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Institute of Central-European Studies

Shaping Modernity: The Railway Journey Across Two Centuries

Proceedings of the international conference

*The Railway Journey from the 19th to the 21st Centuries.
A Cultural History of Railway Transport and Mobility
(Cluj-Napoca, 12-14 September 2019)*

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Of People, Trains and Railways

Introduction

Society generally looks patronisingly or with benevolence upon railway fans, as if they were children. In reality, they are serious people, with very diverse preoccupations, drawn around a common passion: trains and railroads. We all had the opportunity of noticing this during a conference which took place between September 12th and 14th, 2019 in Cluj, Romania, hosted by Babeş-Bolyai University and the Faculty of History and Philosophy. Entitled **The Railway Journey from the 19th to the 21st Centuries. A Cultural History of Railway Transport and Mobility**,¹ it was the first of its kind ever to be held in Romania. The organisers were Babeş-Bolyai University through the Faculty of History and Philosophy, the “George Barițiu” Institute of History within the Romanian Academy, the Society for Historical Sciences in Romania and the International Association for Railway History.

Thirty-six historians, literary scholars, researchers and non-academic presenters took part. We observed them for three days, at the conference venue, at the projection and the informal discussion at the end of the event, as well as during the trip at the Remarul enterprise (for engine and car repairs) and at the Dej railway museum and railyard. On all of these occasions, we saw passionate people, interested both in the topic of their research and in trains and railways in general. We could not help but notice the joy exhibited by participants of all ages upon climbing onto the historic locomotives displayed in the open-air museum in Dej.

¹ <http://hiphi.ubbcluj.ro/railway-journey/>

The topics of the papers presented at the conference were very diverse, and this was one of the strong points of the event. Many of these papers have been formalised by their authors as contributions to this volume.

As volume editors and first readers of these contributions, we have had the pleasure of noticing their significant chronologic, thematic and geographic diversity. Research topics range from landscape to motion pictures having railways as the main subject, and from the architecture of Belle Époque stations to social or technical history. As for their geographic distribution, the papers tackle Europe – either countries (Italy, Great Britain, Romania, Russia, Hungary) or smaller territories (for instance, the Maramureş region treated by Jeffrey Pennington or the Sătmar described by Róbert Géczi) – but also the Isthmus of Panama, the Holy Land (Palestine) or China. From this perspective, this book could be seen as representing a political, cultural and social history of trains and railways.

The first section of the volume includes papers dedicated to *The railway journey and its representations*. The railway journey is in itself a very large research area, and the authors have different approaches to it. For instance, the well-known Italian historian Stefano Maggi shows how train travel developed in Italy in its first hundred years, analysing trajectories, durations, engine improvement and administrative issues. In another paper, Radu Mârza watches how travelling by train has given Romanian passengers at the turn of the century the opportunity to discover landscape.

Ever since their beginnings, railway stations have acted as stages. Architectural historians Cristina Purcar and Virgil Pop have looked at several important European stations and their restaurants. This reminds us that, up until three or four decades ago, station restaurants held great social and spatial significance especially in smaller European towns. Lifestyles and railway spaces are also at the centre of János Majdán's research, who looks at how the railway universe and its representations articulate elements of everyday life in the Hungarian part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

The action of many important motion pictures in the history of cinematography has taken place inside a train or in direct connection to the railways, the best-known being, probably, *Murder on the Orient Express* (1974). Trains and railway journeys in recent Russian films are the focus of the study by Olga Grădinaru, a researcher very familiar

with the cultural history of that area. Her paper speaks about pictures dealing with Russia's participation in the First World War, with the 1917 Revolution(s) and with the ensuing Civil War. Johanna Rustler's article deals with the way in which British railways and stations have prepared and adapted to participate – from behind the front – to the war effort during The Great War. Finally, the last paper in this section belongs to Hungarian historian and archivist Gergely Péterffy, and studies the railway journey in the industrialised north-eastern part of Hungary during the first eleven years of communism. It is a very interesting and dramatic chapter of social and political history.

The second section of the book is entitled *Planning and Building the Network*. American historian Jeffrey Pennington looks at how changes of European frontiers between 1918 and 1920 have impacted the railway network in Maramureş, a region formerly belonging to Hungary, afterwards divided between Romania and then Czechoslovakia. It is a spectacular topic, perfectly illustrating the link between political history and transport history. Hungarian historian Róbert Géczy studies the construction and organisation of railways in a region adjacent to Maramureş – Sătmar (Satu Mare). Japanese historian Shunsuke Munakata takes us to the other end of the world: building the railway across the Isthmus of Panama, allowing for a direct link between the Atlantic and the Pacific. Steph Gillett writes an excellent social history piece, centred around the Wilts & Gloucestershire Railway, proposed during the second half of the nineteenth century. The section concludes with an extensive presentation of the structure and creation of a GIS database incorporating the various stages of the Romanian railway network, by Andrei Nacu.

The final section tackles technological and administrative issues. German scholar Dirk Forschner demonstrates very consistent research in technical history, passionately following the century-long history of German locomotives functioning on Chinese railways, since their introduction in 1892 until the present day. Loránd L. Mádly discusses some of the first Transylvanian railways by following the contribution of Franz Kazda, a Bohemian engineer who played an important part in the cartographic and technical studies that preceded their construction. Rabbi Dr. Walter Rothschild facetiously, yet convincingly describes the successive reorganisations of Palestinian railways. Included in the Ottoman Empire at the time, these lines were not only of general strategic interest, but also important for the local population and for

pilgrims visiting the Holy Land. The last paper of this section belongs to Hungarian historian Csaba Sándor Horváth, who analyses the wartime organisation of Hungarian railways during the First World War, when many of the involved countries had to quickly and radically transform their network in order to serve the war effort.

After this very brief review of the contributions included in the volume, a few observations are in order. Firstly, these contributions could easily have found other groupings than the one devised by the editors. This goes to show their diversity and wide range of topics, which is, from our standpoint, one of the main strengths of this book, and for that we have our authors to thank.

Another type of diversity – a cultural one, this time – stems from some of the papers discussing Central Europe, and more precisely Transylvania, Sătmar and Maramureş, where the names of several towns and villages are given in different languages (Hungarian, German, Czech, Romanian, Ukrainian), as a testimony to the cultural and ethno-linguistic richness and diversity of these settlements and areas, which were united, both literally and figuratively, by the railways.

Finally, many thanks to all our colleagues and friends who responded to have responded to our 2018 invitation and took part in a very successful conference in Cluj, even if not all the delivered presentations found their way in this volume. Further thanks to the authors who have formalised and sent their contributions to be included in the book, and who bore with the editors all through the publishing process. A special thank you to our colleague Elena Păcurar, head of the Department of Specialised Foreign Languages at the Faculty of Letters (Babeş-Bolyai University), who has carefully revised the individual contributions.

We should also thank the aforementioned organising institutions and our sponsors, as the conference could not have taken place without their help. The same sponsors are now helping publish this book, and for that we are grateful. The volume is published under the aegis of the Babeş-Bolyai University, and has been edited and printed by Mega Publishing House. We take this opportunity to also thank these institutions.

Radu Mârza, Toader Popescu

Cluj-Bucharest, September 2021