



"Money was of no consideration": French Railway Companies and Sustaining Troops on the Battlefields during the Great War

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This article is a part of a larger project investigating the social and cultural initiatives of French railway companies in modern France. The Great War brought many changes in the functioning of French railways, which had to handle the movement of large numbers of people. Military historians have pointed to railways as “the main culprits” in the war’s duration—four years and three months. The war put the French railway companies in a difficult situation and almost bankrupted the wealthiest French railway network, the *réseau du Nord*. The military complained about the attitudes of the railway companies, feeling that, in the case of war, “money was of no consideration,” whereas the French railway companies were naturally concerned with financial efficiency. At the same time, it is important to highlight the contributions of the French railway companies in sustaining the troops. During the Great War, each day the French army required 2,000 head of cattle, 600 tons of frozen meat, 1,000 pigs, 2,500 sheep, and 15 million liters of wine. The French railways became, in the words of a military historian, the “genuine cords between the army and the motherland that made possible the functioning of armies.”

Would the Great War have lasted four years and three months without the existence of railways in Europe? This question may appear odd even to historians who are familiar with the history of the First World War. Nonetheless, railways played a crucial role in sustaining the survival of the

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army, whether in delivering of troops to the front, supplying provisions, or evacuating wounded soldiers. Some military historians have argued that the railways extended the war indefinitely because the railways ensured the delivery of supplies to the front after the army had exhausted local resources. In the aftermath of the war, military historians reflected on the performance of railways. Some argued that the managers of railway companies did not make sufficient preparation for the war. If, ideally, money should have been “of no consideration” to the management of railway companies, in fact profit rather than the tasks of national defense defined their priorities. This essay will consider the response of French military historians to the performance of French railway companies during the Great War.

Effects of the War

The First World War brought many changes in the functioning of French railways. The tasks that the managements of French railways needed to fulfill in the course of military action differed from those during nineteenth-century wars. Railways handled the movement of a large number of people. In the course of the war, the military had gradually assumed authority over the railways. According to François Caron, the historian of French railways, in the course of the war, the French railway companies had taken many improvised decisions to deal with the unexpected dynamics of the war.¹ In August 1914, neither the management of the French railway companies nor the leaders of the army expected that the war would last more than four years. As Caron argues, the French railways had to deal with the increasing state control, necessary to fulfill the growing demands of the military, and the destruction of a significant part of the railways in northern France. In his study of the performance of the *réseau du Nord* during the war, Caron argues that the war led to a severe financial crisis for the network.² The *réseau* suffered heavily from the destruction of rolling stock, train stations, and depots during the war. In her Ph.D. thesis investigating the performance of French railways during the war, Anne Desplantes argues that the everyday efforts of railway networks came to play an ever-increasing role in sustaining the morale of the troops.³ The French railways ensured that a French *poilu* had good nutrition, kept in touch with his family, and had enough warm, clean clothing.

Historians note the paradoxical consequences of the presence of new technology during the July crisis of 1914. As Stephen Kern shows, the

¹ François Caron, *Histoire des chemins de fer en France*, vol. 2: 1883-1937 (Paris, 2005), 546-85.

² François Caron, *Histoire de l'exploitation d'un grand réseau: la Compagnie du chemin de fer du Nord, 1846-1937* (Paris, 1973): 422-23.

³ Anne Desplantes, “Les grands réseaux de chemin de fer français pendant et après la Première Guerre mondiale, 1914-1921” (Ph.D. diss., Université de Paris X-Nanterre, 1997.)

crisis of 1914 demonstrated the inability of the elite to understand the broad political implications of new technology.⁴ Newspapers used telegrams, sent among the royal houses of Russia and Germany, to mobilize the crowds in many European cities and to arouse anti-German (or anti-Russian) sentiments in many prowar demonstrations. With the introduction of the telegraph and telephone—the inventions of Samuel Morse in 1844 and Alexander Bell in 1854—communication among nations became much easier and timely, and new advances transformed the traditional concepts of speed and distance. In July 1914, the royal houses of Germany and Russia failed to read dozens telegrams sent to them, because the elite was not used to digesting information so rapidly.⁵ The same paradox was true for the use of railways during the Great War: even as their presence made the process of mobilization very effective and quick, nobody expected that the capacity of railways to deliver millions of soldiers and necessary supplies to the battlefields month after month would extend the war for more than four years.

Railways, according to Marie-Joseph Fischer, were “the main culprits” in the war’s lasting so long.⁶ Before the railways’ construction, local assets limited the resources of two opposing armies; when their supplies were depleted, an army needed to retreat. Fischer argued that the construction of dense railway networks had drastically changed the nature of modern warfare. Because railways helped to satisfy the needs of millions men on the front for months and years, a modern war could, theoretically, last indefinitely. If the development of railways prolonged the war, it also allowed the army to concentrate troops with unprecedented facility and speed. Before 1914, it took months to concentrate troops; in August 1914, it took only days to do so.⁷ Moreover, the general state of the transportation system became an important factor behind the Armistice: according to British officer James E. Edmond, the state of railway communication in France had contributed to the decision of Marshal Ferdinand Foch to negotiate a peace treaty in 1918.⁸ In the last months of the war, French

⁴ Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983.)

⁵ As Kern argues, telephones, telegraph, railways, x-rays, and modern art undermined “hierarchical” spaces: Francis Joseph, the last emperor of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, never allowed a telephone line to be installed in his Vienna palace because communication via phone threatened to eliminate the hierarchy between him and the caller. (Such a mode of communication made redundant the rituals of sending invitations, exchanging letters of recommendation, and having an audience.) Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space*, 316.

⁶ Lieutenant-colonel breveté [Marie-Joseph] Fischer, *Comment dura la guerre: souvenirs et réflexions sur l'entretien des Armées françaises au moyen des Chemins de fer de 1914 à 1918* (Paris, 1925), iii.

⁷ *Ibid.*, iii, vii, iv.

⁸ Brigadier General Sir James E. Edmonds, “Introduction,” in Alan M. Henniker, *Transportation on the Western Front, 1914-1918* (London, 1937), vii.

railways had encountered numerous difficulties in keeping pace with the rapid Allied advancement.

French railway management had underestimated how much cargo it would be required to handle to fulfill military needs.⁹ Total mobilization imposed very high standards on French railways: they became a major tool for providing fresh supplies to French troops and for delivering reinforcements. Gabriel Lafon, the author of a monograph about French railways in the course of the war, wrote: “Railways had . . . to satisfy the enormous and multiple needs of the troops, to ensure the economic life on the home front, and to give war industries, which were born [in the course of the war], the work force and basic resources indispensable for their functioning.”¹⁰ When planning military operations, military chiefs operated by very large numbers, a circumstance that increased the burden on French railways. The director of military railways in France, Joseph Le Henaff, characterized the behavior of French General Headquarters (*Grand Quartier Général* [GQG]) in the course of the war as “megalo-mania.”

Military requests for food and supplies rose significantly each year: the needs of the French army doubled, while those of the British army had quadrupled.¹¹ At the beginning of the war, the French command believed that the French military would be capable of buying provisions, including potatoes, fruits, and condiments, in areas where their units were stationed.¹² Soon the army could not procure such items in the countryside, however, and had to rely on trains to fulfill its needs. In the course of the war, each day train stations had to provide 1,588,000 rations for men and 508,000 rations for horses. According to Fischer, each day a military corps needed twenty-seven wagons with provisions and other materials.¹³ Each day the French army demanded 2,000 head of cattle, 600 tons of frozen meat, 1,000 pigs, 2,500 sheep, and 15 million liters of wine.¹⁴ Every day each division needed one and a half trains with provisions—assuming that every train consisted of fifty cars; moreover, divisions located on the front line needed two or three trains every day. Each day a division demanded eight carloads of bread, two of dried vegetables, salt, lard, sugar, and coffee, twelve of staple food, and four with staff for personal use.¹⁵ Only to provide supplies for the French army, French railways

⁹ See, for example, Gabriel Lafon, *Les chemins de fer français pendant la guerre: étude historique, économique et juridique* (Paris, 1922), 7-8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Caron, *Histoire des chemins de fer en France*, 2: 549-53.

¹² Fischer, *Comment dura la guerre*, 33, 48-49.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 24, 10.

¹⁴ Paul Gerbod, *La Restauration hors foyer en Europe* (Paris, 2000), 106.

¹⁵ Fischer, *Comment dura la guerre*, 10.

needed to deliver two hundred trains every day.¹⁶ In addition, each month the French army needed 750,000 pairs of shoes, 200,000 great-coats, 500,000 pants, 350,000 uniform jackets, one million shirts, and one million boxer shorts.¹⁷ Each winter the French railways delivered to the French troops 150,000 stoves, 200,000 lamps, 13,000 boilers, 2 million camp beds, 1,800,000 straw mattresses, and other items. As Edmonds argued, “The amount of ammunition, engineer stores and road metal consumed in trench warfare vastly exceeded the demands of mobile warfare. Railway traffic began to increase beyond the maximum needs of peace time and place an ever-increasing strain on the French rolling stock and personnel.”¹⁸

In addition to delivering food and personal items to the French troops, the French railways carried out the difficult task of providing the troops with new weapons. In the course of the war, the command modernized the French artillery: at the beginning of the war the French army used the 75-millimeter cannons, but it had switched to 450-millimeter cannons by the end of the war.¹⁹ According to Fischer, at the beginning of the war, nobody expected that the command would need to change the ammunition and the armament of troops almost completely during the course of the conflict.

In the course of the Great War, train stations assumed a new role as storage and distribution centers; the phenomenon of “regulating train stations” (RTS)—*gares régulatrices*—drastically redefined the function of French train stations. The law of December 8, 1913, envisioned RTS’s as simple annexes to railway stations, but they came to fulfill the role of service centers for the army.²⁰ As a result, regulating train stations were handling an increasing amount of cargo. Weapons and ammunition came to the RTS’s from cities, villages, and warehouses that were scattered throughout France. Trains filled with groceries and petrol arrived at RTS’s; railway workers unloaded such trains and arranged the “daily mixed supply trains” to the front.²¹

RTS’s relied on the service of *stations-magasines*—that is, storehouses for the French army; in the words of Fischer, *stations-magasines* resembled the Parisian market, “*les halles centrales*.” These storehouses became affiliated with the RTS’s. In addition to incorporating warehouses, storing food and provisions, they developed into service centers for the

¹⁶ Caron, *Histoire des chemins de fer en France*, 2: 553. Interestingly enough, the famous words, “an army travels on its stomach” were first said by Napoleon, who also understood the importance of supplying French troops.

¹⁷ Fischer, *Comment dura la guerre*, 60-62.

¹⁸ Edmonds, “Introduction,” xii.

¹⁹ Fischer, *Comment dura la guerre*, 46-47.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 48-49.

²¹ Edmonds, “Introduction,” x. Nine warehouses, which fulfilled the needs of the French army, included those in Lyon, Dijon, Troyes, Le Plaine Saint-Denis, Orleans, Vierzon, Le Mans, Mézidon and Dunkerque. Fischer, *Comment dura la guerre*, 60-62.

army. On their territories, one could find bakeries, butcher shops, and even workshops where vessels for the transportation of wine and other liquids were made. Regulating train stations also acquired laundry facilities, because RTS's became the only centers ensuring that the army had a clean laundry. Profiteers were making a fortune by charging high prices for food; to stop speculation, the military administrations had created cooperatives that provided fresh food at affordable prices.²² Such cooperatives stocked central stores, mainly established at RTS's.

The development of the RTS's contributed to the increasing role played by the French command and army in handling the business of the French railways. By developing RTS's, the French army created new railway centers that redefined the spatial hierarchy of French railways. RTS's became indispensable centers for the military authorities because they minimized the need for the army to communicate and to negotiate with civilian authorities. RTS's had developed into kinds of autonomous cities, which came under the complete control of the army. The military command thus preferred to give all orders to the staff of RTS's that had at their disposal all necessary resources.²³ In his diary, Raymond Poincaré described his visit to a regulating train station in September 1915 and his satisfaction with the well-coordinated work of the railway staff.²⁴ Poincaré observed the ways the staff of an RTS handled the distribution of post parcels and the composition of trains taking food to the front. As Poincaré wrote, "everything functioned perfectly." Where the French command had introduced a practice of short leaves, "*permissions*," RTS's also became centers where bedrooms, dining rooms, entertainment centers, and post offices were at the disposal of soldiers on leave.²⁵

Even though military historians pointed to the unprecedented contribution of the railways to the mobilization, they also sometimes revealed bitterness and frustration when writing about railways. Such authors blamed the railway management for multiple failures to deliver troops on time, for a lack of efficiency, and for other delays—problems that they felt could have been avoided if the managers of French railway companies had cared less for profits and more for national interests. In an article published in 1922, Colonel Le Henaff evaluated the service of French railways to the French nation as satisfactory but not outstanding.²⁶ According to Le Henaff, in the years of the Belle Époque, there was a false perception that the French railway companies employed enough staff and enough resources to handle the needs of the army. Nonetheless, the increasing development of commercial traffic—a matter of pride for

²² Fischer, *Comment dura la guerre*, 33, 48, 62-63, 82-83..

²³ *Ibid.*, 55-55.

²⁴ Раймон Пуанкаре, *На службе Франции, 1915-1916: Воспоминания* [Raymond Poincaré, *Serving France, 1915-1916: Memoirs*] (Moscow, 2002), 67.

²⁵ Fischer, *Comment dura la guerre*, 80-82.

²⁶ Colonel [Joseph] Le Henaff, "Les chemins de fer et la prolongation de la guerre," *Revue militaire française* 5, n. s. (July-Sept. 1922).

French railway companies before 1914—did not become a factor that facilitated the mobilization and concentration of the French army. Moreover, the managements of the Paris-Lyon-Méditerranée, the Paris-Orleans, and the state network (*réseau de l'État*) were little prepared for handling mobilization. At the same time, Le Henaff admitted that military leaders themselves had not imagined that the war would last for more than four years and would demand superhuman efforts. Neither the military nor railroad management was prepared for such a course of events.

Military historians emphasized that there was a drastic difference between the attitudes of French railway companies and the French army toward the construction and development of railways. Le Henaff argued that nothing cost the army more in the course of military action than the policy of saving money before 1914.²⁷ As commercial enterprises, French railway companies always prioritized economy; they did not make provisions for additional stock and for expansion of their service in the event of mobilization and military conflict. A similar critique appears in the work of an American officer, General James Harbord, who became Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army in France. Harbord bitterly contrasted the attitudes of railways companies as commercial enterprises and the army toward the railway necessities during wartime:

The military corporation had been organized to conduct war and there is no other agency in the world qualified to conduct it. The impelling force behind a civilian corporation is to make something for as little money as possible, and to sell it for as much money as possible, thereby leaving a margin of profit for the shareholders. The impelling force behind the military corporation was to get a certain thing to a certain place at a certain time. Money was of no consideration except as it might be a means to that end.²⁸

Conclusion

The French railway system that emerged in the course of the war differed from that of the Belle Époque. Military authors emphasized that railways played a crucial role in the history of the Great War. The increasing requirements of the army for provision and armament made railways a

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ General James G. Harbord *The American Army in France 1917-1919*, 360, as cited in Edmonds, "Introduction," xxii-xxiii. Harbord, who before 1914 was a prominent banker in Chicago, also noted: "The people of a democracy do not have a very high opinion of the business intelligence, or even the usefulness, of soldiers until the enemy is thundering at the gates. They forget that through the ages military administration and supply have been worked out from experience. They cannot be separated in the field of actual operations. Civilian business seldom remembers that it had borrowed from the military the basic principles of its own administration—everything, perhaps, except certain ethical standards. The trade secrets of the military profession, he [General Charles Dawes] said, are known only to military men and are not understood by civilians." Ibid.

very important tool for ensuring that the everyday needs of the army were met. As General Edmonds wrote,

The vast amount of material, especially of ammunition, required in modern war renders Armies dependent on their lines of communication, and particularly on railways, to an extent undreamed of in the past. Their mobilization, deployment on the frontier, concentrations for offensive, strategic moves and reinforcement and the removal of wounded and sick are likewise impossible without rapid means of mass transport.²⁹

The railways ensured communication between the armies and the home front and became, in the words of Fischer, “genuine cords between the army and the motherland that made possible the functioning of armies.”³⁰ In the course of the war, railways became a system of mass transit that developed the capacity to carry the growing number of travelers and goods.

²⁹ Edmonds, “Introduction,” vii.

³⁰ Fischer, *Comment dura la guerre*, iii.