S-40 – Politics in Constructing Infrastructure

International Committee for the History of Technology

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Abstract:
For colonial powers, improving infrastructures was vital for economic development since the early nineteenth century. Nevertheless, circumstances in colonies were often more challenging than Europe in various respects. Earlier historians have claimed how Britain put efforts to develop infrastructures, such as ship transport, harbours, telegraph lines, roads, and railways, of its colonies in order to consolidate its power and boost trade. This session examines whether this was really the case for Britain, Germany and Portugal while they looked after their interests in Africa and Europe of the 19th and 20th century. Because of many stakeholders, it was necessary to pay attention to diplomacy and politics in order to complete extensive construction projects. The first paper examines political constellations in constructing railways in a Portuguese colony, Mozambique from the 1870s to the early 20th century.
The second paper deals with the rise and fall of the tramway and cable transport system in early 20th century Andalusia and nearby regions. This lifecycle of about fifty years did not depend only on internal factors of these businesses but also on the general state of the Spanish economy, the level of local technological expertise and diplomatic conflicts.
Daniel Headrick argued more than thirty years ago that technologies were primarily "Tools of Empire", introduced by imperial powers to control and exploit their subjects. On the basis of some case studies related to Colonial Dar es Salaam, the third paper discusses possibilities to challenge this traditional narrative of domination and subjugation.
A weak point of colonial powers was the lack of realistic knowledge and sufficient experience on the regions under their rule. The last paper of this session works on this issue using a groundnut scheme in post-WWII Tangayika, Africa, as a case study.

Keywords: History of Technology – Infrastructures – Colonial policy – Railbound transportation – Technological imperialism.

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