



# Aquacritical Vistula: the deep mapping of literary sources within the emerging historiography of flooding (1934)

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## Abstract

This article focuses on an aquacritical reading of literary sources within the emerging historiography of flooding. In 1934 the largest flood in the history of the Second Polish Republic (1918–1939) happened. After summer torrential rains the tributaries of the main river in Poland, the Vistula River, disrupted the functioning of the centrally-managed and newly recovered state. By using a deep mapping tool for river-related discourse analysis and for historical river management approach, the authors discuss different accounts of the 1934-flood: firstly, works from the historical period (J. Kurek, K. I. Gałczyński, relevant newspapers) and secondly, a contemporary reference to 1934 and flood narrative in prose (M. Płaza). All these literary sources contain numerous renamings of the Polish flood management dictionary but have one historical feature in common: they anchor the modern militarization of language in flood narratives (the fight against the river) and the symptomatic discourse of power and control (ruling over the river). Finally, these sources led the authors to the conclusion that both the Polish experience of World War I and later subsequent armed conflicts, as well as the impact of militarized state policy left their stamp on the flood lexicon and deepened the divide between humans and disempowered rivers.

**Keywords** Aquacriticism · Floods · Historiography of rivers · Vistula River · Second Polish Republic · Deep mapping

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It is time to re-imagine the river (Strang 2020).

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## Aquacritical frame and deep mapping a national river

In 1934, the Vistula River experienced a catastrophic flood. This flooding of the most symbolically loaded Polish river, and the declaration of a ‘state of emergency’ provide an especially interesting example in the modern history of hydro-infrastructure and management because of Polish ‘frustrated nationalism’ (as it was pointed out by one of the reviewers to this text). Polish partitions and wars contributed to the fact that the Vistula was not ‘modernized’ and improved the way that other European rivers were in the 18th and 19th centuries. But they also shaped a military language that was specifically used to describe the Vistula flooding in 1934 and after, reflecting the frustrated experiences of WWI and (implicitly) shaping the way the rivers were understood and treated throughout modern period up to now.

To investigate this phenomenon of nationally driven militarisation over the rivers (in Poland), we read three different texts and apply ‘deep mapping’ practices (Bodenhamer et al. 2022) as a method of distanced, geo-trackable, in-depth literary analysis presented in what we are calling an aquacritical frame. Aquacritical research corresponds with the hydro-critical (Winkiel 2019) or hydro-poetical (Ryan 2021) interpretations attentive to the agencies of water and to the ways that water is portrayed and perceived within sources of culture. But it also differs from them as a method of reading the sources (here, literary texts) within and outside of the dominant hydro-logies of science and technology (the prefix ‘hydro’ is more common there than ‘aqua’). An aquacritical approach is ‘critical’ in focusing on the politicised aspects of water perceptions in the past and uses the literary archive to challenge the ways we reconstruct water histories. As such, it implies a broader non-Polish aquacritical historiography and integrates ecohumanities alongside studies of political action and national identity formation in managing such culturally meaningful bodies of water like the Vistula River.

Two narratives about the Vistula illustrate this need to develop aquacritical historiography: a river which is useful and symbolic. The usefulness of the Vistula comes with the political borderlines attached to the river, as well as military and economic activities (Kutrzeba 1922). Historians emphasised that until the end of the First Polish Republic (1795) the Vistula was navigable, useful for transporting goods, that it was ‘the great trade route for the Polish Commonwealth’ (Kutrzeba 1922, p. 6) and ‘the most heavily trafficked transport artery in the world’ (Stanielewicz 1995, p. 164). In practice this meant an earlier restriction on the building of river barriers, but some historians of hydro-infrastructure have seen this as benefitting the river itself, since it was possible for the Vistula and migrating fish (and not only traders and raftsmen) to flow freely (Depczyński 2008). Over the centuries, more dams, weirs and dykes tamed the rivers of western Europe but the Vistula – apart from the dam in Włocławek – remained seen as a free-flowing river. Largely embanked, but only partially canalized (in its Cracow section, the former Galician region annexed by Austria) and regulated (the former Prussian section), the Vistula would become colonised in terms of symbolic language of fierce Polish nationalism. This language intensified at the time of the November Uprising (1830). From that moment on, the Vistula as ‘the queen of all rivers’ began to symbolise Poland’s lost crown (Brodziński 1998 [1831], p. 28). Described as ‘the mother of all Polish rivers’ (Flatt 1854, p. 18) in Polish literary canon and historiography, the river represented the annals of Poland’s national history (Borowy 1932; Hertz 1965; Bachórz 2009).

It is possible that this narrative of national liberation has overwhelmed the Vistula's own history as a dangerous and flooding river. And, in consequence, the poetics and imaging of a real, non-allegorical force of nature, including flood narratives which have the potential to generate adaptive responses, are still hidden in Polish national canon due to the history of partitions. Historical studies on floods in Poland provide evidence of the frequency and wide variation of the Vistula's flooding patterns (Bogucka 1957; Cyberski et al. 2006; Popiołek 2017), as well as certain elements of non-anthropocentric language which flavoured the earliest historiographical discourse. In the *Annales Regni Poloniae* written in 12 books between 1455 and 1480 by Jan Długosz, these elements involve the elemental force of the flooding river (2012, p. 133, 212). The work communicates the river's own way of participating in the historical events like for example during the wars with Ruthenians: 'the Vistula, for some time stained with human blood, blending red with its proper shades, let those watching see the full extent of its breadth' (p. 243). Such early-modern language empowered and enlivened rivers (and other ecological actors) but gradually gave way to the anthropocentric history of the subjugation of rivers, and from the 18th century onwards involved the language of correcting and disciplining them in terms of engineering discourses and projects.

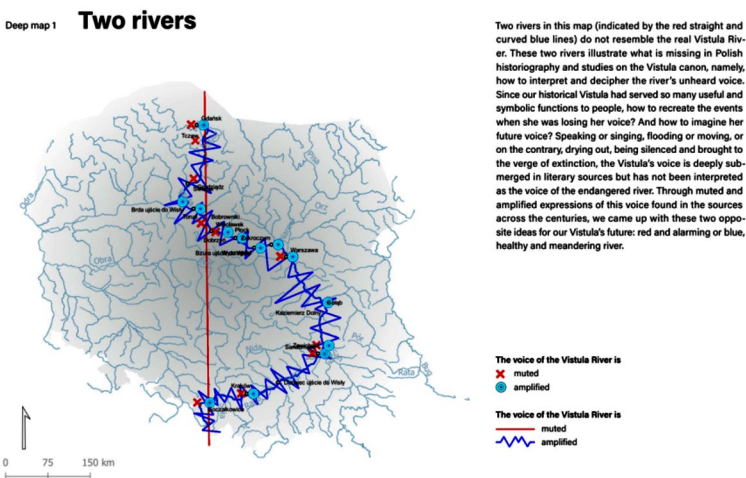
Waterborne trade on the Vistula ended only much later, as population and economic acceleration in the 19th century influenced the development of railway networks by three colonising Great Poland empires of Austria, Prussia and Russia (Buczek 1960). As with other European arteries, the river became more intensively 'modernised' by 'foreign' authorities for example in the main cities like Warsaw. This happened in line with knowledge at the time about ways of dealing with the threat of flooding which had only begun to be described as *catastrophic* in that particular century (Bieńczyk 2017). For example, research shows that the floods in 1813, 1844, and 1855 categorised as 'catastrophic' were no more significant than those from previous huge floods in 1540, 1611, or 1747 (Cyberski et al. 2006, p. 814). Thus, it is the discourse about the catastrophic risks of flooding, as presented at that time in *Słownik geograficzny [Geographical Dictionary]*, rather than the actual flooding which explain why the 'works to regulate [the Vistula] in the real sense of this word' began only around 1864 (Chlebowski 1893, p. 592). And yet, due to disproportionalities in the hydro-technical management of the Vistula during the three partitions of Poland perpetrated by Russia, Prussia and Austria (between 1772 and 1795, which lasted until 1918), as well as to climate factors which led to its waters icing over for months each year (Jeziński 1982), it did not become a channel riddled with barriers like the Rhine or the Thames, and despite large-scale loss of its ichthyofauna, it remains a living river in the ecological sense. Whereas in the 19th century, the river could be described as 'the almost dead Vistula' as defined by its loss of economic and trading importance (Kutrzeba 1922, p. 51) – the living-dead river was categorised there only due to its economic usefulness, for rafting purposes. Understanding that the river continued its ecological life due to Poland's partitions was neither included in this modern historiography, nor in a reborn national state in 1918.

We recognise here a potential for a new historiographical interpretation of the Vistula when Poland reappeared in maps, subjugated but revived, when eventually both the nation and its river survived. Such historiography could have reopened what the term 'living river' actually means. How did the river manifest in the past its active, agential nature to tell us something more about the complex and resilient histories of the people and rivers? How did the Vistula escape the utilitarian-symbolic model of being equated with the economical commodification by the imperial forces or serving as a metonymic figure of national

connection throughout the 19th century. Major events of floods can challenge this anthropocentric historiography, as in the context of Polish history and troubled nationalism. The rebellious, flooding river could not be commodified and discarded its symbolical patriotic costume of Polishness attached to it by the national bards especially in the 19th century literature (e.g. Flatt 1854; Brodziński 1998 [1831]). More importantly for the aquacritical focus, the Vistula with its powerful network of tributaries and mountain streams manifested its monstrous power over people who during the major floods experienced what a living river means: how does it sound, move, and take over. This is particularly evident in literary sources in which attempts to render floods, often separate from the symbolisms of the ‘great [Biblical] flood’, anthropomorphise or animate rivers via bestial and feminine poetics as being danger laden – the Vistula included (e.g. Grochowski 1986 [1605]; Ziontek 2014 [1644]; Koźmian 1858 [1780–1815]; Czajkowski 1845; Zmorski 1866).

This is why our aquacritical analyses of literary sources involve so-called ‘deep interpretative mapping’ where floods, for example, amplify historical expressions of the river’s unheard voice in the anthropocentric historiography that is juxtaposed with movement (meander) in a series of critical cartographical materials (deep maps). The index of texts we analysed (from the early-modern period to the contemporaneity) to create a series of deep maps is provided in the open-accessed *Aquacritical Atlas of the Vistula River* (Barcz and Waclawik 2022). The *Atlas* allowed us to visualise a dichotomous model of a natural and commodified river discourse for further studies on the historical space called Poland as a negotiated area between the river and people. This is exemplified in the first introductory map of the *Atlas* (Fig. 1) where we plotted both literary texts in which the river is disturbed and muted (the red straight line) and in which it ‘speaks’, i.e. moves, meanders, floods, or in other words – represents any of the river’s ecological realm (the blue lines).

Literary scholarship concerned with water often overlooks its spatial and environmental aspects. To address this, we have borrowed tools from geography that are used to create what we are calling a ‘deep map’ – a change-sensitive representation of a river’s meander over time. There are other examples of deep maps as graphic representations (Springett

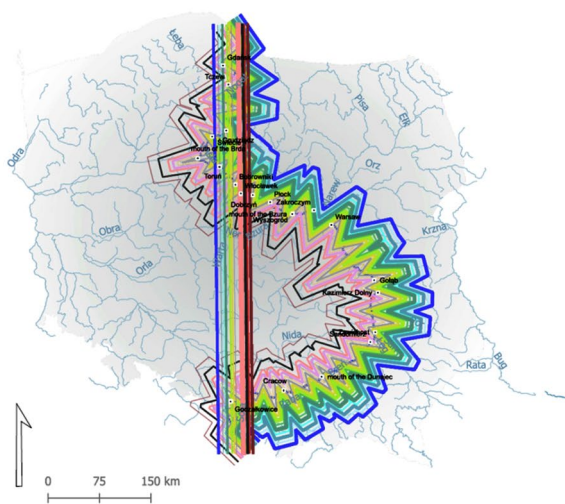


**Fig. 1** The first deep map in its original form as presented in the *Atlas* (Barcz and Waclawik 2022, p. 3)

2019) and as cognitive and analytical tools (Alves and Queiroz 2015). Our deep map represents in graphic form the changing discourses around the Vistula in our corpus of source materials. To prepare our corpus, we collected 164 canonical samples: 137 of these represent the metaphorical voice of the Vistula categorised as either ‘amplifying’ or ‘muting’ the river’s agency within the source text (Fig. 2).

In mapping the sources which describe floods caused by the Vistula and its tributaries we notice that in 1934, the date of the largest flood in the history of the Second Polish Republic (Gierszewski 1982), there was a certain key change in the narrative and perception of floods – the flood seems to have activated a previously unheard-of military lexicon of *an armed conflict* between people and the river. This military language took on a spatial dimension. Military jargon demands precision, for the enemy to be defined, for actions to be specific, for individuals to be named and engaged, by which we mean placed in spatial contexts. That which previously involved and affected individuals or specific settlements became an element of widespread operations and processes, the subject of tactics, schemes, manoeuvres, and even military strategies, as well as planning documents created by the newly established territorial administrative apparatus. This 1934 example seems to correlate with the enduring change in how the flooding river has been perceived: in the following study we review and analyse it from an aquacritical perspective, and ask further how the deep mapping of literary sources can strengthen a distanced and less anthropocentric interpretation of historical floods.

Deep map 2 **Aquacritical references**



In this map, we substitute the Vistula’s aquacritical references in stripes (muted river) and curved, meandering lines (amplified river) with various and sometimes semantically loaded colours (e.g. war is black, revitalisation is green). Again, there are two powerful and resonating but opposite interpretations of the river’s voice represented in Polish narrative sources found across the centuries (from the early modern – 15<sup>th</sup> century’s Jan Długosz to the contemporary flooding cycle of stories inscribed into *Skoruf* by Maciej Piłza), which balance each other. To aquacritically reconstruct the Vistula’s voice, we need to be equally acquainted with both perspectives: when the river is amplified and muted.

The voice of the Vistula River is

AMPLIFIED [69]	MUTED [68]
appropriation [1]	appropriation [15]
war [3]	anthropomorphisation [8]
historiography [3]	war [8]
worship [5]	contamination [1]
myth [1]	historiography [15]
flood [4]	flood [2]
co-agency [5]	co-agency [3]
revitalisation [10]	revitalisation [3]
animalisation [3]	mobility [6]
mobility [10]	voice [1]
voice [4]	ecosystem [1]
ecosystem [8]	riverscape [7]
purification [4]	
riverscape [7]	

Fig. 2 The second deep map in its original form (Barcz and Waclawik 2022, p. 6)

## The militarisation of language in relation to rivers in the context of the flood of 1934

Floods, which in traditional riparian cultures came from the outside world (from some non-human dimension) and were treated as a manifestation of divine wrath – the effect of supernatural phenomena and the work of the river itself, something which could not be tamed – were expressed in magical terms combined with language that animated rivers. It is noticed particularly well by a historian, Maria Bogucka, who writes about the Vistula: ‘It represented not only a convenient route, for transporting various goods and relatively rapid travel. In its distant epoch, the Vistula is a force which caused feelings of unease for all those who lived close to its shores. Like other elemental forces, such as fire, it was both kind and mean’ (1957, p. 29). In other words, if from the 15th to the end of the 19th centuries, cataclysms related to flooding rivers were for communities which lived close to rivers, most often peasants, explained in terms of the Biblical paradigms, then the language used to describe floods belonged to the same categorical lexicon. ‘The Vistula, like God, blesses some, curses others’ it was said (Odyniec 1982, p. 58). Recent Polish historiographers analyse some examples of efforts being made to manage the course of natural processes – such as in the Enlightenment narrative and in the development of environmental engineering, with their beliefs in progress and in controlling the elements (Czeczot and Pospiszyl 2021). However, here, we want to indicate another noticeable redefinition of meanings related to the phenomena of flood catastrophes which occurred not only in 19th but also in 20th century literature. The character of these changes is connected – in our opinion – with experiences related to the WWI and historical (national liberation) phenomena which defined the socio-political construction of the Second Polish Republic. Both these factors shaped the forms of flood narratives and the unique language used to describe them, which by becoming decidedly more militaristic and technological, reinforced by experiences of the Great War, described floods in terms of military warfare, while flooding rivers compared to *enemy forces* crossing borderlines set and defined by human decree. Passing rains or heavy downfalls have not become such an enemy. The river, even though changeable, can always be laid to blame.

Two linguistic codes are characteristic in modelling the modern (and post-war world) flood literature we are analysing: that which is military and warring, by which we mean drawn from descriptions of military conflicts, clashes with traditional folk knowledge represented by the residents of floodplains. This includes imitating the voice of Vistula as in the poem *Rzeki [Rivers]* by Julian Przyboś (signed: ‘1934, the year of the flood’), in which a peasant ‘called out the Vistula’ as if he knew how to speak the river’s elemental force (1998, p. 83)<sup>1</sup>.

The first text which exemplifies this *two rivers’ model* mappable via Polish literature is *Woda wyżej [The Waters Above]* by Kurek (1976 [1935]). This text, published after the flood of 1934, illustrates the discourse going on in the centralized Second Polish Republic. In relation to neighbouring countries, Poland is relatively late in its attempts to ‘modernise’ its natural habitats because of lack of funds as the state restored and rebuilt itself not only after WWI, but also after the Partitions of the previous centuries. In this text we follow the attempts to replace traditional relations between people and rivers with national government intervention and the promise that floods can be managed and contained. Historically, this

<sup>1</sup> All longer literary fragments, if not stated otherwise, were translated by Marek Kazmierski.



included also a radically new approach in hydro-engineering: 'The aim of modern meliorations was therefore not emancipation, liberation from oppressive rulers, but the replacement of the power the river had over pre-modern peoples, such as the meandering river, with the power of a centrally controlled state apparatus' (Czeczot and Pospiszyl 2021, p. 73).

Kurek places the flood of 1934 in the centre of this narrative via a fictionalised journal featuring Cadet Leon Makara (the central protagonist), which is for us an interesting historiographical and hydrographical document. The journal refers to a flood caused by July rains and the breaking of highland riverbanks, especially the river Dunajec: 'The Vistula became a small tributary of a great river once upon a time called the Dunajec. Today, they form a conglomerate of many rivers, flowing along a single riverbed' (1976, p. 96). Rivers thus combined, resulting in flooding which killed more than 100 persons, leaving 150,000 persons in need of food supplies and aid with medical, sanitary and housing provision (Tuszko 1982; Szuba 2012). All these contexts feed into Kurek's flood narrative but more significantly – the war front becomes transposed onto the realities of the crisis caused by flooding, something referred to as the 'flood front lines', as in the opening scene in which Cadet Makara is called up for military service:

Yeah, yeah, Makara sir. We are enlisting you. As in times of war. You are to be ready to serve in twenty-four hours time, then off you go to the flood front lines. Many of our lads have already gone off to fight there. (p. 7)

Wars against rivers become a reflection of the battles waged during WWI (though this intensification of military speak can also be treated as a linguistic echo of the war between Poles and the Bolsheviks). This includes descriptions of digging trenches to defend against the enemy (flood lines); of listening out for coming attacks (the sound of a culminating wave) and scaring away (of water); as well as initiating strategies for defence and repelling: the erection of embankments and entanglements. The cadet, then, self-motivates himself as during the war: 'A battling spirit rose up in him, alien to all armies during peace time, the only tactic: not to give in to the waters. << We have to triumph. The river will roll back, it's backing off now>>' (p. 98).

Kurek describes all activities on the flood front lines as if this were a tactical map – in the tiniest detail, with references to spatial relations: telephone lines connect specific townships (p. 43, 122), ships and boats coursing between them (p. 53, 144), bridges collapsing, and damage being inflicted on infrastructure (p. 61, 169). Every tree bank where flood victims take refuge is to be found in a specific ravine and specific town (p. 95). In-depth knowledge of local territories is needed to fight the coming threat, and so battling the flood becomes a question of military tactics. Thereby, we find out the local peasant population can *read* the river's map, that which the river flows over, what it flows past, and what the trajectory of the flood might be (p. 28, 39). A deep map therefore involves not only spatial topography, but also the hidden depths of human memory and knowledge of the river.

To 'fight the elements' soldiers are delegated and given tasks which include protecting populations residing close to rivers, while also training inexperienced civilians in the art of fighting the river – now shown to be a dangerous neighbour. Two categories of enemy – thieving neighbours and foreign invaders – are interchangeable and depend on points of reference. For pragmatic peasants, used to cyclical flooding patterns, the river was a danger-

ous neighbour, but also an *amplified* force of nature which was well known, whose actions could be predicted, based on observations and the scale of risk assessed:

A lot of water is coming – one of the peasants announced.

How can you tell?

‘When whirlpools spin like mad, then you know a flood is coming.’ (Kurek 1976, p. 28).

‘Oh, things will be bad,’ Mrs Maślankowa concluded, staring into the waves. ‘When the river flows backwards, going in reverse, that means the waters will be rising awful high.’ (p. 49).

For a soldier-saviour from far off involved in defending the civilian population, the river becomes a foreign invader, a revolutionary force, ideologically and morally unacceptable ‘like the mumblings of a hundred thousand strong mob, like the noise of a violent street demonstration’ (p. 160). This leads to something we observe as the reverse anthropomorphization of the river’s voice. The human characteristics assigned in this process are drastically redefined and exaggerated: the river becomes something monstrous, like a noisy barbaric horde. The military language already used is now joined by registers taken from a different frame of reference. What is noticeable here is the coincidence between the language of state propaganda of the 1930s: ‘the red wave from the East’, ‘the revolutionary wave’, ‘fearsome clouds rolling in from the East and West’, and the kinds of linguistic transplants present in narratives involving floods. We read in a leaflet issued by the National Aerial Defense League [LOPP]: ‘In the face of fearsome clouds rolling in from the East and West, in the face of the enemy’s increasing provocations, the only answer worthy of a great nation will be a mighty gesture proving we are not afraid...’ (LOPP [1923–1928]).

A new combination of rural mythologies and military propaganda is found in the language used in the diary of the ‘flooding campaigns’ as recorded by Cadet Makara. His description of the fierceness of the raging highland river Dunajec refers to a new sort of experience expressed in narration which combines folklore and traditional interpretations with political-military lexicons:

The Dunajec. The peasants talk about it as if it was a living, rebellious creature, as if about a great, wild monster stretching across Lower Poland like a two-hundred-kilometre-long snake [...]. Its passing is odd, irregular, tangled, dishonest. Its furies come from flash rains, from the banks which have not been regulated, from great differences in terrain elevation. It flows with terrible power, completely untamed in its upper reaches. (p. 47–48)

The spirit of the Dunajec has infected that river network. It is the chief of all highland streams, the one which imbued them with fierce currents, bearing upon it fallen tree trunks, smashed up houses, bridge supports, crop piles and mounds of foam. Whole buildings were borne upon the waves, dead cows floating by, piles of straw and broken trees piling up on the surface of the river. A procession of wasted possessions and goods parading along the waves [...]. (p. 96–97)

The Dunajec attacked the helpless Vistula, picking on poor villages, leaping over embankments. Once white foam began to appear on the raging river, people started



to pray at once. This meant highland waters were raging down. Only now would the river rise up, once the towering manes of the river appeared, the avant-garde of the coming flood. (p. 63–64)

The Dunajec, the Vistula's mean spirited tributary, which caused the 'catastrophic' scale of the flood of 1934, is described by peasants as if it were a living creature. Referred to as a spirit, a ghost, a monster or a slithering snake, it becomes a visual image, something vivid and located in spatial terms, bearing the remains of ancient pan-European myths about rivers coming to life (Böhme 1988; Selbmann 1995).

Narratives covering the floods of 1934 which echo frontline reporting styles will also dominate in local and national press coverage. Julian Podolski, an 'impartial observer', writing for a special edition of the Polish Red Cross magazine, begins his article with a tone reminiscent of military dispatches, describing towns which had surrendered for example, or territories occupied by enemy forces, contact lines between armies being cut:

- Lines of communication between Zakopane and Krakow cut!
- Trains on the Kraków–Tarnów–Lwów line not running at all.
- Nowy Sącz flooded!
- Nowy Targ submerged!

We reached Krakow around midnight. The station looked like something from the war some twenty years back. Riots and almost infernal hustle and bustle. (1934, pp. 162–163)

By using military forms of expression, Podolski transports his readers into a warlike landscape and mood, just the way Kurek does, and he includes the monstrous rhetoric as well: 'Dunajec savaged, ripped, razed the barriers near Karsy' (p. 163). In other press materials from this time, we find the sacrifices made by soldiers taking part in tackling the floods being stressed. In the July edition of *Głos Podhala* [*The Voice of Podhale*] particular attention is paid to 'heroic officers, cadets and soldiers', for it is they who 'rescue people and possessions from death's clutches' (1934, p. 2); we also find an interview with an airman who developed a special recognition code to help deliver aid to victims of flooding and mentioned the need for the establishment of a new rescue airforce service which would employ specially trained military-medical personnel. During the flood of 1934, the air force (including civilian craft) helped in the relief efforts. A special communication system was established with flood victims, informing pilots about the needs of those who were trapped in flooded areas. Residents of flooded homes arranged simple symbols using towels: a cross + (medical transport), parallel lines = (food transport) or two lines side by side \_ \_ , when there was no need for air support (Polish Red Cross 1934, p. 154).

This metaphorical and actual militarisation in times of threat (flooding) also represents a part of a different process – the disappearance of riparian cultures and their traditions of treating rivers as living, mighty and independent beings. We see it in the press coverage of the time – in the tensions between civilians and the military. The former are characterised as being 'crazed, despairing and deranged', the latter as fearless in the face of the enemy, heroes who protect and secure 'domestic defences' (*Głos Podhala* 1934, p. 2) against the river's 'elements which declared a terrible war against Poland' (*Piast* 1934). This tension is also tangible in Kurek's narrative.

## The new heroes of the flood of 1934

The militarised lexicon activated in Kurek's flooding narrative required the invention of new hero-types which had thus far been unknown (or their presence was not obvious) in texts about floods, and whose presence would constitute a counterpoint to the watery elements. Hence, Kurek uses different kinds of soldier as templates: the sapper – a real hero working on anti-flood embankments (which in contemporary narratives will be associated with firefighters); officers (leaders) who see the struggle against the elements as a hazy reflection of real military warfare; and infantrymen, assigned to directly help those affected by flooding. They are described as follows:

Sappers worked heroically, superhumanly; they had in them that odd heroism which meant they could whistle as they worked. Singing coarse songs, the water reaching their knees. Embroiled in the elements, they were a particle of humanity engaged in the fight. Only non-commissioned officers displayed their indifference and superiority, like economists over a crowd of peasants; only they were human beings, the rest only soldiers. Those dove into the human scale disaster, these conducted the efforts in triumphant fashion.' (p. 203).

Along with fighting against the flood and with its effects soldiers, we also find the engineer archetype. This role in times of flooding is based on notions of prophetic philanthropy, seeing as the river-monster can be tamed. Those of the engineering predisposition want to predict riverbanks breaking, and in evading baseless speculations (the initial metaphysical notions as expressed by peasants and their traditional belief systems) to ensure that the forces which lead to flooding can also be neutralised (removing the causes of flooding), and harnessed to produce energy during peace time<sup>2</sup>:

Here, in this unassuming, single story town house, is the central headquarters of the fight against Poland's most extreme river: here is where ideas are born which will help prevent flooding, it is here that millions of cubic metres of water are jotted down on small pieces of paper, it is here that visions of waves being tamed, disarmed and harnessed for good are formed. (Kurek 1976, p. 221)

In this 'magical house' resides an engineer, representing a new generation of hydro-engineering specialists who have ambitious plans regarding the Vistula and her tributaries. In the militarised-flooding narrative of the 1930s engineers perform the role of those who have at their disposal a brand-new language of *muting* the river: a means of measuring, a tool for defining and disabling the river-enemy. New hydro-technologies meant to replace previous ones based on primitive perceptions of the river, are as yet unknown and mysterious, bordering on mad visions and scientific invention:

Engineer Kubiak looked over the readings. [...] So cunningly and carefully did he sneak up on Nowy Sącz with the head of the flood line, registering it all scientifically

<sup>2</sup> Which was accelerated by the flood of 1934, seeing as the dam on the Dunajec, the construction of retention reservoirs or else the regulation of the upper course of the Vistula were first delayed due to post-war rebuilding efforts, and then the financial crisis of the 1930s (Tuszko 1982; pp. 75–78).

– the tragic assistant of a murderous crime, the secretary of a sudden natural uprising.  
(p. 63)

This is a reflection of the mood in a Poland undergoing modernisation processes between two World Wars, one which can also be found in academic texts and technical reports of the time, such as *Umiejdzynarodowienie Wisły i jego skutki dla Polski* [*Internationalization of the Vistula River and its consequences for Poland*] (Ingarden 1919) and *Światowe drogi wodne a regulacja Wisły* [*Waterways of the World and The Regulation of The Vistula*] (Matkiewicz 1921).

This model involving the nation's technological development by modernising and muting the Vistula will be later described by Kurek in another flood themed novel-reportage – *Zamurowana rzeka* [*The River Walled In*], published just before the WWII, in 1939. In an almost messianic vision of hydro-engineering transformation of the riverscape the author creates a phantasmic image of a modern, mechanised and multi-industrialised homeland:

He saw the whole country as far off as his own native village on the borderlands – bathed in the glow of electric light. [...] Water would flow through turbine pipelines, and the power of its flow and fall would drive electric machines – electricity which would service the whole district. [...] How beautiful! Delighted with this vision, he would go to sleep in his barracks, cuddling up to dreams of a truly enlightened Poland. See for yourselves: the water which previously wrecked and drowned will now be harnessed in lighting up homes. It will power mills, sawmills, factories. All this achieved through our hard work. The mind of the engineer and the labour of the working man. (Kurek 1939, pp. 150–151)

This vision involves the river being 'harnessed' in working like a carthorse or a semi-living, 'organic machine' (White 1995), capable of moving other machines with the energy it provides. Spatial relations changed and new Poland created its own maps of 'energy, maps of labor, and maps of meaning' (White 1995, p. 22). To interpret them, we come back to aquacritical questions on the river's status: what will happen to it in relation to technologies, will it carry on being a river or is it still a river when it 'is dammed up into the power plant' (Heidegger 1977, p. 16)? In optimistic discourses following 1934 the force that is the river being compared to the work of a machine or turned into a machine itself seem to be a new incarnation for the river itself... until the next flood. Kurek encrypted this to some extent in his *The Waters Above*.

'Night of the Great Flood' and the ensuing 'Night of the Final Calming' (Kurek 1976, p. 212) camouflage concealed references to the Great War and the truce which ended the military conflict. In *The Waters Above* these expressions function as mighty culminating metaphors which transpose the central protagonist's experiences. Eventually, the flood as the war against the river has not been won, and its forces disarmed and disabled – what has happened is a sort of 'unconditional capitulation'. The opposite is true – the river becoming a military conflict is that which first of all is capable of drawing Cadet Makara out of a state of lethargy. From the point of view of a reluctant observer unwilling to engage in fighting the flood, because at first it reminds him of mindless military drills performed during wartime (p. 9), Makara finally recognises that the flood carries upon it something revolutionary. The story involves subversion which does not consist of purifying and changing what

exists and requires transformation (as a text in a great flood paradigm would infer), but in revealing the instability inherent in models of governmental rule which intends to master the world of nature itself by applying military style strategies.

Even if ‘fantastic’ engineers have at their disposal – or will soon have – the potential for mastery over the river, they will not be able to use military offensive strategies (marked with references to anti-flooding and defensive campaigns) to neutralise the elemental force that is the river, something confirmed by the great Vistula flood of 1947 (similar in size to that of 1934) and other ‘catastrophic’ floods which followed in ensuing decades (Jarosz and Miernik 2013, pp. 201–220). In essence, Kurek’s flood narrative performs resisting the notion of imposing military processes upon the natural world by governmental decree, processes of possessing and overseeing because on the deep map (in deep timescales) what exists is:

beyond human and material affairs. And above those who become men of the age of crisis – the *waters above*. (p. 252)

### Grotesque errors in the management of catastrophic floods

In the short story titled *Szczęśliwy Wojewoda [The Fortunate Voivode]* published in 1936, K.I. Gałczyński deconstructs the image of an authoritarian, so-called ‘Sanation’ era state (from ‘healing’ to which J. Piłsudski and his military circles referred during their interwar rule in 1926–1935) of the Second Republic, through a portrait of a small town of Golibroda overseen by the Capital and attacked by floods in the spring. Gałczyński decides to title it in a way which shifts the emphasis on a flawless ‘statesman’, a voivode who goes by the tellingly comical name of Butla [from a bottle] – Grunwaldzki [a reference to the victory of the Poles over the Teutonic Knights in 1410]. This civic leader, in ignoring a prophetic dream of a coming flood and his own intuitions that ‘water can at times be dangerous’ (Gałczyński 1979, p. 138) attempts to rescue an administrative office worker which results in both drowning.

In this tale, so different from the reportage and administrative style of Kurek, floods are an elemental force which turn the world upside down, in which Bakhtin’s carnival mentality applies. The grotesque language used by administrative officials mixes with traditions of rituals and superstition:

This was in springtime, the flood in Golibrody was going full swing, prayers being mumbled in churches, the Flood League announcing a competition for an oratory composition titled *The Waters Have Risen Again, Dear Lord* (after J. Kochanowski), while generals’ dogs which could not swim floated around in gondolas instead of being taken for walks. (p. 140)

Antoni Pudel, a sixty-year-old council administrator, was just swimming to his office with the last of his strength, gripping in his teeth an abacus and an egg sandwich [...]. (p. 141)

And although this short story resounds with the echoes of Gałczyński's earlier humoristic works, such as the poem *Wszystko się chwieje* [*Everything Swaying*] (a flooded river carries upon it the famous national painting *Battle of Grunwald* by Jan Matejko), in the case of *The Fortunate Voivode* the author conveys a subtle critique of authoritarian rule through portrayals of formal conduct and buffoonery. The fact that the Voivode is the embodiment of tyranny is something Gałczyński masks in the titles of the documents the man signs. While the first is titled 'O znormalizowanie jajka polskiego' [*On the normalisation of the Polish egg*], the second has the somewhat more laconic, yet pointed, title of 'Śmierć wrogom' [*Death to the enemies*] (p. 139). The documents' dark, absurd status expose how helpless the state is in the face of elemental forces such as flooding rivers. In spite of his surname and title, the voivode is afraid of water, which is shown through his bizarre nightmare:

He dreams [...] Of a plate of black soup. No symbols, just a plate and some soup. Night after night, the nightmare repeats itself. As soon as he closes his eyes, he instantly sees a plate filled to the brim with black soup. 'I tried eating it, but I couldn't – it stank. That dream drove me insane [...]'. (Gałczyński 1979, p. 140)

Gałczyński reveals the outmoded autocracy of the town of Golibrody (the name hinting at shaved beards, which was a symbol of lost dignity for Lithuanian boyars). If we take into account the fact that once the flood hits his town, Butla-Grunwaldzki is no longer a fortunate voivode and reduced to the initials B.G., then the mystery of the recurring nightmare can be solved in two ways: either the voivode is aware of the presence of forces – in this case represented by the wild flooding – which are capable of stripping him of his power, or – this solution seems to be more convincing, when we take into account the symbol of a boiled egg rising to the surface of the stinking soup as shown by the sarcastic author. The egg Gałczyński ironically calls 'the symbol of eternally resurrecting life' (p.141) is in fact the main ingredient of the sandwich, a clerk, Antoni Pudel is clenching in his teeth, while swimming across flood waters to get to work. Then, the black soup is not an actual aspect of the flood, but reflects that which is fragmented, swollen and subjected to processes of rapid disintegration. In this sense, the dream of black soup which predicts death in the dark waters of the flood, is not a foretelling of the coming flood, which destroys the town of Golibrody (for the general's dogs will survive, and the Flood League will come up with its own hymn), but may be contesting that in actual fact the political, fascist powers that followed the Great War, also in Poland, are the black soup which should be escaped by floating upon the waters of the raging river.

## War against a (still living) river persists in the lexicon of post-flood literature

More evidence for language which describes floods and relationships with rivers, including the Vistula, becoming more militarised since the floods of 1934 can be found in the contemporary series of stories titled *Skoruń* by Maciej Płaza. The titular Skoruń is the hero of the book itself, a small boy, as is the river – the Vistula and events related to flooding in post WWII Poland, which is why this cycle aligns into a novel. The 1934 and all following floods – this book covers two of them in detail, 1947 and 1979 – Płaza compares to wars and occu-

pations, because that is when people have so little power in defending themselves against the raging river: ‘floods are wars and pestilence all at once’ (2015, p. 306). Just as in Kurek’s *The Waters Above*, the river here is an enduring force of nature: ‘seemingly gentle, and yet even so more mighty than us, than all of us all together’ (p. 176), while knowledge about its flooding nature is the outcome of multigenerational accumulation of experiences of fear and helplessness regarding its destructive advantage: ‘Our elders say that it is like war: the enemy just shows up and that which was is no more, only the enemy remains, furious, yet uncaring, because it knows it cannot be stopped. While we, from down by the embankment, what were we to think? You knew all too well this enemy, that grey son of a bitch’ (p. 248).

Plaza does much more than Kurek to imbue his militarised-flooding narrative with a language which shows passion for the river, illustrating how angry people are at it and how hurt by their tumultuous relations. He is less interested in reporting events and more in developing a language – from the point of view of all the great post WWII floods in Poland – to describe the unstable, liminal relations people had with the river. On the one hand intimate, ‘welcoming’, ‘sensitive trickster’, ‘cruel mute’ (p. 178) which has the power to purify: ‘may the waters wash me from within [...], let pike and mud snails set up home in me’ (p. 177); and on the other a Vistula which has been transformed into a monstrous being which ‘becomes rabid’ when it floods (p. 248). Reports of the flooding take place, as in Kurek’s case, in a military setting, when people are ‘sandbagging’ and ‘getting fired up as if for war’ (p. 251). On riverbanks lined with sandbags people hang around, their mood calm as it might be in trenches and dugouts before another battle, in spite of the danger to come:

We turned lamps off, the generators humming. Those who had smokes passed them around. It became empty as people returned to their homes or went into town. Only the regular posts were still occupied. We lit campfires near those tents, the canvas whipped by winds, rains humming, conversations floating along, jokes told about the Russians. It really was like wartime might have been. (p. 271)

Compared with Kurek’s writing, the abyss between rural folks and the soldiers or firemen helping out on orders from the state seems to be less expansive. The flood, compared here to the occupation, brings people together (Plaza 2015, p. 269):

Maybe people during wartime feel different. No, during wartime rather not because the war divides people, setting them against each other while the flood unites. We felt there that we were united, as one, understand? With that embankment, that softening earth, that sand. We were proud, but not the sort which makes you stick your nose up at the world, we weren’t doing anything there to show off, but real, deep work for a common good: everyone felt that pride, exactly the same, you only had a tiny part in it. It was kind of sacred.

Plaza creates a characteristic (and complex) character of Richard who brings these two worlds of relating to the river together – he is a sapper, farmer, engineer and also anti-communist rebel. His role – to shift the direction the flood travelled in so it would cover a different village – shows that we are no longer dealing with a triumph over the river itself, but with knowledge about its power and attempts to outsmart it in uneven combat between humanity and elemental forces. This protagonist’s attitude must be influenced by the his-



torical repetition of floods upon these lands (Sandomierszczyzna) and commemorating past floods as in the wayside, 'sky-blue chapel of the Holy Mother of Ceaseless Help, which his father built after the flood of 1934' (p. 14).

Plaza recreates the anti-river military strategy but with a different view at the river itself. The erection of embankments which are reminiscent of trenches during World War I and the use of different military techniques serve most of all in defending against the rising Vistula which is mightier than the local people. He does not include the progressive optimism exemplified by engineers from the times Kurek wrote in the 1930s, because there are no hydro-technical plans of a final solution to the threat of rivers overflowing, nor will they ever be drafted. His post-military narrative evokes the permanently disrupted hydrologic balance where the rivers' voice mingles with the humans' efforts to adapt to flooding risks. From an aquacritical perspective we see in *Skoruń* many human losses suffered, along with lucky escapes, as well as connections between the living, amplified, and muted river and the stories of recent wars. All these establish a multilayered, deep map-knowledge about the adaptive character regarding the river's dangerous power:

As they told it in the village, the river ridiculed all those kraut soldiers which chased a unit of resistance soldiers across the frozen river. [...] This is why it wouldn't seduce me with its July fainting. Any time I went into it, naked, shouting, snorting like puppies, we were deeply humble and watchful within. (p. 176)

Deep mapping the literary sources makes us aware that access to these connections after the war becomes ever more complex as the river's living body transforms and something which no longer resides in any human or material memory:

I dreamed of one day becoming a diver and pulling German weapons up from the bottom. I told father about this dream, but he laughed it off. 'You a fool' he'd say, meaning this is not the same river as before – it had flooded, changed its course, been dredged, dug up, elevated, they worked miracles on it, nothing is left. (p. 180)

## **After the war, after the flood: aquacritical conclusions**

In a historiographic reading of source texts relating to the Vistula flooding along with its tributaries (the Dunajec) in 1934 we have shown the influence of that event on the appearance in discourse of a militarised approaches to battling floods both in terms of some aquacritical references as well as practical strategies for dealing with catastrophic floods. We also noted that all these texts, which contextualise the flood of 1934, repose the question on how we perceive the muted or amplified river, especially in the aquacritical perspective – how the modern military worldview distorts traditional ways of treating rivers as living entities. This leads to an awkward or unrealistic thinking about river flood management, seen from the point of view of modern engineering of the era, administration and the army – ghouls of the state ridiculed in the text by Gałczyński.

Since the flood in 1934, cultural memories reinforce certain models of relations with the flooding river, when rivers are being associated with fighting against an enemy as if dur-

ing wartime. Registered and variously transformed in literature, it unfortunately then seeps through to language and everyday speech, settling there mainly in an anthropocentric forms (Heimann et al. 2021). This military lexicon doesn't serve future environmental adaptation and development of human-river cultures. Simultaneously, we witness a fading away of traditional images featuring a living, almost anthropomorphized and mythologised river which, as in the case of *The Waters Above* and *Skoruń* are in a way smuggled across and preserved in the memory of literary animated rivers.

Combining aquacriticism with deep mapping offered us a method how to navigate through our sources and provide an in-depth discourse analysis: we mapped the linguistic constructions in literary texts (e.g. the river as a warlike enemy), as well as flagged the gaps in historiographical interpretation of the river's side (e.g. the flooding as moving, political *voice*). We conclude that in order to interpret the *muted* and *amplified* representations of rivers' agency beyond their utilitarian-symbolic character, like the Vistula has in Polish nationalistic culture, the flood of 1934 encourages us to ask about other methods for source analysis. These hybrid methods not only challenge the given river historiographies but also recognise different historical factors which, like militarised language around the river flood of 1934, reflect a change in the way rivers are understood and managed even now.

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## Declarations

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