

A transnational history of reservoir construction in the Alps from 1870 to 1974

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The postdoc-project "A transnational history of reservoir construction in the Alps from 1870 to 1974" examines the initiatives and building activities implemented since the end of the 19th century to exploit hydroelectric power resources within the transalpine arc. The focus lies on reservoirs that went into operation in Switzerland, Italy and Austria. This study period was chosen because the expansion of Europe-wide electricity grids and the growing need for energy resources resulting from the industrialisation led to a hitherto unprecedented increase in the number of new storage lakes in the Alps by the late 1940s. The underlying processes that contributed to this intensive phase of Alpine hydropower development as well as the consequences for the respective regions after the early 1950s are taken into account.

The development and use of hydropower often involved cross-border resource conflicts, which is why the investigation follows a transnational and environmental history approach. Moreover, the study focuses on how remote Alpine valleys evolved from relatively poor rural areas to resource-rich regions, which in the eyes of investors promised substantial, energy-based profits and thus were harnessed accordingly. Quite often whole villages and valley communities were expropriated and resettled because of the construction of new reservoirs. Furthermore, the expansion of Alpine hydro technology had serious ecological impacts on the watersheds of newly built basins sparking heated civil societal debates. Hence, the ecological and social consequences of the dam construction for the surrounding ecosystems and their residents are discussed. The project aims to uncover the history and provide the first comprehensive overview of cross-border hydropower exploitation in the Alps.