

# *The Marshall Plan and the Great Acceleration of Europe*

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When drought hit central Europe in 1947, an already very bad state of affairs got even worse. The origin of the Marshall Plan (MP) lay in these extreme weather conditions, challenging previous aid schemes. An outstandingly cold and harsh winter 1946–1947 pushed energy provision, industrial production, railroad transportation, and heating into crisis. Hunger, cold, and missing prospects had left the population exhausted when drought threatened an already shaky system of food rationing. Faced with the intensified activities of communists in France, Italy, and Greece, but also facing increasing doubts about the efficiency of existing programs in Congress, the Truman administration needed to react. They unified differing aid schemes, built a centralized aid allotment administration and novel international organizations (ECA/MSA and OEEC) by which they linked aid to the U.S. political agenda. These organizations maintained U.S. interests with a global resource procurement and monitoring network and by guiding transfers of U.S. technologies and knowledge.

Economic folklorists hailed and still hail the MP as decisive intervention that pushed participating nations towards the post-WWII ‘economic miracle’. More skeptical studies offer anti-American interpretations of the MP as large export program, carried out to avoid a recession of the U.S. economy. Researchers currently agree that the aid and its political conditionality was merely a marginal aspect of a far wider political agenda: the co-construction of an ‘empire by invitation’ that linked elites on both sides of the Atlantic and solidified U.S. global hegemony. Although it would have a lot to offer for this field, environmental historians have not taken up the MP as a research topic. This would include the procurement of crude oil by the U.S.A. in the Middle East, the mass diffusion of crude-oil-dependent technologies, the integration of Europe by large-scale mobility and power infrastructure, but also the transfer of an economic system that was based on neo-liberal economic principles, open trade, and capital flows. These aspects of the MP have been given particular attention in the history of technology, economic history, or the history of international diplomacy.

In my project, I will start from these debates but will develop a socio-ecological and/or environmental historical reading of the concerted aid effort. An important topic in these fields is path dependency and their side effects. In this project, the Marshall Plan is conceived as a political-economic intervention that favored “lock-in” effects into technically accelerated development paths and thus contributed to a phenomenon that earth system scientists call The Great Acceleration. This is generally understood to mean a profound change in social-natural relations that, accompanied by the widespread use of petroleum-driven technologies and historically unique economic growth rates, marked the transition to the second phase of the Anthropocene.

By doing so, this project can not only contribute to a deepened understanding of the biophysical impact the Marshall Plan had on European landscapes and societies but also allows us to tackle the question of how The Great Acceleration unfolded after 1950.