukrainian, Belorussian, and a considerable Jewish minority; Boyd, 1936).

The work by the geographer Martin Bürgener, titled *Pripet-Polessie: Das Bild einer polnischen Ostraumlandschaft* (1939)¹² has been regarded as significant in relation to the Reich’s attitude towards this land (Blackbourn, 2006). Bürgener’s text, at first glance a well-researched regional monograph, negatively emphasizes

¹⁰ As they remain, despite land reclamations realized under different rulers, mainly between the 1870s and the 1950s (Boyd, 1936; Regel 1947).

¹¹ A situation similar to the Naliboki Puscha’s (some 350 kilometers northeast of the Pripet), where the Bielsky brothers led a clandestine Jewish community. Also, the Pripet Marshes offered refuge for Soviet and Polish partisans and Jewish fugitives.

¹² Published when the region still belonged (for a few months) to Poland for its major part.

the “primitive” state of Polesie¹³ and the alien presence of Jews¹⁴, and suggests solutions: a reform in land ownership and land use, the colonization by a more advanced people, the improvement of the urban settlements, and the expansion of land communications (Van Cleef, 1940).

With the invasion of Poland imminent, Bürgener’s suggestions were not innocuous; in spring 1941, a report of the *Reich Office for Regional Planning* described the marshes as having good potential for cultivation, while, in July of the same year, Hans Frank (the General Governor of the Occupied Polish Area) actively proposed their drainage. German efforts were meant to transform the marshes, left un-reclaimed by “idle” Slavic people and hosting a considerable “parasitic” Jewish population, into a productive neat Aryan countryside (and also into a good peat reserve). From the Nazi perspective, there was nothing worth conserving in the marshes (i.e. hardly anybody), as in the majority of eastern lands craved for by the hunger for vital space. The marshes were nothing but stagnant water to be drained in order to reveal the bare ground on which to build a new productive Germanic landscape (Wolschke-Bulmahn, 2005). Nazi heterophobia (Bauman, 1989) had also a territorial and landscape dimension: reclaiming the marshes meant eradicating an unfamiliar sample of “geodiversity” (and biodiversity).

If the reclamation techniques and machinery were to be provided by the Reich’s engineers, the model for the new planning was to be supplied by Christaller’s theory (Barnes, 2016): the synergy between hydraulic engineering and area planning would create an efficient and familiar context for the new German settlers who would repopulate the region after the expulsion of the Slavic inhabitants.

As for the Jews, in Frank’s proposal both existing inhabitants and others deported there were to be subjected to forced labour in land reclamation works¹⁵, with the double advantage of eliminating large numbers through back-breaking work in a harsh environment and initiating a long-term land reclamation project. Later, in 1943, when the marshes had already been cleared of Jews, Werner Essen, responsible for race and settlement policy in *Reichskommissariat Ostland*, was keen to commit the drainage to an unspecified group of resettled Dutch, notably experts in land reclamation (Haar, 2005). But the reclamation plans were left aside due to the events of the war, whereas the Pripet Marshes witnessed the

¹³ In the same years US explorer Louise Boyd viewed Polesie’s “amphibious” way of life with a much more sympathetic and somewhat romantic gaze (Boyd 1936).

¹⁴ The German word used in the text is *landschaftsfremde*, literally “alien, foreign to the landscape” (Bürgener 1939, p. 65).

¹⁵ The 14 August 1941 *Ereignismeldung* (Event Report) of *Einsatzgruppen B* asserts “until the final solution of the Jewish question for the entire continent is achieved, the superfluous Jewish masses can be excellently employed and used for cultivating the vast Pripet swamps, the northern Dnieper swamps as well as those of the Volga” (Arad, 1989, p. 87; also cited in Browning, 2004, p. 516).

first act of the Final Solution with the Pripet River area being one of the first to see indiscriminate mass shootings of Jews¹⁶, carried out between July and August 1941 by the SS Cavalry Brigade and the *Einsatzgruppen B* (Gilbert, 2002; Browning, 2004). There were also attempts to drown Jewish women and children in the marshes, ordered by Himmler in person (Browning, 2004).

Even when the Final Solution took its definitive shape as a death camps machine, the expression “driving people to the marshes” continued to be used by Nazis to allude to extermination. Moreover, as secret documents reveal, some groups of deportees, doomed for extermination, continued to be officially requested for “the reclamation of Pripet marshes” some time after the drainage project had been indefinitely deferred (Blackbourn, 2006, pp. 277-278).

Third evidence: land reclamation inside the concentration and extermination system

The third dimension to corroborate the concept of Nazi wetland reclamation as a manifestation of territorial totalitarianism must be looked for inside the slave labour, concentration, and extermination system, where Eastern *Lebensraum* became *Tottensraum* (Agamben, 1998).

While in general Jewish forced labourers from ghettos and concentration camps were employed in, among other tasks, hydraulic arrangements such as river regulation and land reclamation, this kind of work is particularly true of the major complex of camps built in eastern Upper Silesia, in the district of Auschwitz (Blackbourn, 2006).

The Auschwitz concentration and extermination system took form between spring 1940 and November 1944, by then numbering three major camps (Auschwitz I-Stammlager, Auschwitz II-Birkenau and Auschwitz III-Monowitz, next to the I.G. Farben *Buna Werke* plant for production of synthetic rubber) and around 45 working sub-camps (industrial, armament, mining, and agricultural) scattered about the district. The region is characterized by the significant presence of wetlands, and the core of the system, that is to say Auschwitz I and II, was placed in the riverine plain between the Vistula and its tributary Sola, a particularly swampy terrain subject to periodical flooding¹⁷. Fritz Bracht, *Gaulaiter* of *Oberschlesien*, disagreed on the choice of the site precisely for hydrogeological and environmental reasons, but Himmler’s belief that Auschwitz was an ideal location, with its abundant water supply and its good rail connections, prevailed.

¹⁶ The secret name of the operation, systematically conducted along both river’s shores, was exactly *Pripiatsee* (Pripet Marshes).

¹⁷ Some parts of the camps, especially in Birkenau, are currently subject to flooding (even more so now that maintenance drainage works are no longer carried out): this happens quite frequently in the basements of the crematoriums of the *Zentral Sauna* (Forges, Biscarat, 2011).

In addition to other economic functions, the camp system was also meant to be the centre of an experimental agricultural estate run by ethnic Germans resettled from Romania: this required reclamation works such as the excavation of drainage canals, the building of dykes along the Vistula and the maintenance of fishponds¹⁸ (Dwork and Van Pelt, 1996). Land reclamation was also a necessary preliminary to the planned transformation of the settlement of Auschwitz into a model German city for 60,000 inhabitants.

Without such land reclamation even the machine of the Final Solution would become stuck in the mud. In the integrated productive facility and death factory (Arendt, 1951; Snyder, 2012) destined to become the symbol of the Shoah, the efficiency of the camps was only made possible by land reclamation works carried out by the deportees (fig. 4).



Figure 4. Auschwitz Birkenau (1941), construction of a drainage channel at crematorium II (Yad Vashem Archive, Album Number FA157/268, Archival Signature 951, <https://collections.yadvashem.org/en/photos/54302>). Among thousands of other images, the Yad Vashem Archive collects many photographic testimonies of the land reclamation work carried out by deportees in Nazi concentration camps

¹⁸ The latter was the women's task in the satellite camp of Budy, 4.5 km southwest of Auschwitz I (Forges, Biscarat, 2011).

In Auschwitz I, the internees were forced to widen the camp, to level out the soil and to dig drainage ditches, but this was even more evident at Auschwitz II–Birkenau, whose area was notably marshy person. Here Soviet, Polish, and Jewish prisoners drained and prepared the terrain, and then built the blocks, according to precise plans. The SS employed the deportees in the digging of 13 kilometres of drainage ditches, converging in a main trunk canal named *Königsgraben* (King’s Canal) flowing into the Vistula River. Today we can still see the canal on the southwest side of the camp, while on the wooden ceiling of a male block nearby there is a painting by an unknown deportee, showing the harsh working conditions during its excavation. The digging of the main canal is also conveyed in several photographs, as are many other Auschwitz land reclamation works (fig. 4).

Yet the wetland nature of the location of Auschwitz was never totally overcome (fig. 5): the camps remained unhealthy places¹⁹, especially for weakened bodies, with SS doctors reporting a malaria outbreak in 1942. Some places, moreover, were intentionally not reclaimed, as is the case of the infamous “ash pond” where the ashes from Crematorium IV and V were thrown. Due to rapid filling, the pond was periodically dredged, and the resulting mud and ashes used as fertilizer in the farms of the satellite agricultural camps.



Figure 5. Project of the expansion – never carried out – of Auschwitz I (30 April 1942); still marshy areas are visible on the upper left side of the plan (Yad Vashem Archives, O.51/523-565)

Contemporary revisionist discourse (especially circulating on the web) relies instrumentally on the marshy nature of the site as an alleged proof of its thesis. For example, it is frequently asserted that it would not have been possible

¹⁹ Some survivors testify that, on rainy days, the packed earth floor of the barracks turned into a swamp.

to bury bodies in mass graves or burn them in ditches due to water stagnation and the high groundwater table, which would have quickly filled any ground pit²⁰. In response to this assertion, even in a wetland environment some areas are drier than others, and land reclamation works were specifically designed to dry the soil and lower the groundwater table.

Another revisionist argument (somehow implicitly conflicting with the previous) is that land improvement activities such as reclamation would have been «incompatible with the supposed extermination aim of the Lager»²¹. On the contrary, land reclamation was perfectly compatible, and even interconnected, with totalitarian purposes, including the extermination of the non-integrated (Jews, Roma, and Sinti, Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals, political opponents).

Survivors, on their part, attest that land reclamation was a means of extermination itself, as is clear in the words of a former Birkenau deportee:

«In the course of digging and building the foundations, the prisoners worked in the autumn, in winter and freezing conditions, standing waist-deep in water [...] I firmly believe that the choice of the building site – on wet ground, even though they could have built on ground that was dry and more suitable for construction – a choice made by professionals... was designed to exterminate the prisoners who worked on the construction and those who inhabited the buildings»²².

Conclusion

Huge land reclamation works require high technique, planning, and profound financial investment, in addition to the coordination of plenty of workers: hence why they have been promoted, not exclusively but very frequently, in the framework of authoritarian forms of government. More specifically, the elements of control, gigantism and demiurgic transformation of nature made land reclamation particularly beloved by 20th century dictatorships and totalitarian regimes.

Among Third Reich territorial politics, wetland reclamation was not the most important and, certainly, is not the best known. Nevertheless, its analysis reveals how it was perfectly analogous to Nazi ideology, representing a concrete expression of totalitarianism on a territorial and geographic level (consonant – and entwined – with totalitarianism in its socio-political meaning). Both Nazi land reclamations and racial politics (including the “Final Solution” of the Jewish

²⁰ E.g. <https://liberthalia.wordpress.com/2014/02/16/cucciolo-di-agnelli/>.

²¹ Words accompanying figure 4 in a denialist blog <http://olo-truffa.myblog.it/falda-freatica-auschwitz>, no longer accessible today.

²² Record by Alfred Czesław Przbylski (Yad Vashem, Exhibitions *The Architecture of murder: the Auschwitz-Birkenau Blueprints*, <https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/through-the-lens/auschwitz-blueprints.asp>. Access March 07 2023).

question) bear the marks of the “reactionary modernism” (Herf, 1986) typical of the Third Reich. On the one hand modern techniques, bureaucracy, and industrialization played a major role in hydraulic engineering, as well as in “social engineering” and in extermination. On the other hand, land reclamation does, nonetheless, require traditional work (symbolized by the shovel); and it finally leads, mostly, to new agricultural lands, a concept which is functional to a certain reactionary and mythic ruralism. The drying out of “putrefying and insidious” swamps, for its part, links up to the irrational component of Nazism’s collective imagination.

Most of all, the three cases I have considered reveal two aspects: first, that wetland reclamation was present at every level of Nazi spatialities (within Germany, in the conquered territories, and in the topographical/topological dynamics of the universe of concentration); secondly, there emerges a clear link between ethnic cleansing and “landscape cleansing” (Wolschke-Bulmahn, 2005), between “water drainage” and “human drainage”. Between land reclamation and “racial reclamation”.

The pseudo-scientific racism and the geopolitical vision of the Third Reich (mutually strengthened by the concepts of “blood and soil” and “vital space”) met in land reclamation. So that the strict control of people (within the Reich) and their annihilation (in the occupied Eastern territories and in extermination camps) could be inscribed, both in concrete actions and in visionary projects, in the obliteration of wetlands.

It is true that «when [...] Primo Levi [...] called Auschwitz “the ultimate drainage point of the German universe”, he had thought himself into the head of its persecutors, for whom drainage was both metaphor and reality» (Blackbourn, 2006, pp. 274-275, quoting Levi, 1989).

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NAZI WETLAND RECLAMATIONS AS "TERRITORIAL TOTALITARIANISM"

– The article focuses on wetland reclamation works carried out, or planned, by the Nazi regime. Three major cases are considered: the new polders in Schleswig-Holstein (northern Germany), the land reclamation project for the Pripet Marshes (southern Belarus and northern Ukraine), land reclamation's metaphor and reality within the Nazi concentration and extermination camps (Auschwitz-Birkenau). Several similarities

emerge between these projects for “normalising” the landscape and its natural hydro-paedological regime, considered as alien and pernicious for the geographical body of the Nation, with the excision of non-integrated persons from its socio-political body. According to Arendt’s (1951) classical definition, the totalitarianism is an exercise of absolute control and annihilation of subjectivity; considering that Nazi land reclamation projects consisted of absolute control over land and water arrangements with the contemporary annihilation of any existing socio-spatial subjectivity, we can conceive these projects as an expression of “territorial totalitarianism”. In a similar direction leads the interpretation of the Nazi reclamation projects within the conceptual framework of the Nazi biopolitical project proposed by Agamben (1998). Arranged within this framework of meanings, the contribution offers an interpretation of the socio-territorial transformation project operated, through land reclamation, by Nazi Germany that is more in keeping with the political-ideal meanings that drove it.

Keywords: Wetland Reclamations; Nazi Totalitarianism; Adolf Hitler Polder; Pripet Marshes; Auschwitz-Birkenau.

LE BONIFICHE NAZISTE DELLE ZONE UMIDE COME “TOTALITARISMO TERRITORIALE” – L’articolo analizza le opere di bonifica delle zone umide realizzate, o progettate, dal regime nazista. Vengono presi in considerazione tre casi principali: i polder dello Schleswig-Holstein (Germania settentrionale), il progetto di bonifica delle paludi di Pripiat (Bielorussia meridionale e Ucraina settentrionale), la metafora e la realtà della bonifica all’interno dei campi di concentramento e di sterminio nazisti (Auschwitz-Birkenau). Emergono diverse analogie tra questi progetti di “normalizzazione” del paesaggio e del suo regime idro-pedologico naturale, considerato estraneo e pernicioso per il corpo geografico della Nazione, con la radicale esclusione delle persone non integrate dallo stesso corpo socio-politico operato dal nazismo. Secondo la classica definizione di Arendt (1951), per la quale il totalitarismo è da considerarsi come un esercizio di controllo assoluto e di annientamento della soggettività, e tenuto conto che i progetti di bonifica nazisti qui analizzati richiedevano il controllo assoluto della terra e delle acque, oltre al contemporaneo annientamento di qualsiasi soggettività socio-spaziale esistente, tali programmi possono essere considerati come un’espressione di “totalitarismo territoriale”. Come tali essi emergono anche collocati nel quadro concettuale del progetto biopolitico nazista proposto da Agamben (1998). Disposto in questo ambito di significati, il contributo offre una chiave interpretativa del progetto di trasformazione socio-territoriale operato tramite le bonifiche dalla Germania nazista. Ne emerge l’aderenza al più generale quadro di significati politico-ideali del nazismo stesso.

Parole chiave: Bonifica delle zone umide; Totalitarismo nazista; Polder Adolf Hitler; Paludi di Pripiat; Auschwitz-Birkenau.