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Historians often perceive railroads primarily as an infrastructure helping a state to consolidate its territory and to integrate distant regions into one economic and political space. This is also true for most of the literature on the history of railroads in nineteenth century Russia. Change of commodities and the mobility of the population. In the second half of the nineteenth century, railroads also opened new opportunities for people to experience ethnic and religious diversity. Contemporary travel accounts bear witness that travelers on Russian railroads perceived the empire less as a homogeneous space of communication than a fragmented territory inhabited by a great and sometimes uncomfortable variety of ethnic and religious groups. Moreover, the railroad proved to be an effective tool in the hands of those political actors who were trying to undermine political stability. In particular, in the western borderlands railroads repeatedly became a target of politically motivated violence and were used by militant groups to spread the seeds of ethnic hatred. The Russian example bears witness that the railroad, envisioned by its proponents as a golden path to social and spatial integration, in the immediate term enabled violence and contributed to developing social disintegration.

My essay may be read—in a more general sense—as a plea for the inclusion of railway structure in general and of railroads in particular for a long time as an exclusive domain of scholars studying either economic or technical history. Railway historians, conversely, have often neglected the great cultural and social impact of the construction and the use of networks of modern infrastructure in the era of the steam engine, but in recent years there has been a "cultural turn" in railway history. In this spirit, we have to bring the history of infrastructure back into the general narrative of the development of European societies in the era of industrialization. The history of the borderlands of the Romanov, Habsburg, Ottoman, and Hohenzollern empires in particular gains substantially from insight into the social and cultural impacts of the construction and the use of modern infrastructure in the era of the steam engine.

The construction of railway networks altered significantly the structures of social spaces within these contested regions of the continent's polyethnic empires. In the imperial capitals, the invention of the railroads inspired far-reaching spatial fantasies by politicians, military officers, and geographers alike. Both the state and private actors made a strong effort to use the new means of transportation in order to transform geographically and culturally heterogeneous territories into politically and economically integrated spaces. But in the borderlands of the continental empires of Europe, populated by a variety of ethnic and religious groups, the introduction of networks of modern transportation had extensive and often unintended social and cultural side effects. On the one hand, railroads became an effective tool of imperial rule, helping imperial administrations to exert political and military control more effectively over large territories at the empires' peripheries; construction of railroads thereby helped to integrate borderland areas into the political, economic, and cultural space of their respective empires. On the other hand, the construction of railroads led to a significant increase in human mobility in all countries encountering the process of modernization of their infrastructure. Increasingly mobile societies became a growing threat to the social and political order of the ancien régimes in the polyethnic empires for various reasons. The new means of transportation opened up new possibilities for an increasing number of people to explore the various geographical regions of the imperial territories personally and thereby to encounter the empire's ethnic and religious heterogeneity. It is an open question whether this confrontation between an increasing number of subjects and the "imperial characters" of their respective empires consolidated feelings of imperial identity—or, on the contrary—enforced processes of increased national or ethnic alienation. As the Russian example shows, the new means of transportation were also used by proponents of national liberation movements in the borderlands, enabling them to build up their own networks of communication and to destabilize mechanisms of imperial rule by attacking railways and telegraph lines. This chapter will analyze the ambivalent impact of the modernization of networks of transportation in the western borderlands of the Russian Empire in the second half of the nineteenth century.

In the following, I will provide some observations on the ambivalent impact of infrastructure building and use in imperial contexts in nineteenth century Europe. First, I will briefly outline the political debates among Russian bureaucrats in Saint Petersburg in the latter half of the nineteenth century concerning the construction of railroads in the western part of the Russian Empire, and describe the development of the railroad network in this part of the country prior to World War I. Second, I will focus on the travel accounts of nineteenth century railroad passengers traversing the Western Empire, describing their encounters with multiethnicity inside and outside the railroad cars. Finally, I will reflect on the issue of rail-
roads and politically motivated violence, focusing first on the anti-Jewish pogroms of the early 1880s and second on the train raids conducted by the Polish Socialist Party at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The term “western borderlands” is used in this context in a rather broad sense. It comprises a geographically large region that was extremely heterogeneous in both socioeconomic and cultural terms. “Western borderlands of the Russian Empire,” as they are understood in this article, encompassed the so-called “western region” (Zapadnyi krat), the territory of the Polish Kingdom, the provinces of “left-bank Ukraine” (Chernigov and Poltava), New Russia (Khersonskaia guberniia, Tavricheskaia guberniia) and the province of Ekaterinoslav in the southwestern part of the country.7 Despite the mixed character of this large region, it was nonetheless shaped by a number of common historical and structural features.8 To a large extent the western borderlands were parts of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth before they were incorporated into the Russian Empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; other parts belonged until the eighteenth century to the Ottoman Empire. In the second half of the nineteenth century the density of population in this region was much higher than in any other of the border zones of the imperial realm. In terms of socioeconomic development the region—the Polish Kingdom in particular—toward the end of the nineteenth century surpassed not only the other peripheries but also the core area of imperial Russia. Finally, the population of the western borderlands comprised a large number of different ethnic and religious groups. Since the boundaries of the region were almost identical with the Jewish Pale of Settlement, the area was also the homestead of the majority of Russian Jews. Toward the end of the century the political development in the region was increasingly dominated by the conflicting agendas of the Polish, Lithuanian, Ukrainian, Jewish, and Russian national movements, along with various kinds of revolutionary parties that strove to extend their social bases.

Railroads and the Consolidation of Territory in the Western Borderlands

When the Russian administration started to debate the possibility and utility of building railroads in the Tsarist Empire in the 1830s, proponents of the steam engine argued from the very beginning that the new means of transportation might help strengthen the links between the Russian heartland and the politically troublesome periphery in the West. In his note for Tsar Nicholas I, Franz Anton von Gerstner, an Austrian entrepreneur who applied in 1835 for the concession to build an entire network of railroads in European Russia, deliberately alluded to the revolutionary events in the Kingdom of Poland in 1830–1831 in order to convince the Emperor of the necessity of covering his realm with railway lines. Gerstner informed Nicholas I that the British government had successfully applied the new means of transportation for the quick dispatch of troops to suppress a revolt in Ireland.9 He argued, “if Petersburg, Moscow, and Grodno or Warsaw had been connected by rail, it would have been possible to subdue the Polish insurgents in four weeks.”10 Although Gerstner’s reference to the Polish November uprising was a good example of the applicability of the steam engine for strategic purposes, a railroad from Petersburg or Moscow to Warsaw or Grodno was ironically not part of the rail network he suggested setting up in European Russia in 1835.7

A few years later, the construction of long-distance railroads in Russia began—in the Western part of the empire.8 In 1839 Nicholas I approved the application of a group of private investors from Warsaw, who planned to connect the city with the Austrian capital by rail.9

The plan was initiated by the Russian viceroy of Poland, Count Ivan Paskevich, who wanted to deflect the flow of Polish trade from Prussia to the Habsburg Empire. When the private stock company went bankrupt in 1843 the Russian government took over and completed the line in 1848.10 Just a few years later Nicholas I gave the go-ahead for the construction of the strategically important railroad from St. Petersburg to Warsaw. The head of the empire’s Board [later Ministry] for Ways of Communication, Count Peter Kleinmikhel’ and other leading bureaucrats had openly criticized this project because they doubted its economic usefulness. Nevertheless the Emperor ordered the erection of the line in February 1851, half a year before the first overland railroad in Russia from St. Petersburg to Moscow was officially inaugurated.11 Nicholas I perceived the railroad to Warsaw as a means to tighten the bonds between the politically unreliable Polish Kingdom and the Russian heartland and to strengthen the western borderlands strategically.12 He argued that “in case of a sudden outbreak of war with the present state of the rail network in Europe, Warsaw, and with it our entire west, could be overrun by enemy forces before our troops could succeed in getting from Petersburg to Luga.”13 Although the beginning of the Crimean War in 1855 interrupted the construction of the Petersburg–Warsaw railroad, work resumed in 1857 and the line opened in 1862. Soon after its inauguration the railroad to Warsaw proved its utility for imperial rule. In 1863 the line enabled the autocratic regime quickly to dispatch guard regiments to the western provinces and the Polish Kingdom to suppress the January uprising.14 In the same fashion, some years earlier the railroad from Warsaw to Vierna had enabled the Russian government in 1849 to relocate troops to Hungary, helping to contain the revolutionary upheaval there.15

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century the western borderlands of the Russian Empire remained in the focus of infrastructure politics for two reasons. First, leading strategists in the Russian Ministry of War predicted a future military confrontation between the Tsarist Empire and its neighboring countries in the West. Therefore they urged their government to follow the example of Prussia and the Habsburg Empire, which were developing their networks of modern means of transportation in quick pace, improving their abilities to dispatch their troops to the Russian border with rapidity in the case of war.16 Second, the experience of the January uprising in 1863 seemed to underscore the need to consolidate further the empire’s territory in the west with the help of railways. Many contemporaries were influenced by the idea that a network of modern means of transportation would not only integrate a country economically but in the meantime would help overcome cultural and ethnic borders.

A good example of this way of thinking is the lecture that General of Infantry Sergei Buturlin gave in 1865 at the Imperial Society for History and Archeology in Moscow.17 This presentation was part of a larger campaign by the Ministry of War against the plans of the Board of Ways of Communication for the development of Russia’s network of railroads, drafted by the administration’s head Pavel Mel’nikov in 1862–1863.18 Mel’nikov, a representative of the first generation of Russian engineers of transportation, perceived railroads first and foremost as an instrument to integrate the territories of the Tsarist Empire economically. His aim was primarily to connect the centers of Russian agricultural (and to a lesser extent industrial) production with the highly populated areas in European Russia and with the empire’s harbors at the Baltic and the Black Seas. In earlier years Mel’nikov had openly criticized the construction of a strategic railroad from St. Petersburg to Warsaw. Therefore it was not surprising that he included in his 1862 master plan just one more railway line...
crossing the western borderlands (from Briansk to Odessa via Chernigov, Kiev, and Balta). Mel'nikov's draft was published in 1863 and ignited a large public debate about the principles of Russia's future railway policy. Proponents of an economically sustainable network argued with advocates of strategic railroad building; supporters of regional business interests were confronted with activists seeking to serve the interests of the empire as a whole; adherents of a state-funded railroad were facing experts reminding them of the limited resources of the government's budget and arguing for cooperation with private investors. Sergei Buturlin represented the camp of railway politicians promoting the construction of strategic railways in general and in the western borderlands of the empire in particular.19

Referring to a possible scenario of a war of defense (voina obronitel'naya) against Russia's Western neighbors, Buturlin reminded his listeners in 1865 of the fact that Warsaw was located 200 verstes20 closer to the river Rhine than to Moscow and that the distance between the Polish capital and Moscow was in fact even larger due to the poor state of the roads in Russia. The countries of Europe, having built a dense network of railway lines in the last 20 or 30 years, had accordingly succeeded in "shortening the distance between themselves and Russia" significantly, whereas the distance between Russia and the West had remained almost the same.21 Buturlin argued that Russia must not stand idle facing this problem. Instead he formulated a detailed plan for the construction of approximately 6,095 verstes of new railway lines in the western part of the country. The author, who wisely did not touch the difficult question of costs and funding for his ambitious project, planned not only to strengthen Russia's western borderlands from the Baltic Sea to the Crimea with a network of strategic railroads as an answer to separatism and revolutionary movements in this region. Alluding openly to the January uprising of 1863 Buturlin stated:

"Which join the Western parts of the empire with the country's core area" than railways connecting Russia's periphery with the country's Western neighbors or improving the mutual exchange and traffic between the various parts of the western borderlands.22 That's why Buturlin identified the city of Brest-Litovsk as the most Western outpost of Russia's strategic railway system. According to his plan the territory of the Polish kingdom should not be further developed by a network of modern infrastructure.23

Buturlin's outline reflected almost perfectly the main features of the Ministry of War's official railway policy in the 1860s. Three years later, in 1868, Minister of War Dmitrii Miliutin urged Tsar Alexander II in a memorandum to make further investments in strategic railway building in Russia's western borderlands.24 He reminded the Tsar of the superiority of Russia's Western neighbors in terms of infrastructure development. Both Prussia and the Habsburg Empire could rely on more railway lines leading to the common border than the Tsarist Empire, enabling them to dispatch troops more quickly to the front in a future war.

Like Buturlin, Miliutin made a strong argument for the construction of strategic railroads from the Russian heartland to the western borderlands and agreed that Poland should not be part of the program of railway construction in the future.25

In fact the question whether the Tsarist administration should encourage the construction of railroads in the Kingdom of Poland remained disputed within the Ministry of War until World War I. After the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871, which Prussia managed to win in large part due to the quick movement of troops and armaments on strategic railroads, Miliutin himself looked at the issue of railroad building in Russia's Western periphery from a different perspective. In 1873 the Minister of War demanded at an official meeting on national security affairs the construction of 5,000 verstes of new strategic railway lines in the Western part of the country, 1,000 within the borders of the Polish Kingdom. But due to a lack of sufficient funding none of the 11 lines he demanded were constructed until 1881 and only three until 1888. After a new shift in strategic planning at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Ministry of War in 1910 again opposed the construction of new railroads in the Polish Kingdom, on the grounds they could help a future aggressor quickly to invade the Russian heartland.26

The repeated shifts in railway policy by Russia's Ministry of War clearly illustrate the undecided attitude of the Tsarist elite toward the issue of infrastructure building and its possible impact in the western borderlands in the second half of the nineteenth century. Already in December 1861 the General-Governor of the northwestern region (Severo-Zapadnyi krai), General V. I. Nazimov, had warned about the "ambivalent attitude of the administration of the newly opened [St. Petersburg–Warsaw] railroad and the personnel of the line who are most exclusively Poles and foreigners."27 Nazimov apparently was afraid of the regime's dependence on the loyalty of the representatives of national minorities who were running the new system of transportation. The experience of the January uprising would soon show that Nazimov's fears were not at all ill-founded. When the national revolt began, Polish insurgents not only burnt several railway bridges and cut the wires of the strategically important telegraph; they found active supporters among the staff of the privately run railroad company who were happy to further obstruct the quick dispatch of loyal Tsarist troops by rail to the revolting provinces.28 After the uprising's suppression the railwaymen who had collaborated with the insurgents were harshly punished and the Tsarist administration made a strong effort to enhance its control over the strategically important network of railway lines in the Western districts.29 In 1880s Warsaw Governor-General I. Gurko even advocated that Poles not be employed in the railway sector any longer. Subsequently it was decided to ban Polish staff from the most important strategic railway lines. But this decision remained difficult to implement as there simply were not enough qualified Orthodox technical and engineering specialists to substitute for the professionals of Catholic backgrounds.30 The Tsarist administration was not only afraid of disloyal Polish railwaymen. Bureaucrats in the administration of the General-Governor of Vilna had warned back in 1867 against further consolidating the regional railway network between the Zapadnyi krai and the Polish Kingdom. In a letter from August 23rd the official A. P. Storozenko reported that the construction of the railroad from Vil'na to Warsaw had significantly increased the reach of Polish nationalist propaganda...
in the province of Grodno. The local bureaucracy lamented that the railroad brought not only pork salesmen from Mazuria but also "agents of the Polish cause" spreading unrest in the region.

Notwithstanding these misgivings, neither the Minister of War, who was afraid of further developing the network of modern infrastructure in the Polish Kingdom, nor the local representatives of the Tsarist regime in the western borderlands who warned of the unintended political effects of railway building at the empire's periphery could stop the process of modernization and industrialization that Russia in general and her western borderlands in particular were experiencing in the second half of the nineteenth century. Between 1868 and 1872 the Tsarist Empire encountered its first boom of railroad building, with a second one coming in the 1890s. During these periods the western borderlands became the region with the best developed regional railway network in the entire empire. Already the public debate about the construction of the so-called "Southern Line" had shown in the 1860s that the arguments of those political forces stressing the importance of the steam engine for the economic development of the country often exceeded those of the representatives of the national security agencies. Despite the hesitant attitudes of several agencies regarding the modernization of the region's infrastructure, it was the western borderlands that experienced the quickest development of railroad networks, and consequently the greatest increase in passenger mobility, of any region of the Russian Empire toward the end of the nineteenth century.

The Railway Journey and the Experience of Ethnic Diversity

Despite the fact that railway passengers traveling from the Russian heartland to the Habsburg Empire had to change trains in the city of Warsaw due to different gauges on the tracks eastward and westward of the Vistula River, cartographers of the nineteenth century envisioned the vast expanses of the Tsarist Empire as a single, homogeneous space structured and bound together by an integrated system of black, iron arteries. From the 1880s on every waiting room of the first two classes in Russian railway stations had to be equipped with such a map of Russian networks. But it is an open question whether cartographical artifacts of this kind had an enduring effect on the mental maps of Russia's railway passengers. Did, one may ask, passengers traveling by rail in the western borderlands experience the space outside the railway car really as an integral part of one national or imperial space? Was the image of an iron network holding together the various parts of the multietnic empire only a product of the wishful thinking of engineers and cartographers, or did it also have a significant impact on the patterns of spatial perception of Russian railroad passengers? The analysis of a small number of randomly selected travel accounts by Russian railway passengers who visited the western borderlands during the last decades of the nineteenth century make a different hypothesis more likely. Apparently the new possibilities for travel from one part of the country to another in the railway age did not consolidate images of territorial integrity but, on the contrary, strengthened the awareness of the multietnic and multi-religious character of the huge country. Different ethnic and religious groups came into focus in these travelers' perceptions according to the geographical regions they covered. When taking a closer look at travel accounts from Russians who made their trip to or through the western borderlands of the empire in the late nineteenth century, one is repeatedly surprised by the omnipresence of anti-Jewish stereotypes and detailed descriptions of Jews as embodiments of the internal "other." Apparently many Russian railway travelers perceived these regions mainly as a "Jewish" space that differed significantly from the Russian heartland.

For travelers in railway cars in late nineteenth century Russia, experiencing the internal borders of the empire was first and foremost a matter of acoustic perception. Aleksandr Klevanov, a historian and translator of ancient literature, made a trip in 1870 from St. Petersburg to the German lands, crossing the Western periphery in a first-class carriage of the St. Petersburg-Warsaw line. In the city of Dünaburg/Dvinsk, at the intersection with the railway line to Riga, Klevanov noticed a large number of Germans entering the train who accompanied the traveling society to Vilna. Getting closer to the empire's western border he remarked that he had left the Russian heartland acoustically: "the employees of the railways are without exception Polish. The sound of the Russian language can't be heard anywhere except from travelling passengers." After he had gone through passport control at the Russian checkpoint, which was conducted by a Polish border guard, he stated: "In general the last impressions of my fatherland [rodiny], at least those of the Polish borderland [ukrainy], were not too pleasant". In order to illustrate his estrangement in the borderzone, he added that a Jew addressed him at the station, offering to change his Russian money into Austrian currency.

The encounter with the Jews in the western borderlands left a deep impression on most of the Russian railway voyagers who gave an account of their travel experiences in this region. This was also true for those Russians who lived in the western part of the empire and who in principle were well acquainted with the polyethnic reality of social life in these regions. For example, Vasilii Liakhotskii, an Orthodox priest from the city of Kholm/Chelm, made a roundtrip from his Polish/Ukrainian hometown through the Russian Empire by train in 1898 and published his travelogue two years later. At the railway station of Kovel' in Volhynia, where Liakhotskii and his fellow passenger came into contact with Jews offering them accommodation in a local hotel, the author made fun of the "chidki" and their Russian accent. Two years later Liakhotskii left again his hometown for a journey to the southern Caucasus, documented in another travel account. This time he bought a ticket for a third-class carriage, which took him from Kholm via Kovel' southwards to Berdichev, Kazatyn and further to Rostov na Donu. On the first part of his journey, his carriage was almost completely populated by Jewish passengers. In his travelogue Liakhotskii frankly reveals his feeling of discomfort in this situation:

This tribe [plemena] stands out because of its [extraordinary—FS] forbearance, which can be studied particularly on journeys like this. In order to travel as cheap as possible a Jew [zhid] is even happy to sleep the whole way underneath an ordinary bench. Since there were so many Jews in the car (it was after Saturday), many of them had almost to sit down on somebody else.

Liakhotskii did not hide his anti-Jewish sentiments when he called the city of Berdichev a zhidovskaia stolica (capital of Jews) and described Jewish passengers on their way to Kiev in the following strongly derogatory terms: "This tribe, repudiated by God and other people, strives to the capital, to the mother of Russian towns, the sanctuary of Rus', meanwhile our folk are wandering from the North to the South and the way back just in order to make a living." Obviously Liakhotskii perceived the western borderlands as an integral part of an all-embracing imperial space of communication. Nevertheless, he interpreted the increasing
mobility of the different ethnic and religious groups less as an indicator of growing spatial cohesion and more as an erratic and ominous development.

Despite the increasing density of the local network of railroads in the western borderlands of the Russian Empire before World War I, the region did not lose its image as a sphere of political unrest and instability. This spatial stereotype was based not only on the perception of the polyethnic composition of the region’s population but also on the imagination of its landscape. The report of Vasili M. Sidorov, who traveled in the late 1890s by train from Vilna to Kiev, is a lucid example of this kind of mental mapping.46 Sidorov, who had a choice between a rail connection via Brest and one via Gomel, chose the latter option and got stuck into the horrible marshes of Pinsk: “In his train that could move neither forward nor backward he experienced the feeling of absolute loneliness [chuvstvo polneishago odinochestva], . . . of horrible depression [strashnoi toski] and alienation of everything familiar [otchuzhdennosti ot vsego blizkogo].”47 There were almost no other passengers in the train, except three huntsmen in the second class and some peasants in the third. On the railway stations he met just “crowds of Jews [zhidy], who curiously stared at me without understanding what I am doing in this solitude,”48 After having arrived in the city of Gomel he was shocked by the “filthy hotel room in the provincial town that was crowded with Jews.”49 When he finally got to Kiev, two days later than originally planned, he felt as if he “saw the light again” after a journey through the darkness.

The Russian perception of the western borderlands in late nineteenth century was affected both by patterns of ethnic diversity in general and the Jewish population in particular. This becomes even more obvious if one takes a closer look at the memoirs of a Jewish writer who reported on a railway journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow in the 1860s.50 Vladimir Garkavi, a son of a wealthy Jewish family in Vilna, moved to Moscow in 1864, in order to start his studies in law at the city’s university. Garkavi went first to St. Petersburg, from where he took the train to his new hometown. Traveling in a cheap third-class carriage, the young student was surrounded by Russian peasants, women and children who were sitting on the “benches and on the floor.” Every passenger carried a lot of luggage; people drank tea, sang songs, slept on the floor and underneath the settees. Garkavi was surprised that during the whole journey, which lasted about 36 hours,

nobody pronounced the word “zhid.” I became acquainted with almost every passenger and—what seems to me quite naive and funny from today’s perspective—I read loudly poems of Nekrasov and Nikitin to the peasants [in the train]. The peasants listened attentively, giving a deep sigh from time to time, and I realized that I was in touch with the essence of [Russian] folk life. In the carriage I made first acquaintance with an educated Russian woman. . . . We talked about literature, about Belinskii, Dobroliubov, Pisarev, Chernyshevski, and about the female protagonists in Turgenev’s novels. From my accent and manner of speech she recognized that I was a “foreigner” [inorodets]. But when I told her that I was a Jew, she was more than surprised.51

Garkavi’s travelogue is a fascinating source. It illustrates that the railways as a modern means of communication could open up new spaces of social integration and interethnic communication. But this was apparently true to a larger extent for the railways in the heartland of the Russian Empire than for its western borderlands.

The perception of the western borderlands of the Tsarist Empire by Russian railway passengers as a “Jewish” space corresponds in an interesting way with the patterns of description of trains and railway stations in this region in Yiddish literature at the turn of the century. Analyzing novels and short stories by Elyoukem Zunser, Sholem Abramovitch, Sholem Aleichem, and David Bergelson in which railroads play an important role both as settings for the story and/or as a signifier of modernity, Leah Garrett writes of a tendency to “Judaize” Russian railroads in the Yiddish literature of the time.52 Contemporary Jewish writers repeatedly depicted the railroads as a means of helping Jews either to escape or to pull them out of the narrow world of traditional shtetl life. Although Jews were neither allowed to work for the telegraph service of the Russian railroads (decree of 1875) nor to rent restaurants and buffets at railway stations (decree of 1894) and were not even allowed after 1897 to practice their religion openly in train compartments or the waiting rooms of Russian railway stations, Jewish writers developed various imaginative techniques to appropriate these public spaces.53 Garrett unveils an ambivalent mode of perceiving the railroads in Yiddish literature in the second half of the century.54 Zunser, Abramovitch, and other Yiddish authors depicted the railroads in the Pale of Settlement as a space of social encounter where Jews got in touch with men and women from different parts of the country and representatives of other religious and ethnic groups. Whereas Zunser praised the steam engine in his poem “Der ayznban” (“The Railroad”), written in 1865, as a “democratic, positive force to literally transport the Jews into the modern world,” Bergelson depicted a Ukrainian railroad depot in his 1909 novel Arum vokzal (At the Depot) as a location of complete stagnation and social desperation.55 Overcrowded compartments in third-class railway cars inspired both Sholom Abramovitch’s short story “Shem un Yefes in a vogn” (“Shem and Japheth on a Train”) in 1890 and Sholem Aleichem’s Azbybn-gekhkhikes (Railroad Stories), written between 1902 and 1909.56 Abramovitch uses this framework to tell a mythical story of reconciliation and fraternization between a Jewish tailor and a Polish shoemaker during a time of modern ethnic persecution, while Aleichem depicts crowded railway cars as an almost ideal site for the exchange of information, gossip, and Jewish storytelling.

Railroads and Politically Motivated Violence

Aleichem’s Railroad Stories, though they have to be treated of course primarily as literary fiction, give us a good impression of the extent to which the steam engine altered social life in the Jewish Pale of Settlement at the beginning of the twentieth century.57 From his narrative we learn a lot about the narrowness and noisiness of overpopulated third-class carriages, and about Jews ignoring the law prohibiting prayers in the public sphere. Aleichem depicts the ceremonial welcome of trains by the populace of small towns in the western borderlands, and the increased mobility of Jewish traders and salesmen. Vicariously, we experience the encounters and conflicts between different religious and ethnic groups in trains and railway stations. Moreover, Aleichem’s stories can be read as an attempt “to explore a new kind of Jewish experience and to describe a Jewish society that had reached a new level of development or of disintegration.”58 His tale, “The Wedding That Came without Its Band,” written in 1909, is of particular interest in our context.59 In this short story Aleichem treats the subject of railroads and their role in anti-Jewish pogroms in early twentieth century with a hearty dose of black humor. The population of a small Jewish settlement called Heysin is informed about a group of Ukrainian roughnecks planning to conduct a pogrom in their shtetl. As the Ukrainians approached the settlement by train, the Jews, aware of the impending catastrophe, alarm a Russian prefect and plead for his...
help. In return for a large payment or bribe the representative of the Tsarist authorities orders a company of Cossacks from a nearby city to protect the Jews from the pogromists. But when the Cossacks, the Jews, and other residents from Heysin gather at the railway station awaiting the train's arrival they find out that the drunk driver of the steam engine had forgotten to connect it to the passenger cars at the point of departure. Thus the locomotive arrives at Heysin while leaving the cars with their precarious passengers on its way. The Jews are saved from another wave of ethnic hatred thanks to the stupidity of Russian railwaymen. Although Aleichem's story about the impeded pogrom at Heysin is purely fictitious, it nevertheless consists of historically reliable elements. It is particularly interesting that Aleichem was aware of the fact that the construction of railroads in the western borderlands contributed to the increased regional mobility both of ordinary salesmen and workers and of perpetrators spreading hatred and ethnic violence from one part of the country to the other. This observation was later affirmed by the studies of Michael Aronson, Omeljan Pritsak, and other historians who analyzed the origins of the anti-Jewish pogroms of the 1880s in the western borderlands of the Tsarist Empire. Aronson convincingly demonstrated the high degree of involvement of railway employees and workers in the riots of 1881; he also pointed out the importance of railway lines in enabling militant groups to move easily from one location to the other and to conduct their destructive activities in the whole region. Despite the fact that the government later tried to blame Ukrainian peasants for the outbreak of ethnic and religious violence, the pogroms had their origins less in rural than in urban contexts. The critical role railwaymen, who were suffering from bad working conditions and alienation from their home regions, played in the pogroms of the 1880s brings Aronson to the conclusion that "the pogroms were more the result of Russia's modernization and industrialization process than of age-old religious and national antagonisms." All fearfu of pogroms in the early 1880s, the inhabitants of Jewish settlements were well aware of the dangerous potential of the railroads as a network for the spread of ethnic violence. As John Klier has shown, in some Jewish towns in the western borderlands in 1881 and 1882 the populations set up armed self-defense units, which made rounds by night and tried to stop potential perpetrators from disembarking trains at railway stations.

As the example of militant destruction of railway bridges and telegraph lines during the January uprising in 1863 has shown, railways and other strategically important infrastructures were used by militant groups to spread ethnic violence and were identified as highly sensitive targets of politically motivated criminal acts. Further examples of this often neglected side of railway history in the western borderlands of the Russian Empire are found in the attempts of political underground movements in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to target sites of Russian infrastructure like trains and railway stations. In this context one may point, for example, to the attempt of the terrorist organization "People's Will" (Narodnaya volja) to blow up the train of Tsar Alexander II near Odessa on its way from the Crimea to Moscow in November 1879. Due to changes in the Emperor's travel route, the Populist activists quickly halted their preparations at the site near Odessa and shifted their activities to two other spots on the road. When one of the bombs finally exploded underneath the railway track near Moscow, the Emperor escaped the attempt at his life only by chance.

But the railways in the western borderlands remained in the following decades a contested space in the struggle between the Tsarist authorities and various political underground movements. On 26 September 1908, the Revolutionary Faction of the Polish Socialist Party under the leadership of Józef Piłsudski committed an armed train raid at the small railway station of Będzany (Lithuanian: Bzdonys) 25 km. from Vilna. The rebels had learned that every Saturday the government sent tax money with the night train from Vilna to St. Petersburg. The train was identified as an ideal target for an action of expropriation to fund the party's militant activities and to equip the newly founded Union of Active Struggle (Związek Walki Czynnej) with weapons. Nineteen activists carried out the operation, planned in detail one year in advance. When the train reached the station, a bomb was thrown under the postal coach and the door of the carriage was opened by force. The rebels started shooting at the escort and left one Russian soldier dead and five seriously injured. Within 45 minutes the rebels succeeded in capturing more than 200,000 rubles. The police detained only four of the 19 raiders; they received lifelong prison sentences. It was obviously difficult or almost impossible for the administration to find adequate measures to meet this form of revolutionary attack reminiscent of partisan war. The authorities had to realize again and again that the network of railways they had created in the western borderlands, imagined and constructed not least to politically consolidate and stabilize the periphery of the Tsarist Empire, were also being used by the opponents of the autocratic regime for quite the opposite purpose.

Conclusion

The construction of railroads in the western borderlands of the Russian Empire had different and to a certain extent contradictory effects. On the one hand, the Polish Kingdom and other parts of the region possessed toward the end of the nineteenth century one of the densest rail networks in the entire Russian Empire. Run by both private and state-owned companies, Russian railroads helped to develop the country economically and to consolidate the multi-ethnic empire as one political space. On the other hand, the development of Russia's infrastructure led to a significant increase in geographical mobility that opened up for many people new possibilities for encountering the large variety of the country's ethnic and religious groups and to experience the empire less as a homogeneous and more as a highly fragmented space of communication. Railway passengers who were Gentiles perceived the region primarily not as a Russian but a Jewish space, a reaction that corresponds, interestingly enough, with similar forms of imagination in the Yiddish literature of the time. Jewish writers depicted the railroads in the western borderlands as a space of both communication and estrangement that confronted the Jews with new challenges of modernity. The victims of anti-Jewish pogroms in the 1880s as well as the Jewish writers at the turn of the century realized that the railroads brought to their traditional habitat not only blessings but also the violence of the modern era. The traditional master narrative of railway history, which has emphasized the integrative force of the new means of transportation, has failed to take into account its impact on the modes of perception among polyethnic populations. The intensification of ethnic and politically motivated violence on the Russian railroads, in the empire in general and its western borderlands in particular, is a case that points to the darker effects of railroad development.

Notes

1. Michael Freeman, Railways and the Victorian Imagination (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); Ian Carter, Railways and Culture in Britain: The Epitome of Modernity (Manchester: Man-


20. Dvor z 1.07 km.


22. Buturlin, "O voennom znachenii zheleznykh dorog."

23. Buturlin, "O voennom znachenii zheleznykh dorog."

24. Buturlin, "O voennom znachenii zheleznykh dorog."


36. In addition to the trunk line from Warsaw to Vienna, the spur from Lobkowicz to Bromberg in Prussia (inaugurated in 1863) and the railway linkage to Lodz (put into operation in 1866) were also built on the European standard gauge (1524 mm). Only in the late 1860s did the Tsarist government decide that all future railway lines in the Empire should be built on Russian regular gauge (1524 mm). Richard M. Haywood, "The Question of a Standard Gauge for Russian Railways, 1836–1860," Slavic Review 28(1) (1969), 72–80, 79.


38. Aleksandr Semenovich Klevanov, Putevye zametki za granicu i po Rossii v 1870 godu (Moscow: Tip. A.I. Mamontova, 1871).


40. Klevanov, Putevye zametki, 49.

41. Valentin Kantelinenko (Vasilii Fedorovich Liakhotskii), Pervoe moe puteshestvie po Rossi (Cholm: n.p., 1900).


43. Valentin Kantelinenko (Vasilii Fedorovich Liakhotskii), Vtoroe moe puteshestvie po Rossi (Cholm: n.p., 1903).

44. Ibid., 10.

45. Ibid., 11, 45.


47. Ibid., 25–26.

48. Ibid., 27.

49. Ibid., 30–31.


51. Ibid., 279.


54. Garrett, Trains and Train Travel, 67.

55. Garrett, Trains and Train Travel, 69, 81–85.