Journal of Transport Geography 36 (2014) 160

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Transport Geography

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jtrangeo

Book review

Eastern European Railways in Transition: Nineteenth to Twenty-First Centuries, R. Roth, H. Jacolin. Ashgate, Farnham (2013). £75.00, Hbk, ISBN: 9781409427827

This edited volume of 23 essays is part of Ashgate's *Modern Economic and Social History* series. It is based on papers presented at the September 2009 International Railway History Association's conference in Bratislava.

The book is organised into three main sections together with an introduction by one of the editors. Its stated aim (p. 1), reflected in this structure, is to gain a clearer insight into: (a) the main trends in the historical development of Eastern European railways since the mid-nineteenth century, (b) the political, geopolitical and economic context for the region's rail development between 1945 and 1989; and (c) the impact of 'the transition starting in 1989 on the railway systems as a whole and the national railway companies in particular'. The Eastern European rail network is distinguished by three 'conspicuous particularities': (i) being less dense than the west, reflecting vaster and less densely populated territories; (ii) having evolved two or three decades later than western European networks; and (iii) being relatively 'peripheral' to the latter.

The volume's first part, essentially an historical overview, comprises six chapters: one specifically on the Baltic States ('Railways under many masters'), railway modernisation in 'Belorussia/Belarus', Serbia's access to the sea between 1830 and 2006, the history of railways in Hungary, Czech military railways, and the Royal Prussian Eastern Railway. As a network lying between the two inter-continental arteries of the Trans-Siberian and Orient/Baghdad railway systems, the railways of Eastern Europe did not represent a homogeneous entity, not least because of the fragmented, competitive and changing nature of political control through the second half of the nineteenth century.

A century later, as represented in the second part of the volume, there was a more obvious single dominance of the region and a significance of non-economic factors – notably the military – in the nature and role of the rail system. This period also largely isolated east from west. Thus, part 2, 'Under Russian protection', spans the twentieth century both in relation to the life of the Soviet Union and the USSR's post-Second World War role in Central and Eastern Europe. The eight chapters in this section take us from '1918, 1945 and 1989: three turning points in the history of Polish railways in the twentieth century' (by Marcin Przgiętka) to 'Cold War crisis on the railway: construction of the Berlin Wall' (Tomáš Nigrin), via 'The railways of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic: 1920–1990' (Ihor Zhaloba).

The third part of this collection, also made up of eight chapters, addresses post-1989 issues up to about 2007. Essays cover a range of issues clearly pertinent to current concerns, including questions of integration and disintegration, modernisation, privatisation, and railway heritage protection and representation. The period of transition since 1989, which arguably continues to this day, has presented both new problems and opportunities for the region's rail systems, as well as new ways of examining them. The latter is reflected in two chapters employing oral history methods, one of which reflects back on experiences during the 1950s and 1960s. It is this section of the book which is most likely to appeal to the readership of this journal.

There is certainly an enormous gap in the English language literature surrounding many of the historical and contemporary issues addressed in this work. All chapters in this text reflect sound scholarship, albeit with occasional quirkiness, and most sustain a focus on the relevance, significance and transformation of rail transport within Europe's chequered evolution over the past century and a half. It is very much to the credit of Nathan Horowitz (as well as the 26 authors, two editors and their 'support' staff, the vast majority of whom appear to be non-native speakers), that the English in this volume is of such a consistently high quality.

However, there are several editorial and production niggles. In view of the enormous efforts that must have gone into producing usually excellent text translations, it is a pity that the editorial and production consistency of this volume sometimes falls short. The volume has 66 'figures', including 22 photos, the monochrome reproduction of which is often poor. There is enormous variation in the quality of maps offered, several of which are barely legible.

In Chapter 2, concerning Byelorussia/Belarus, and Chapter 16 on USSR/Russia, all Cyrillic references are helpfully transliterated into Roman. This is not the case for Chapter 11 discussing Ukraine, where all footnotes and end references remain in Cyrillic. Throughout the work, titles of the substantial non-English language sources (in French, German, Dutch, Russian, Ukrainian, Czech/Czechoslovak/Slovakian, Hungarian, Polish, Romanian, Serbo-Croat, Slovenian) remain untranslated. The one exception to this is Zsuzsa Frisnyák's chapter 'The centrally planned economy and railways in Hungary'. In addition, historians' propensity to reference a book's place of publication but not its publisher can be frustrating.

Finally, while the structural characteristics are established in a useful overview introduction by Ralf Roth, there is no concluding chapter. This contributes to the feel not of a comprehensive, integrated approach, but of a series of individual topic essays, with little cross-referencing. Each chapter has its own bibliography and footnotes; the index is 23 pages long. This specificity of chapters results in a patchwork approach.

This is a useful work for dipping into. As noted above, the third section of the book has most contemporary pertinence, but, throughout, the volume offers stimulation and reflection for both specialist and generalist reader. Nonetheless, there remains a yawning chasm in the English-language literature, waiting to be filled; not least by geographers.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jtrangeo.2013.12.014