

### **Railways in the First World War. 8th International Conference on Railway History**

**Veranstalter:** International Railway History Association, Paris; International Union of Railways, Paris; French Embassy Budapest  
**Datum, Ort:** 28.11.2018–01.12.2018, Budapest  
**Bericht von:** Egor Lykov, ETH Zurich

The 8th International Conference on Railway History was dedicated to World War I and addressed numerous long-lasting issues resulted from the war regarding complex entanglements between railway technology, state administration and warfare. Special attention was paid to war preparation, the role of railways in troops' shipments as well as in food, energy and weapons supply, imperial competition through railway construction, the functioning of railways during the war, including their economic, social, political and cultural implications, and aftermaths. In his keynote lecture ANDREA GIUNTINI (Modena) pointed out that complex relationships between railways and World War I were extensively described in popular literature, albeit they remain to be underrepresented in historical research. Prevailing nationalistic approaches of historiography towards railways during World War I were criticized, so Giuntini pled for a global-historical approach towards railway history, bringing together the wartime and the decisive transformations of railways before the beginning and after the end of World War I on the one hand, and the development of railway systems in belligerent and neutral countries on the other.

Aspects of railway planning as an important measure for war preparation were discussed on a wide range of case studies including investigations focusing on a specific country as well as comparative approaches. REINHARD NACHTIGAL (Freiburg im Breisgau) discussed railway construction in the late Russian Empire which was characterized by predominance of economic demands in railway planning and did not foresee the strategic use of many railway lines in case of war. It was shown by examples from the Caucasus and the western part of the Russian Empire that the Russian military strategy foresaw

only the defensive use of railways. Moreover, the commercial use of railways was more important than spatial control via railways by the Russian central government. In this sense, railway construction did not follow any imperial purposes as it was claimed in numerous pieces of research on the influence of railways on Russian society.<sup>1</sup> Railway building on the frontline was not successful during World War I, so many building projects remained unfinished. Even though some new railway lines were opened during World War I (for example the Murmansk railway in 1915), they did not have military relevance anymore.<sup>2</sup>

HENRY JACOLIN (Paris) presented a comparison of railway systems in Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia shortly before World War I. He pointed out that the German railway network was better organized than the Austro-Hungarian railway system. Thus, many German railway lines reached the Russian border, and after the war broke out the trains could circulate every 20 minutes, enabling the rapid transport of troops. In comparison, Austria-Hungary had many gaps in its railway system, and there was no railway line following the border. Such infrastructural issues like a weak connection between Galicia and Hungary and a lack of any connection between Transylvania, Galicia and Bukovina had a negative influence on warfare. The railway system in Russia was challenged by the coexistence of broad (Russian) and standard gauge lines in Poland and the lack of double-track lines. The same problem was present in Romania, as TOADER POPESCU (Bucharest) explained in his paper. Until 1900 there were only railway lines far away from borders. Romania possessed only one railway connection to Russia, and there were no connections to the Ottoman Empire. However, many connections led to Austria-Hungary for eco-

<sup>1</sup> Fritjof Benjamin Schenk, *Russlands Fahrt in die Moderne. Mobilität und sozialer Raum im Eisenbahnzeitalter* (Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte des östlichen Europas), Stuttgart 2014; Walter Sperling, *Der Aufbruch der Provinz. Die Eisenbahn und die Neuordnung der Räume im Zarenreich*, Frankfurt am Main 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Reinhard Nachtigal, *Die Murmanbahn. Die Verkehrsanbindung eines kriegswichtigen Hafens und das Arbeitspotential der Kriegsgefangenen (1915–1918)*, Remshalden 2001.

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nomic reasons. In conclusion, railway building projects were marginal in Romania and did not influence the warfare.

Besides railway planning the conference also focused on the role of railways in warfare. ANTHONY HEYWOOD (Aberdeen) dealt with the stylization of mobilization in the Russian Empire as a success. It was seen as a success since there were no major failings and railways transported more troops than planned, so the Tsar was satisfied with the „magnificently working“ mobilization. Heywood considered mobilization as troop shipments used a specific mobilization time table. This mobilization was a huge effort for railway administration and infrastructure, so there were almost no transportations for civilian use. Despite being a „success“, the mobilization was a process lasting far longer than planned because of massive troop movements from Siberia to the front line in December 1914 and in early 1915, less capacities of single-track lines and infrastructural problems. Furthermore, after the end of mobilization, railway administration showed its inability to restore the commercial timetable what made the functioning of Russian railways less efficient than it could have been.

CSABA HORVÁTH (Budapest) dealt with economic and social effects of railway transports during World War I in Hungary. Passenger traffic was temporary restricted in the whole country, and the two-front war had a confusing influence on railway administration. The Budapest-Belgrade-line was the most important route for warfare, and there were many delays because of infrastructural problems. The Lemberg-Miskolc-line was one of the most important railways leading to the Eastern front where many evacuations took place. Apart from food, energy and weapons supply and shipment of troops, trains were used for propagandistic purposes as well. After the war railways also played an important role because of huge amounts of transportation and massive migration flows. The immediate aftermath of World War I was exemplified by MACIEJ GÓRNY (Warsaw) regarding the mass war between Ukrainians and Poles in Galicia in 1920. He showed that railways are not only about transportation but also about fights against enemies: railway technol-

ogy became an integral part of the warfare, so many bridges and infrastructural objects were destroyed in the course of railway war. The mass migration after the war was a negative factor in the spread of violence along railway lines and disorganized the young Polish nation state.

Medicine in railway contexts was also an important topic discussed at the conference. JEREMY HIGGINS (Aberdeen) presented his profound investigations of British ambulance trains in Dover, exemplified on medical preparation for the Somme battle (01.07.-18.11.1916), administration and operation practices of ambulance trains. British ambulance trains could evacuate soldiers very quickly but they did not provide enough place for medical staff and only had very limited resources (for example there was no cooking and heating in the trains). Although the British military trains could evacuate about 80 percent of the wounded of the Somme battle, there were massive delays because of the lack of communication between military, railway and medical administrations, which also had to coordinate their actions with the French military. MARK BUTTERFIELD (Leeds) traced the particularities of British ambulance trains, which were put in operation for the first time during the South African War in 1899, and standardized in 1916. He pointed out that the increase of the carrying capacity of ambulance trains stood in the foreground of military interests despite „some discomfort“ for soldiers like insufficient water supply and lack of sufficient space. OLGA GALKINA and PAVEL GALKIN (both Kolomna) showed similar developments in the Russian Empire where 50 military trains were used, organized by both the All-Russian Zemstvo Union and the Red Cross. Most of them operated on the Western front. The Russian ambulance trains included wagons for medical staff, pharmacy, warehouse, kitchen and glacier wagons as well as 27–28 wagons for the wounded. Even though there was more space for medical staff, food and water, the technical equipment was worse than in British ambulance trains.

Cultural representations of railways during World War I were also an important topic at the conference. MACIEJ WAS (Bucharest)

analyzed literary representations of railways, using the concept of transitional spaces, looking at train stations, trains, and travelling itself. The station as a transitional space was depicted as a juxtaposition between architectural beauty and insanitary space; the joy of returning from war and death. The train station during the war was frequently represented in literature as a huge hospital, a home for refugees, a public space for propaganda, revolution and political meetings. Trains were understood as both transport to the front and return to home countries. Travel also represented many stages of warfare, showing the mobilization and enthusiasm of soldiers and the population, evacuations, the end point in case of railway accidents, as well as triumph and the end of the war. This paper clarified the importance of literary studies for investigations of the cultural history of war.

The conference on railways in World War I introduced various approaches which have seldom been used in railway history and made connections between history, literature and social sciences in a productive way. It was realized that interdisciplinary approaches should be fostered in research on railway history. However, in spite of claiming the separation from older „national“ approaches the prevailing number of papers dealt with railway history from a national point of view. Although the railways of neutral countries should also be taken into consideration when investigating the role of railways during World War I, not enough case studies were presented, for example Switzerland as the most important example of a neutral country in Europe was absent from the discussion. Moreover, practices of civilian internment and refugees' movements during World War I have not ever been investigated in the railway context. All of these examples make the railway history of World War I an emerging field for future research.

#### **Conference Overview:**

Pascale Andréani (Ambassador of France to Hungary, Budapest): Welcome Address

Jean-Pierre Loubinoux (Director-General of the International Union of Railways (UIC), Paris): Welcome Address

Katona András (The Hungarian Scientific Association for Transportation, Budapest): Welcome Address

Henry Jacolin (International Railway History Association, Paris): Introduction to the Conference

#### *Keynote Lecture*

Andrea Giuntini (Modena)

#### *Panel 1: Railways and the Great War: An Overview in Space and Time*

Irene Anastasiadou (Berlin): Building Europe on Rails: Transnationalism, Railways and World War I

Christopher Phillips (London): Britain's Railway Experts and the Perception of Industrial Warfare: Understanding the Western Front

Ralf Roth (Frankfurt am Main): The Importance of Railways for Military Strategic Planning, World War I and the War for Railways in Germany, 1830s to 1920s

Zsuzsanna Frisnyák (Budapest): The Logistics of the Hinterland of War – Railway Transport in Hungary (1914-1915)

#### *Panel 2: Railways in the War Theater: Western and Eastern Front (I)*

Paul Van Heesvelde-Jef Van Olmen (Brussels): The Role of the Belgian Railways in the Mobilization and the Retreat of the Belgian Army behind the Yser Line, August 1914 to December 1914

Anthony J. Heywood (Aberdeen): The Trains of August. Russia's General Mobilization of 1914 and the Railroads

Henry Jacolin (Paris): German and Russian Railway Networks at the Beginning of World War I

Csaba Sándor Horváth (Budapest): Front Trains-Front Lines through Hungary during the Great War

#### *Panel 3: Railways in the War Theater: Western and Eastern Front (II)*

Bruno Carrière / Marie-Noëlle Polino (both Paris): Railways and World War I in France

Stefano Maggi (Siena): Railways and Military Mobilization in Italy: Construction and Logis-

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tics Organization (1915-1918)

János Majdán (Budapest): Two Special Operations of the Hungarian State Railways (MÁV) during the Great War

Jan Szkudlinski (Gdynia): The Role of the Railway in German Army Operations on the Eastern Front in late 1914

*Panel 4: Strategic Planning faced to the Reality in Eastern Europe*

Reinhard Nachtigal (Freiburg im Breisgau): Railway Construction and Planning in Russia: An Imperial Perspective in Peace and War (1900-1917)

Maciej Was (Bucharest): The Russian Railways during the First World War: Their Accomplishments and Collapse

Toader Popescu (Bucharest): Preparing for War. Strategic Planning of Romanian Railways before World War I

Dorin Stanescu (Bucharest): Romanian Railways in the Great War. A View from Memoires and Literature

*Panel 5: Looking towards Eastern Europe: Case Studies*

Egor Lykov (Zurich): Ryazan-Uralsk Railway: Russian Provincial Railways and Supply of Food and Energy during World War I

Maciej Górny (Warsaw) - Eisenbahnfeldzug in the East

*Panel 6: Railways in Neutral Countries, Empire and Commonwealth*

Miguel Muñoz Rubio / Pedro Pablo Ortúñez Goicolea (both Madrid): The Impact of World War I on the Railways in Neutral Countries: The Spanish Railway Companies

Walter Rothschild (Berlin): British Defences of the Suez Canal

Norman Aselmeyer (Florence): Targeting the Artery of East Africa: The Anglo-German Conflict and the Uganda Railway in World War I

Pierre Barrieau (Montreal): Nationalization and Rationalization: Canada's Railways, Montreal and the Great War

*Panel 7: Local Railway Networks in Wartime*

Gabor Jéger (Budapest): Narrow Gauge Railways in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy before, during and after the First World War

Oliver Schulz (Clermont): Light Railways and Narrow Gauge Lines at the Salonika Front in World War I

David Celetti (Padova): The Railway Rocchette-Asiago in the Alpine War. Human, Technological, and Tactical Aspects

*Panel 8: The Railway Medical Service to the Test*

Mark Butterfield (Leeds): British Ambulance Trains: Representation and Reality

Jeremy Higgins (Aberdeen): Casualty Evacuation on the Western Front: A Study of British Ambulance Train Provision and Operation, 1914-1916

Olga Galkina / Pavel Galkin (both Kolomna): Hospital Trains of the All-Russian Zemstvo Union during the First World War

*Panel 9: The Role of the Railway in War Logistics*

Sevtap Demirci / Nevin Coşar (both Istanbul): War and Transportation: Sirkeci Train Station (1914-1918)

George S. Carhart (Portland): Rail-Sea Transportation Hubs during World War I

Thomas Edelmann (Rotenburg): Reassessing the Means of Transport behind Habsburg Front Lines: From Arteries towards an Infrastructural Net of Transportation Lines

*Excursion*

Millenium Underground Museum and Railway History Park

*Panel 10: The Aftermath of World War I*

Gábor Varga (Budapest): The Role of the Railway in the World War I, in the Context of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, after Movie News

José Luis Lalana Soto / Luis Santos y Ganges / Laura Lalana Encinas (all Valladolid): The Reconstruction of the Steam Engine Sheds in the North of France after World War I

*Panel 11: After the War: Repatriation of the Living and the Dead*

Nikolai Vladimirovich Rodin (St. Petersburg): Load on the Railways and the Repatriation of the Fallen during the Great War: The Experience of the Russian Empire

Dirk Hainbuch (Marburg): The Superintendent for the Repatriation of Railroad Material by German Authorities (1918-1923)

Olga Zaslavskaya (Budapest): To and Out of Captivity: Railways and Prisoners of War in Siberia and Far East, 1914-1922

*Panel 12: After the War: New Railway Geography and Politics*

Tomáš Nigrin (Prague): Rail under Control? The Establishing of Czechoslovakia and the Control over the Rail Traffic on its Territory after World War I

Katalin Cserhádi (Budapest): Role of the Hungarian Royal State Railways (MÁV) Officers between 1914 and 1920

Péter Kalocsai (Budapest): Railway Changes and its Effects along the Austrian-Hungarian Border after World War I

*Final Round Table*

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