

Waterways of the German North: Strategy and Commerce

By Albert J. Schmidt

My fascination with the medieval Hanseatic cities of Hamburg and Lübeck and their surrounding waterways led me to visit them last summer. The commerce of old Hanse, a loose confederation of free cities, spanned the seas from Britain to Novgorod, Russia. In this enterprise Hamburg and its neighbor Lübeck were big players from its origins in the thirteenth century until prosperity peaked in the fifteenth. With the League as a backdrop this article speaks to both Hamburg and Lübeck and the subsequent commercial and strategic role of the Kiel Canal.

Occupying a kind of north/south mid-point between continental Europe and Scandinavia and east/west space between the Baltic and North seas, Hamburg is well suited for the commercial and strategic role which it has played and continues to play. The city rises in southern Schleswig-Holstein (the Jutland peninsula) at the confluence of the Elbe and Alster and Bille Rivers. Its promoters never tire of singing the praises of its rivers and canals, which surpass both Amsterdam and Venice in the more than 2,300 bridges passing over them. Hamburg's port, a deep one which handles large ocean vessels, is the city's economic lifeline. Hailed as the fastest-growing one in Europe, it is surpassed by only Rotterdam and Antwerp. Besides commerce, Hamburg has heavy industry, media, shipyards, and is one of Europe's most affluent cities.

Hamburg and Lübeck had always to face one great navigational obstacle, the Jutland peninsula, which blocked easy passage from the Baltic to the North Sea. The two cities solved this problem by doing the obvious, building a canal, but not through Schleswig-Holstein/ Jutland. Rather it was a north/south canal connecting a branch of the Trave River near Lübeck with a branch of the Elbe to the south. This Stecknitz Canal, built at the end of the fourteenth century, was one of Europe's oldest. In 1900 it was replaced and improved upon by the Elbe-Lübeck, or Elbe-Trave Canal (which branches off the Trave near Lübeck) with a southern terminus at Lauenburg on the Elbe some 67 kilometres (42 miles) distant. This Elbe-Lübeck Canal links the Baltic not only with Hamburg but with the Elbe at its mouth into the North Sea.

However much the Elbe-Lübeck Canal improved upon the ancient Stecknitz, it was rendered obsolete at the outset by massive North Sea/Baltic traffic. To relieve this congestion the authorities made Kiel, situated due north of Hamburg in southern Schleswig-Holstein, the anchor for a new canal.

The resulting dig at the end of the nineteenth century was not the first time that a Kiel-North Sea canal was undertaken. In 1784, a 27-mile extension of a longer 109-mile Kiel waterway had been opened. Using for the most part the present route of the Kiel Canal, it stretched from the Eider River to the North Sea. However, the Eider canal, only 32 yards wide and ten feet deep, could accommodate neither German naval nor commercial vessels.

Meanwhile, the navy insisted on linking its Baltic and North Sea bases by a full-blown ocean canal, thus avoiding the need to circumnavigate Denmark. Construction of a canal, which began in the summer of 1887 near Kiel at Holtenau, was completed eight years later in 1895. This massive undertaking, which required some 9,000 workers, was ceremoniously

opened by the German Emperor William II (and named for him, the Kaiser Wilhelm II Kanal). The widening of it between 1907 and 1914, which accommodated passage of a Dreadnought-sized battleship, included the installation of large locks at both ends of the canal, at Brunsbüttel and Hotemau. The completed canal allowed for the saving of 250 nautical miles and avoided what were often heavy seas. Although the Versailles

Treaty internationalized the canal, this status was repudiated by Adolf Hitler's Germany in 1936; after World War II the canal was once again internationalized. The 61-mile canal which we know by the label of 'Kiel' underwent a name change in 1948 from Kaiser-Wilhelm-Kanal to Nord-Ostsee-Kanal. That some 43,000 ships passed through several years ago suggests that it may be the world's most heavily traversed artificial seaway. Large cruise ships must either refrain from using the canal or be equipped with special funnels and masts to avoid low hanging bridges.

The Lübeck-Elbe and the Kiel Canal hardly tell the whole story of the importance, strategic and otherwise, of Germany's northern waterways. West of Hamburg and the Kiel Canal, where the river Weser empties into the North Sea, Bremerhaven/Bremen served as a nineteenth-century debarkation point for emigrants to America. Farther west still a North Sea bay called the Jade Bight housed Wilhelmshaven, which during World War I served as a base for the German High Seas Fleet.

I am dedicating this piece to my late good friend, travel companion, and George Washington University colleague, Carl Linden.





*Photos (by the author):
This page, top left: Hamburg waterfront; top right: store fronts along Lubeck canal; middle: Lubeck canal; bottom left: Keil, Kaiser Wilhelm II Canal; bottom right: container ship, Keil. First page inset: Keil canal locks.*

