

The History of SNCF in the Holocaust: The State of the Research

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Introduction

In 1945 and 1946, France's main organization for deportees, the National Federation of Deportees and Interned Resisters and Patriots (FNDIRP),¹ put on a touring exhibition of German concentration camps. The communist-leaning Federation was a massive organization, with tens of thousands of members, survivors, and relatives. Jews and resistance fighters joined the Federation, with no strict demarcations. The exhibition was original in the sense that it was circulated by train and displayed in train stations. Seventy-one stations in France and Belgium served as exhibition halls for artefacts and works of art made by camp inmates. Urns holding the ashes of murdered victims, as well as striped pyjamas and clogs, were on full display.² The exhibition was one of many organized in France and Western Europe just after WWII with the purpose of documenting Nazi crimes,³ but the fact that it was by train must have had a powerful impact on those who experienced it. In addition to informing the public about the ordeal deportees endured, the exhibition sought to redeem the image of trains, which became closely associated with Nazi crimes and mass deportation in the aftermath of the war. While train stations could be seen as places of persecution, they also became places for testimony and justice.

In France, it was the Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer Français railway that made trains synonymous with deportation and death in the minds of many. Merely four and a half years after the left-leaning Popular Front government created the national railway in 1937, SNCF became an instrument of death in the Holocaust. Under German occupation, it provided the trains that transported 73 convoys of Jews to Germany and Poland. French railway workers operated the trains until they reached the border with Germany, where they were replaced by German staff. The trains brought Resistance fighters to

¹ The *Fédération nationale des déportés et internés résistants et patriotes*.

² Pieter Lagrou, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation. Patriotic Memory and National Recovery in Western Europe, 1945-1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 215-216.

³ See, for example: *Ibid.*, 21; Olivier Laliou, *La déportation fragmentée. Les anciens déportés parlent de politique, 1945-1980* (Paris: La boutique de l'histoire, 1994), 48.

concentration camps such as Buchenwald or Dachau, while Jews were sent to death camps: Auschwitz and Sobibor. To date, no evidence has emerged of refusals on the part of SNCF leadership.

Over the last 30 years, considerable research and scrutiny has focused on SNCF's role in the Holocaust. That work remains far from complete today, with much that remains unknown. SNCF found itself positioned within a complex web of powers spun between various French and German agents. At one extreme were the all-powerful *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* (Central Reich Security Agency or RSHA), the German Army, the German Ministry of Transports, and the Transport Department of the Military Command in Paris (Hôtel Majestic), with the Vichy government, local authorities (*préfectures*), and the French Ministry of Transports at the other. The intent of SNCF managers was never genocidal, but the company played an instrumental role in making the large-scale deportation of Jews possible.

This paper presents the state of the research and a synthesis of current knowledge about the role of SNCF in the Holocaust. The paper mainly considers the deportation of Jews, but transports of resistance fighters will also be mentioned, as these operations were organized by a parallel chain of command and reflected a similar pattern to the convoys of Jewish victims. The paper begins with a review of existing literature and a discussion of available archives. It then addresses eight thematic areas: the place of SNCF in the global assessment of European railways during the Holocaust; SNCF leadership during the Vichy regime; the organization of deportation convoys; the issue of coercion; finances and the payment circuit (the theme we have the least knowledge about); the role of SNCF workers in deportations and their attitudes towards them; resistance to the Vichy government, the Nazi occupation, and the persecution of Jews; and, finally, the perspective of Jews transported in freight cars from France to their deaths in Poland.

The State of the Research

The most detailed, existing academic research on SNCF during WWII was commissioned by the railway itself in 1993. Presented three years after its inception in 1996, the study was written by Christian Bachelier and conducted under the supervision of historian Henry Rousso at the French research center Institut d'Histoire du Temps Présent (Institute for the History of Contemporary Times or IHTP, for its French initials) in Paris. The research is significant and remains the most detailed to date on the general structure of SNCF in the times of war and occupation, as well as on the French-German negotiations regarding railways. The question of deportation is addressed but is not central to the work of 914 pages, which includes 684 pages of annex. Although the report was never published as a book, it is now available online,⁴ and remains indispensable to the study of SNCF and its role and responsibilities during in the Holocaust.

Serge Klarsfeld's work is also seminal to understanding the organization of convoys, even though Klarsfeld, like many historians of the Holocaust in France, is more focused on the arrests of Jews than on the politics and the power dynamics behind the use of trains for deportations.⁵ Ahlrich Meyer considers the issue of payment for deportations from France in a short, but important, chapter on "Transport and flight" in his

⁴ Christian Bachelier, *La SNCF sous l'occupation allemande. Rapport documentaire*, IHTP, 4 volumes, available at <https://www.ahicf.com/une-entreprise-publique-guerre>.

⁵ Among others, see: Serge Klarsfeld, *Vichy-Auschwitz. Le rôle de Vichy dans la 'solution finale' de la question juive en France* (Paris: Fayard, 2001, c.1993); and 'Klarsfeld, "L'acheminement des Juifs de province vers Drancy et les déportations," in Marie-Noëlle Polino, ed., *Une entreprise publique pendant la guerre: La SNCF 1939-1945* (Paris: PUF, 2001): 143-158.

book *Täter in Verhör* (available only in German). Meyer is the only researcher to confront the archives with the interrogations and depositions of German perpetrators of the Holocaust in France, including some who were in charge of transports.

More recently, Ludivine Broch has analysed the constraints of SNCF during WWII, with a specific focus on deportations. Her book brings a nuanced appraisal of the company and primarily covers the attitudes of “ordinary railway men.” She describes SNCF leadership’s strict collaboration with Vichy and the German occupiers, as well as the many positions and attitudes represented by the more than 400,000 SNCF employees. A minority of those employees embraced the new French regime and its arch-conservative values (“Work, Family, Homeland”), while another minority participated in active resistance. A significant change that occurred during the war was the increased presence of communists within SNCF. Communist railway workers were few to be identified as such before the war and, if they were, would face persecution and often termination. Over the course of the war, communist and union leaders saw their influence grow with massive recruitment of new members within the clandestine Party, benefitting from the prestige accrued by communist Resistance forces fighting the occupiers.

The general policy of SNCF in war time and occupation is known in detail, as are the higher-level negotiations with the Vichy government and SNCF’s German counterpart: the *Reichsbahn*. Christian Bachelier’s 2001 report is seminal for this analysis. Bachelier illuminates the thin margin for maneuvering the SNCF leadership had, as it was caught between Vichy policy and German demand. His report describes the power play and negotiations between SNCF leadership, the Vichy government and the various German agencies (details on the latter also appear in a seminal article by French historian Michel Margairaz).

The policy of SNCF towards its employees is also known, with an early identification (and denunciation) of communists in its ranks and a protective, paternalist policy towards the global workforce. Some research has been done on the implementation of antisemitic legislation within SNCF itself, mostly by Ludivine Broch. Broch has also pioneered the study of the implementation of Vichy anti-Jewish measures on Jewish employees of SNCF. The biographies of many SNCF leaders, however, have yet to be written. For example, one knows very little about Robert Le Besnerais (General Director of SNCF from 1938 to 1946), on whom there is not even a Wikipedia page. The biography of one of the railway’s Jewish directors, Henri Lang (written by Nathalie Bibas), is an exception. Lang was arrested for being Jewish early in the occupation period and deported to Auschwitz, where he was murdered. While these studies lend insight into the upper levels of SNCF’s wartime leadership, even less has been written about the lower echelons of power and their role and reaction to deportations.

An extensive assessment of the Resistance within SNCF still needs to be written. Paul Durand’s 1968 book on the topic is an interesting collection of stories and testimonies (all anonymous) but fails to describe the very structure of the Resistance within the national company. Georges Ribeill provides an account of the creation of the long-lived *Résistance Fer*, the official network of the Resistance within SNCF. This loose network was made official only after the liberation of France, with the creation of an association of former Resistance fighters. Christian Chevandier has also written about railwaymen who fought the Nazis and about the memory of this specific Resistance.

The politics of memory surrounding SNCF, from the building of a heroic myth to the many controversies about its past, are described in a thorough and critical way by Sarah Federman in her a recent book based

on her Ph.D. dissertation, published by University Press of Wisconsin.⁶ Additionally, Charlotte Pouly has described the expulsions of suspected workers in the Vichy period and the post-liberation purges of railwaymen charged with collaboration.⁷

The existing literature, though important, appears rather limited considering the importance of the history of SNCF in WWII and, more specifically, its role in the Holocaust. A relative wealth of research exists on the history of French firms in general during this period, as well as on France's history of economic collaboration. However, a similar corpus of research on the "business history" of France during WWII and the Third Reich, including monographs on specific companies, does not exist (although it has been tremendously developed in Germany). Similarly, while there are several books on the history of Germany's national railway, the *Reichsbahn*, a comprehensive history of SNCF under Vichy has not been written.⁸

The Archives

SNCF archives are now sorted and freely accessible online and to visitors of the archival center in Le Mans, France. Over 1.3 million individual pages are available, originating from 900 deliveries, which is exceptional, even for a public company. The inventory of WWII archives is detailed and spans 1,068 pages.⁹ Those documents have been produced by the central services of SNCF. They deal mainly with senior-level management, covering themes such as the board of administrators, external relations, general organization, finances, and workforce (including purges of communists and, later, of collaborators).

The archives are sorted into five geographical divisions, the same divisions used to organize the national company in 1937 through the merger of the five historical French railway networks.¹⁰ The collection covers the requisition of materials and workforce by the German occupation authorities and the extensive damages caused to stations, railways, and trains in 1940 and from 1944-1945. Many personnel files have been kept, including some of Jewish employees who were victims of antisemitic French legislation.

In 1940, SNCF leadership created a new secretariat, "Secrétariat W," which was responsible for centralizing and archiving all correspondence with German authorities.¹¹ Because of this, it is possible to finely reconstruct the negotiations held between SNCF and the German military command of France (headquartered at the Hôtel Majestic, avenue Kléber in Paris) and with the French government – whether with the Deputy President of the Cabinet (Pierre Laval) or with the Ministry of Transport (Jean Berthelot,

⁶ Sarah Federman, *Last Train to Auschwitz. The French National Railways and the Journey to Accountability* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2021).

⁷ Charlotte Pouly, "Les agents et dirigeants de la SNCF, épurés sous Vichy, épurés après Vichy. Regard croisé autour de la réintégration," *Histoire & Mesure* (2014): XXIX-2, 135-154.

⁸ Alfred Gottwaldt, *Deutsche Eisenbahnen im Zweiten Weltkrieg, Rüstung, Krieg und Eisenbahn (1939-1945)* (Stuttgart: Franckh'sche Verlagshandlung, 1983); Alfred Mierzejewski, *The Most Valuable Asset of the Reich: A History of the German National Railway*, vol. 2, 1933-1945 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

⁹ http://multimedia.sncf.com/archives-documentation.sncf/Guide_de_recherches_Guerre_1939_1945.pdf.

¹⁰ The five original railway networks were: Compagnie du Nord, Paris-Lyon-Méditerranée (PLM), Paris-Orléans, Compagnie du Midi, and Compagnie de l'Est.

¹¹ Bachelier, *La SNCF sous l'occupation allemande*, 6.

then Robert Guibrat) and the Ministry of Industry (Jean Bichelonne).

Although these documents provide a wealth of information, significant gaps exist. The five geographical divisions of SNCF archives pertain only to central services; close to zero documents from the *établissements* – the big or small train stations themselves – have been found. Archives related to local SNCF movements were destroyed in the 1960s and 1970s in order to save space in the archival holdings. Because SNCF is not a body of public administration, France's law regarding the preservation of public archives does not apply to the railway company. As a consequence, we do not have, for example, the archives of the Gare d'Austerlitz in Paris, where many trains carrying Jews arrived from the Southern Zone, and from where many convoys departed loaded with furniture looted from Jewish residences.

While the archive contains a few generic documents on the organization of Jewish convoys, no documents pertaining to the details of the convoys have been found. Neither the archives documenting the liaison between SNCF and the German Army Transport Directorate or *Wehrmachtverkehrsdirektion* (WVD) – in charge of all train transportation in France, located at 29 rue de Berry – nor the liaison between SNCF and the 9th Bureau of the National Police – in charge of transport of Jews between French camps and Paris-Austerlitz, followed by bus transports to Drancy – are available to researchers. The archives of the 9th Bureau, if they existed, have not been recovered either.¹² Also missing (or at least not yet identified amidst the mass of documentation) are the documents regarding MER, the *Mitteleuropäische Reisebureau* of the *Reichsbahn*, to which payments for Jewish convoys were made.

Collections held by the French National Archives help to supplement SNCF's records. French-German negotiations also took place within the framework of the Armistice Commission in Wiesbaden. The question of railways was addressed on many occasions, even though the special convoys of Resistance fighters and Jewish victims were not specifically discussed. These archives are important for understanding the complex power dynamic in which SNCF found itself. Documents of the French delegation to the Armistice Commission are kept in the French National Archives (AJ 40). One can also read select archives of the Ministry of Transports (Secrétariat d'État aux Communications) in the National Archives series F 14.

The organization of deportations can also be reconstructed using other sources. The most important are the archives of the Sipo-SD (Gestapo) in France. They are kept at the Shoah Memorial in Paris.¹³ Some documents of the Jewish central organization UGIF (*Union générale des Israélites de France*) – forcefully created under pressure from the Sipo-SD – describe the limited role of the Union in organizing convoys through the provision of clothes and food requested by the Gestapo, at least for the convoys leaving from the Southern Zone. Archives of the UGIF reside at the Institute for Jewish Research (YIVO) in New York. Microfilms of the same materials are available in Paris at the Shoah Memorial.

The "Resistance Fer" Association has donated significant archival materials to the French National Archives (available under the reference 72 AJ, 2280-2297). In the same series, a small collection of documents gathered by Resistance fighter, camp survivor, and ethnologist Germaine Tillion provide information about the deportations. One finds rare material in this collection, such as telegrams sent to

¹² Klarsfeld, "L'acheminement des Juifs de province vers Drancy et les déportations" 146-147.

¹³ <http://www.memorialdelashoah.org>.

train stations alerting them to the transit of convoys to Auschwitz.¹⁴

Deportations themselves cannot be studied without survivors' testimonies. A wide range of them exist, both published and unpublished. They describe the long journeys to the camps, the terrible conditions in overcrowded cars, the brutality of German guards, and prisoners' attempts to keep their spirits high and retain their humanity. The seminal literary work on transports is the 1963 book by Resistance fighter Jorge Semprun, *The Long Journey (Le grand voyage)*, in which Semprun describes the five days of his journey from Compiègne to Buchenwald.¹⁵

Millions of pages are available on French and German railways during WWII and on their collaboration with the Nazis. However, only a handful of them that pertain specifically to the organization of deportations have been found and sorted. This can be explained by the fact that those convoys represented a minuscule fraction of all transports through France and to Germany in those fatal years. Suspicions remain in relation to accusatory documents that may have been hidden or destroyed. But in administrative archives, even destruction leaves traces and those traces have yet to be found. If such destruction took place, it must have been in the post-war years, during the time of the purges.¹⁶ According to Alain Leray, those archives were destroyed about ten years after 1945, following the company's normal practice concerning its administrative documentation.

The Role of the Railways in the Holocaust: the perspective of Raul Hilberg

In a famous speech given at his post-war trial, Austrian-born *Schutzstaffel* (SS) officer Franz Novak, who was in charge of transports across Europe, stated: "Auschwitz was for me only a train station."¹⁷ For the roughly three million Jewish people who were killed at camps like Auschwitz during the Holocaust, there was nothing banal about train stations. As renowned Holocaust historian Raul Hilberg has argued, trains, train stations, and railways were an integral part of the totalitarian project in Germany. Far from being a neutral instrument, the German *Reichsbahn* railway company eagerly contributed to the Nazi project by transporting soldiers, prisoners of war, political opponents, forced laborers, Nazi dignitaries, and of course Jews, to their deaths. The following section examines the role that railways played in the Holocaust using the work of Raul Hilberg.

In his seminal, 1961 book on the Holocaust, *The Destruction of European Jews*,¹⁸ Hilberg describes the decision process that culminated in the plan to annihilate Europe's Jewish population. Hilberg dedicates many pages to the role of railways and to the organization of the transports that carried Jews to death camps. He describes the centralization of the decision to organize the trains from Western Europe – they were ordered from Berlin, from the office of Adolf Eichmann himself (office IV-B-4 or the Reich Main Security Office). Those orders were then implemented by Franz Novak, who organized the transports

¹⁴ AN, 72AJ 311, dossier réuni par Germaine Tillon, "Transports de prisonnières arrêtées en France et déportées dans des prisons, forteresses, maisons pénitencières appartenant au système régulier de l'Allemagne," 1947-1952.

¹⁵ Jorge Semprun, *Le grand voyage* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963).

¹⁶ In 1976, historian Raul Hilberg described the same gaps in the archives of the German *Reichsbahn*: Raul Hilberg, "German Railroads/Jewish Souls," *Society* (Nov.-Dec. 1976): 60-73, 61. He advised the use of archives pertaining to the prosecution and trials of perpetrators and found some original documents in those files.

¹⁷ Kurt Pätzold and Erika Schwarz, "Auschwitz war für mich nur ein Bahnhof," *Franz Novak, der Transportoffizier Adolf Eichmanns*, Berlin, Metropol, 1994.

¹⁸ Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of European Jews*, 2 volumes (London: W.H. Allen, 1961).

according to Eichmann's decisions regarding deportations, which were derived from the "availability" of Jews in Western Europe. His office closely managed the population of Jews who had been arrested and interned in camps, ghettos, and prisons around occupied Europe, as they would have managed raw material to be transported to production sites: in this case the production of death.

After the *Reichsbahn* received the initial order for the convoys, it then dispatched the orders to its local branches within the Reich for the deportation of German, Austrian and Czech Jews, as well as Jews from occupied or satellite countries. In France, the order was given to the *Wehrmachtverkehrsdirektion*, which was in charge of operating national railways, including SNCF. Contrary to what has been written for many years, the convoys, which were all civilian and never military in character, had no traffic priority over other trains.¹⁹ For several periods of time, sometimes even months, the *Reichsbahn* had to interrupt trains from France. For example, from December 15, 1942 to January 15, 1943, a general shutdown halted all deportations of Jews in the General Government of Poland and also from the West. Convoys were organised from January 15 on, and traffic resumed on January 20, 1943.

Jewish victims were never transported in regular trains. While the first Resistance fighters to be deported were transported in passenger wagons that were added to regular trains, deportations were rapidly made into special convoys. This change occurred for several reasons. The first was the standardisation of convoys, organized and regulated from Eichmann's office in Berlin. The second reason was the growing number of people to be deported, which made the idea of transporting them in regular trains increasingly problematic. Thirdly, a certain secrecy was to be maintained around those trains, whether for "Night and Fog" deportees (a special status for Resistance fighters who were to "disappear" in camps with no information given to their families) or for Jews. The terrible conditions of the special transports (see below) so clearly foreshadowed the fate of Jews upon arrival – one of systematic killing – that they needed to be hidden from public view. Special convoys were also more cost-effective, which lent itself to the orchestrators' obsession with making persecution and annihilation as cost effective as possible. Finally, special convoys were organized because they were easier to guard, with heavily armed policemen assigned to watch the convoys. As a result, transports of Jews were so unique that the railway companies and workers involved knew the convoys were suspicious and that these convoys were part of a larger plan. In addition, one must assume that the mistreatment of passengers and the horrendous conditions in which they were transported would have raised awareness among members of senior management, as it did for many lower-level railway workers.

The planning and management of those special convoys required a high level of coordination between numerous police and transport agencies. Schedules demanded constant and clever readjustment. Trains rarely lagged and when their travel was suspended, they quickly resumed operations in order to cover the "backlog" of Jewish people to be deported. Only in rare cases, and at the very end of the war, were some Jews saved for lack of transportation. For example, Jews from Budapest were marched on foot to Mauthausen in Austria. The last convoy from Drancy could not be organized because of the general disorganization of transport caused by Allied bombings and by the general strike of French railwaymen.

Of the six million Jewish people killed in the Holocaust, at least half of them were transported to their deaths, with the German *Reichsbahn* playing an instrumental role in that effort. From its base in the

¹⁹ See, among many other examples: Philippe Burrin, *Ressentiment et apocalypse. Essai sur l'antisémitisme nazi* (Paris: Seuil, 2004), 123-125.

centre of Europe, the *Reichsbahn* gave orders to other national railway companies in German-occupied countries. Having taken full control of the Polish national railway company, the *Reichsbahn* organized all the transports to death camps in occupied Poland, even though deportation trains within the General Government were controlled by a subdivision called Deutsche Ostbahn. The Deutsche Ostbahn collaborated with Eichmann's office. In addition to transporting people, the company delivered building material to camp sites and moved goods stolen from Jews across the continent. From Western Europe alone, the railway devoted 735 trains to the transport of looted furniture and properties confiscated from Jewish victims.²⁰ The *Reichsbahn* also employed many forced labourers, including Jews, in dire conditions (although not in France).

The *Reichsbahn* made every effort to serve the German war economy, and this required extraordinary organization across Europe. In the East, the *Reichsbahn* extended its reach almost as far as the Wehrmacht, to the Caucasus and the suburbs of Moscow. Operations incorporated a vast network of businesses and employees, with the company commissioning companies across Europe to organize special convoys. Many European railway companies, from Italy to Belgium, cooperated with the *Reichsbahn* and the Eichmann office to co-organize deportations. Not one refused. In the East, the incorporation of railways into the *Reichsbahn* resulted in dramatic expansion during the war years. By 1942, the German national company employed 1.3 million people.²¹

The *Reichsbahn* benefitted greatly from its participation in the Holocaust; it received 1,576 carloads of furniture and looted objects to distribute to its employees, mostly taken from Jewish residences in Western Europe, with Paris and Amsterdam being the most significant cities in this "Furniture Operation."²²

In 1976, Raul Hilberg returned to the theme of railways and their role in the Holocaust in the article "German Railroads/Jewish Souls."²³ By that time, trains had become central to memory and representations of the Holocaust, with deportation trains seen as a symbol of the genocide's modernity. However, this is not entirely accurate, as European trains in the 1930s were not so dissimilar from those of the 19th century. In 1939, the electrification of trains had not yet begun in earnest – many idle engineers worked on its planning during WWII – and most of the tracks had already been built in the 19th century. The sheer scale of the mass transportation of people during WWII may appear new to history, but the first massive transports of troops had occurred as early as the US Civil War. Yet images of the trains and the transportation of Jewish victims remain vivid in memories and representations of the Holocaust. The transport of three million victims to their deaths is, of course, unique in the history of mass violence and genocide.

More than the technology of trains, it is the precise organization of convoys throughout the Holocaust, the logistical "achievement," that is the most striking and that remains unparalleled today. When asked

²⁰ Bundesarchiv, NS 8230, Report on the confiscation of properties by the West Desk of the Reichsministerium für die besetzten Ostgebiete, 213-218, 217, quoted in Jean-Marc Dreyfus and Sarah Gensburger, *Nazi Labour Camps in Paris* (Oxford; New York: Berghahn, 2011), 135.

²¹ Alfred Mierzejewski, *The Most Valuable Asset of the Reich. A History of the German National Railway*, vol. 2, 1933-1945 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 147.

²² On this operation, see: Dreyfus and Gensburger, *Nazi Labour Camps in Paris*.

²³ Hilberg, "German Railroads/Jewish Souls." For more recent writing, see: Raul Hilberg, Peter Hayes, and Christopher Browning, *German Railroads, Jewish Souls: The Reichsbahn, Bureaucracy, and the Final Solution* (United Kingdom: Berghahn Books, 2019).

about the theory of Hannah Arendt on the “banality of evil,”²⁴ Hilberg contradicted the political scientist, stating that what Eichmann achieved was far from banal. He concludes:

In a word, the role of the German Railroads in the destruction of the Jews opens profound questions about the substance and ramification of the entire Nazi Reich. Through the years the railroads have not been considered a significant component of a political structure; yet they were an indispensable part of the destructive machine. They were not assumed to have beliefs, but they were capable of making drastic decisions.²⁵

SNCF Leadership: Technocrats and Vichyists

The French Government created SNCF in 1937 after the country’s five main railway networks suffered from constant deficits the previous year. SNCF kept the legal form of a public company, of which the state was a majority shareholder. This meant that SNCF was never integrated into the state as part of the French administrative apparatus. Instead, the business was officially considered to have the quality of an *économie mixte* (mixed economy), which means that it was a mixture of a public service and a private firm, controlled by the state. The French state owned 51% percent of company shares. The rest stayed in the hands of private owners, small stake holders, or historical families like the French branch of the Rothschilds.²⁶

The Rothschilds had pioneered the railways in France, even financing the first ever French route from Paris to Le Pecq in 1837. In late 1940, the French state began confiscating the Rothschilds’ properties, including their SNCF stock. At this point, the SNCF Board of Administrators had 33 members. Twenty-one of those members were appointed by the state, which meant the cabinet had some degree of autonomy, although state control was enforced on a daily basis by the Ministry of Transport. Employees were afforded a certain degree of status with privileges such as job protection. Directors were often high-level civil servants who had been transferred to SNCF. Several of them came from the *Banque de France*, others from the magistracy, replacing the traditional recruitment of engineers trained in France’s most prestigious institutions of higher education such as the *École Polytechnique*. This complex legal situation notwithstanding, SNCF was controlled and operated by the French state very much like a national railway. State control became even tighter in September of 1939, with preparations for war and then war itself.

In 1939, the president of SNCF was a magistrate by the name of Pierre Guinand. In September of 1940, following France’s defeat, the Vichy government removed Guinand and replaced him with Pierre-Eugène Fournier. Fournier had been Vice-Director of the Bank of France. He also accepted a second appointment, a month later, as President of a newly created French administration, the *Service du Contrôle des Administrateurs Provisoires* (SCAP). This small organization was in charge of appointing and controlling provisory administrators to Jewish-owned companies in the occupied zone, a mode of control it extended to the non-occupied zone in late July 1941. The creation of the SCAP was a French reaction to the first German measures against Jews, measures that aimed to expel Jewish administrators from their economic positions. These differed from Vichy measures, which dealt with Jews in the public sphere, in politics, and

²⁴ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1963).

²⁵ Hilberg, “German Railroads/Jewish Souls,” 170.

²⁶ Sarah Federman, “Corporate Leadership and Mass Atrocity,” *Journal of Business Ethics* (2020), accessible at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-020-04506-4>.

in civil service.

As the head of SCAP, Fournier rapidly and efficiently put in place the new French policy of “Aryanisation,” which led to state control of 52,000 Jewish-owned firms in France. Very early in his new assignment, Fournier had to implement the new “double” antisemitic policy – both French and German at the same time. This was new to the French political and administrative traditions; officials first had to accept, understand and implement the definition of a Jew given by the French Jewish Statute of October 3, 1940, and then that of the first German anti-Jewish ordinance. Deciding who was and was not Jewish was difficult, particularly given the high percentage of intermarriage in pre-war France that raised questions like “How many Jewish grandparents are necessary to make someone a Jew?” Once these questions had been resolved, Fournier then had to implement the German anti-Jewish ordinance, which defined a “Jewish company” according to the number of Jewish administrators, the percentage of Jewish-owned stock, etc. In that sense, the experienced administrator Fournier was inventing – along with other French civil servants – a new policy against the Jews, which then became French policy.²⁷

Fournier quit the SCAP in March 1941. Officially, this was because he was shocked to see two German officers in his Paris office, indicating that he did not want his work to be controlled or influenced by the German occupiers. It is possible that he had, at that point, understood that the policy he put in place was leading to the full dispossession of French Jews. Fournier was a devout Catholic and is not known to have been an antisemite. At the same time, he had to implement equivalent antisemitic policies within SNCF, including the expulsion of Jewish employees. His policy was to avoid any interference with the Germans in order to keep the autonomy of the national company as plain as possible. This led him to abide by the demands of various German authorities.

The Vichy regime was a composite of men from the extreme-right – for whom antisemitism was at the heart of their worldview – but also of high-level administrators who had built a program for a more powerful executive within the state and for a more planned, modernized, and controlled economy throughout the 1930s. Those men belonged to the same circles and had gone through the same path of higher education (via the *École Polytechnique*). For the most part, they shared the same technocratic ideals and technical endeavours.

Robert Le Besnerais was one such man, and the first General Director of SNCF. He led the company’s daily operations from 1937 until his removal in 1946, two years after France was liberated. Although the heads of most other administrations and public companies were purged and replaced during the occupation, Le Besnerais was a focused engineer, not known for taking an interest in politics. His apolitical stance seems to have benefitted him; his only concern was to run and protect the national company. However, SNCF was also controlled by the Ministry of Transport and there was some personnel circulation between the two entities. The Deputy General Director of SNCF, Jean Berthelot, was appointed minister of Transports and Communications in September 1940. He was also an engineer but not entirely apolitical as a staunch admirer of Marshall Pétain and a promoter of the “values” of the new regime: anti-communism, order,

²⁷ On the SCAP, see: Martin Jungius, *Der verwaltete Raub. Die ‘Arisierung’ der Wirtschaft in Frankreich in den Jahren 1940-1944* (Ostfildern: Thorbecke, 2008).

family, and hierarchy.²⁸ Both men shared the technocratic leaning of the new regime.²⁹

From September 1940, the Vichy government's control over SNCF tightened. The men in charge of the company easily adapted to the new regime after the shock of the worst defeat France had faced in its modern history. At the same time, Vichy replaced seven SNCF administrators, which probably served to discipline the more senior administrators who remained. For those men, the priority was to rebuild the company and the badly damaged railways – 108 reconstruction sites existed as early as the end of August 1940 – and to restart normal functions, which they achieved by the end of 1940.

SNCF's ability to bargain with German authorities varied depending on the men who occupied leadership positions. In April 1942, with the change in the cabinet and Pierre Laval back in power (under German pressure), Berthelot was replaced as Deputy General Director by Robert Gibrat, also an engineer trained at the *École Polytechnique*. For his part, Gibrat proved weaker in negotiations between SNCF and the Germans. He resigned in November 1942, not to oppose Pétain but because of the German occupation of the Southern Zone. Jean Bichelonne, the Minister of Industry, took over his duties.³⁰ Bichelonne is described as the arch-technocrat, eager to work with the Germans to run the economy in a time of war and restrictions. He worked closely with Albert Speer, Hitler's Minister of Armament. In fact, the two became friends. Under Bichelonne's supervision, SNCF had smaller and smaller margins for maneuvering.

The ideological dimension offers limited help for understanding why these well-trained men collaborated so closely with German occupying forces. Some of them welcomed the "National Revolution" of Marshall Pétain but they were mostly obsessed with the preservation of SNCF and with rebuilding and maintaining the company after France's 1940 defeat. This, however, necessitated close collaboration with the Vichy government and the occupation authorities, in which the fate of Jews and Resistance fighters appeared a mere cost.

Coercion

How much margin for maneuver did SNCF have in its negotiations over its general operations? The margin existed, at least until the tightening of control during the winter of 1943. More often than not, however, SNCF capitulated to German demands. As mentioned earlier, the company's leadership rarely (if ever) opposed Germany's plans for the Jewish population in France. SNCF's top priority was to restart its activities, sometimes at any cost, and in the name of service to the French population.

SNCF was badly damaged by the violent six-week period of combat in May-June 1940: the German Blitzkrieg saw the collapse of France and much destruction. Railway infrastructure and stations were destroyed, 30,000 train cars were taken by the *Reichsbahn*, and 35,000 SNCF employees were made prisoners of war in Germany.³¹ At the end of 1940, SNCF had lost one third of its transport material and

²⁸ Ludvine Broch, *Ordinary Workers, Vichy and the Holocaust. French Railwaymen and the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 73.

²⁹ See, for example: Marc-Olivier Baruch, *Servir l'Etat français. L'administration en France de 1940 à 1944* (Paris: Fayard, 1997); and Jean-Pierre Azema, *De Munich à la Libération, 1938-1994* (Nouvelle histoire de la France contemporaine) (Paris: Seuil, 1979), 8-90.

³⁰ See the biography of Jean Bichelonne: Limore Yagil, *Jean Bichelonne, un polytechnicien sous Vichy (1904-1944): Entre mémoire et histoire* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2015).

³¹ Bachelier, *La SNCF sous l'occupation allemande*, 18.

the prospects of rebuilding rapidly waned as the French economy pivoted to meet German needs.³² The railway networks of Alsace and Moselle were separated and confiscated as the two regions were *de facto* – but never legally – annexed by the *Reichsbahn*. Moreover, the railways in the two most northern French administrative departments – Nord and Pas-de-Calais – were attached to the Military Command of Belgium in Brussels. SNCF's many losses made its leadership even more apt to accept new demands. In a very "Vichyist" choice, they opted to negotiate and sacrifice a bit, hoping to save the essential.

In fact, SNCF found itself tangled in a web of constraints and controls. From the German side, its main contacts were with the *Wehrmachtverkehrsdirektion*, a division of the Economic Command within the German High Military Command.³³ In June 1942, the WVD was made into a civilian authority and renamed the *Hauptverkehrsdirektion* (HVD). The HVD was divided into five regional divisions, replicating the five regions of SNCF. This channel was the main conduit through which SNCF received its orders, including orders to organize military and other special convoys. Among these were the IATP convoys, which stood for "Israélites, Allemands, Tchèques, Polonais," or "Jews, Germans, Czechs, and Poles."³⁴

The second channel used by the German occupation authorities was the official Armistice Commission in Wiesbaden, in charge of implementing the Armistice treaty. The Commission set up a delegation for the economy, with a specific bureau for "communications" (read "transports"). The so-called Communications Bureau was led by Lieutenant-Colonel Theilacker on the German side and by Colonel Paquin on the French side. The Bureau was quickly moved to Paris in order to shorten the circuit of decisions. Paquin represented the French Government, but orders were sometimes transmitted directly to SNCF to save time.

Much of the debate over SNCF's ability and will to resist demands from the German occupation authorities has centered on the June 1940 Armistice Convention. The Convention, by which all French administrations – and SNCF – had to abide, was signed in the train car of Rethondes, near Compiègne, the same car in which the Armistice of November 1918 had been imposed. After the signing of the 1940 Convention, Hitler had the train car transported to Berlin as a war trophy. In Article 13, the Armistice Convention stated that all French transport material should remain intact and that "the French Government would make sure that, in the occupied territory, necessary specialised workforce and transport material of railways and other means of communication will be made available in the normal conditions of peace time."³⁵

While Article 13 has led to many interpretations, I argue that it does not mean SNCF lacked a minimal margin for maneuver within the strict framework of state collaboration and coercion imposed by the German apparatus. To the contrary, SNCF gave priority to German military and civilian transports without visible coercion. These German transports represented one fifth of all transport in France in 1941 and nine tenths of transports on the eve of liberation.³⁶ SNCF, like the French Government, made the choice to remain "legalist," and thus to act within the framework of the Armistice Convention, perhaps believing

³² Broch, *Ordinary Workers*, 74.

³³ Michel Margairaz, "La SNCF, l'Etat français, l'occupant et les livraisons de matériel: la collaboration ferroviaire d'Etat en perspective," in Marie-Noëlle Polino, ed., *Une entreprise publique pendant la guerre. La SNCF 1939-1945* (Paris, PUF, 2001): 71-82.

³⁴ Bachelier, *La SNCF sous l'occupation allemande*, 392.

³⁵ The translation is mine.

³⁶ Bachelier, *La SNCF sous l'occupation allemande*, 772-774.

that they would have equal footing in subsequent negotiations. Events rapidly proved this was not the case, as German negotiators had the upper hand.

This use of SNCF capacity reflected the general German occupation policy in France: it represented a semi-direct approach to administration that has been defined as a “surveillance occupation.” Hitler wanted to preserve the German workforce and military forces to conduct the ongoing war against Britain and to prepare for his attack against the Soviet Union. He needed the French economy to remain functional and the government to remain politically docile.

This does not mean that violence was non-existent. From early on, even as the occupation appeared relatively lenient compared to the situation in Poland, there were threats, arrests, and, shortly after, executions of anyone who opposed the occupiers. In August 1943, several high-level French civil servants were arrested and sent into forced residency in Germany. Among them were Wilfrid Baumgartner, the President of the Bank of France, and André François-Poncet, the former French Ambassador to Berlin. Their arrests served as a warning to all high-level administrators. In June 1944, the leadership of SNCF was arrested but released soon after. Those men were too useful to German military transportation, such as when troops were to be sent to the Normandy battlefield. While the occupation began with threats to deprive SNCF of its material, it progressed to pressuring SNCF personnel - including its higher ranks. The time for negotiations was over.

Another way to pressure SNCF was through control of the coal supply. German occupation authorities carefully managed the supply of French coal that came from the North and from Lorraine. This supply was not sufficient to support the French economy as a whole. Railway material remained insufficient for French and German needs throughout the occupation. In fact, the *Reichsbahn* began renting engines and train cars from SNCF. The risk for the French company was that the material would not be repatriated to France. As a result, SNCF entered into constant negotiations over the return of material and the rent to be paid. SNCF leadership continuously fought to maintain the company’s material and workforce, not only for its own self-preservation but also in the name of the service the company rendered to the nation. These goals led the company to abide by German rule.³⁷

Finally, a comparison with the *Reichsbahn* suggests that an internalised norm of compliance, rather than adherence to Nazi ideology, motivated SNCF to collaborate with occupying authorities. Historians of the German railway company describe an “internalised antisemitism” at all levels of the *Reichsbahn*. This expression does not mean that each *Reichsbahn* employee was fanatically abiding by Nazi ideology but rather that, within a slow and escalating process, anti-Jewish measures became a legitimate part of daily policy and corporate functioning after 1933. Nine and a half years passed between the first antisemitic measures (the expulsion of Jews from the *Reichsbahn* payroll) and the first deportation from Germany to the East in October 1941.

This process was different in France. While no significant opposition was raised to the first anti-Jewish measures of October 1940, the general French population – of which SNCF employees were a part – expressed its discontent with the mass arrests of Summer 1942. In response, the French government somewhat diminished the intensity of its persecution against the Jewish population in its country. If, in

³⁷ The Bachelier Report gives numerous examples of such negotiations between SNCF leadership and various German authorities. See an example, among many others, on pages 193-250.

France, submission to Vichy and the German occupying authorities was internalized, the “Final Solution” itself was not. Traditional obedience to authority, especially in a time of crisis, provides a more compelling explanation for why SNCF provided such minimal resistance to the organization of convoys than does the presence of genocidal intent.

SNCF eagerly sought to preserve its autonomy in the complex climate of occupied France. Its top managers were always cognizant of the risk of being fully integrated into the *Reichsbahn*, as had happened to the Polish railway company and others in Eastern Europe. In the name of public service and the French nation’s need for railways in a time of war, SNCF made conscious choices to sacrifice its values. Among those choices, providing transport of Jews to the East was the most blatant.

Organizing the Transports

Before starting our analysis, it is important to note that the transports from France to Auschwitz and Sobibor were the most distant ones – which does not mean the most difficult to organize by the various authorities in charge. Auschwitz is 2,300 km away from Bordeaux by train and 1,700 km away from Paris. Only Athens and the Greek Islands were as distant departure points for deportation as were France and Paris.

SNCF’s role in organizing convoys of Jews and Resistance fighters to the Nazi camps remains blurred even today. Of course, SNCF had to have taken part in this organization, as the trains ran on French tracks and were operated by French drivers, at least until Novéant – the last station in French territory on the journey to the East. Only in the earliest months of deportations were prisoners transported in third class cars added to regular trains, and only ever for a handful of Resistance fighters. From March 1942 on, with the first convoys carrying Jews, special trains were organized. The first convoy left France on March 27, 1942.

Two types of convoys existed. Most of them left from suburban stations of Paris – first from Le Bourget then, from July 1943, from Bobigny. This change was likely made because this latter station was more isolated, and the loading of convoys could be made in a more discreet way. Most of these convoys journeyed to Auschwitz or Sobibor. Serge Klarsfeld has counted 73 such convoys;³⁸ 68 went to Auschwitz-Birkenau and four were destined for Sobibor and Maidanek. One convoy, number 73 – which left Drancy on May 15, 1944 for Kaunas, Lithuania and then Reval, Estonia – carried only men on board. A deportation train with Jews left Lyon on August 11, 1944 to reach Auschwitz, and a wagon of 51 deportees was added to a final convoy of Resistance fighters to Germany on August 17, 1944; the 51 Jewish deportees arrived at Buchenwald. There was also a small convoy of Jewish women whose husbands were French prisoners of war in Germany; they were deported with their children to Bergen Belsen in early July 1944.

The second type of convoys were transports from French camps, some in the Northern Occupied Zone but most from the Southern Zone, to Paris-Austerlitz, followed by bus transports to Drancy. It is not known if these trains were organized from Berlin or if they were organized solely by French administrations. Serge

³⁸ Serge Klarsfeld, *Le calendrier de la persécution des Juifs en France*, Les Fils et filles des déportés juifs de France (Paris; New York: the Beate Klarsfeld Foundation, 1993), 1122-1124.

Klarsfeld, again, has listed those trains.³⁹

The organization of convoys was in itself both remarkable and banal. All military convoys, including trains transporting liberated prisoners of war and trains for military materials, were special convoys. The convoys of Jews were remarkable because they were heavily guarded (more so than those carrying prisoners of war). They were also relatively secret and discreet. Convoys were commissioned by the Sipo-SD and the services of Eichmann in France (not by the French government and even less by SNCF itself). It is commonly written that trains were ordered from Berlin (by Novak) but, in fact, the decision to organize and commission those convoys was the result of many back-and-forth communications between Paris and Berlin. Of course, maintaining an effective convoy schedule also required communication with the camps themselves. Coordinating the trains arriving at Auschwitz was necessary, as they were coming from all over Europe.

Before trains could be organized, the perpetrators needed Jews to deport. According to the now-extensive literature on the persecution of French Jews, there was never a lack of transportation capacity to deport Jewish victims. The main problem for the occupation, however, was the lack of an available workforce to arrest them (and to locate them, following the dispersion of Jews throughout the many small villages of France).⁴⁰ In reality, there were periods of time during which the *Reichsbahn* and the German Ministry of Transport let the Sipo-SD in Paris know that no trains were available for this use (in Autumn 1942, for example). No document has been found among SNCF records indicating a time when the national company refused to organize a train because it lacked materials. But we should remember that SNCF was obligated by the Armistice Convention to prioritize the operation of German convoys on the French railway network.

Considering the documents that have been made available and the body of existing research, it is possible to roughly describe the organization of convoys, but only to a point. The role of SNCF in this organization appears limited, especially in the decision-making process. After Jews were arrested, Eichmann's envoy in Paris announced their detention to Berlin. Before leaving Paris, in August 1942, Theodor Dannecker organized the first convoys. After that, the chain of command and organization of transports remained the same until the end of the occupation. Heinz Röthke, the head of the Gestapo in France, became Eichmann's correspondent after Dannecker's departure until the arrival of Alois Brunner in May 1943. It is only when all of this was decided that SNCF acted, with the material organization of the convoys. Once the decision to organize a convoy was made, however, SNCF provided the cars and organized the trains up to the French-German border, which meant alerting each train station to the convoy's transit.

Some of the precise instructions regarding the convoys given by the RSHA, and more precisely by the IV-B-4 office headed by Adolf Eichmann, have survived in the documentation of the Gestapo. The first set of

³⁹ Serge Klarsfeld, *Les transferts de Juifs du camp de Rivesaltes et de la région de Montpellier vers le camp de Drancy en vue de leur déportation. 10 août 1942-6 août 1944* (Paris: Les fils et filles des déportés juifs de France et par la Beate Klarsfeld Foundation, 1993); *Nice, Hôtel Excelsior. Les rafles des Juifs par la Gestapo à partir du 8 septembre 1943: les transferts de Juifs de la région préfectorale de Nice... et de la principauté de Monaco vers le camp de Drancy en vue de leur déportation, 8 septembre 1943-30 juillet 1944* (Paris: Les fils et filles des déportés juifs de France et par la Beate Klarsfeld Foundation, 1998).

⁴⁰ See the most recent analysis of the role of Vichy in arresting Jews in France: Laurent Joly, *L'Etat contre les Juifs* (Paris: Grasset, 2018).

instructions is dated March 12, 1942.⁴¹ They were detailed, ordering which categories of Jews should be included in the trains and also the percentage of men and women (only 5% of people in the first six trains to leave France were women). The small percentage of women in the initial convoys may be explained by the fact that those deportees were doomed to forced labor in Auschwitz in lieu of immediate execution. However, selections for the gas chambers were conducted at Auschwitz beginning in July 1942. From this point, instructions regarding women rapidly changed.

Instructions stipulated that prisoners were to be sent with clothing and other materials, such as spoons and shovels. In some convoys, these materials were dispatched in the many wagons. In others, a special car was added to transport them. At the beginning, 14 days of food rations were requested for each deportee. This was later reduced to three days. These materials were to be provided by Jewish organizations, but the already mentioned UGIF had inherited the assets and properties of all French Jewish charities. The UGIF was also financed through a tax on Jewish looted assets (5%). The materials transported on deportation trains were thus paid for by the Jewish victims themselves.⁴² Clothes and instruments were to be used by Jews in forced labor in Auschwitz. From July 6, 1942, Jews from the West went through the infamous selection process upon arriving at the camps. Two-thirds were sent directly to the gas chambers. The requested materials, then, were another way of looting Jewish property, but also part of the general cover-up of what deportation really meant (murder, rather than forced labor).

The Gestapo was central in organizing the convoys. Although the first six were set at the initiative of the German military high command – in the framework of its policy of taking hostages to counter the first attacks by the French Resistance⁴³ – the Sipo-SD rapidly took over. The second set of instructions was transmitted on 12 June 1942. It reached the local commands of the Sipo-SD. To organize the convoys and decide on timetables, the Sipo-SD in Paris and the *Hauptverkehrsdirection*, headed by Münzer, developed a smooth and cooperative relationship. The HVD then turned to SNCF for the provision of cars and engines.

This does not mean that SNCF had no involvement in the planning and organization of convoys. A member of an SNCF delegation in Vichy attended at least one meeting to organize the second set of convoys, the ones triggered by the main round-up of Jews (known as the *Vel' d'Hiv'* round-up) on July 16-17, 1942. Those two days were seminal in the development of the Holocaust in France (in 1992, France made July 16 its Holocaust Memorial Day). Obeying instructions given in Berlin, the head of the Sipo-SD lobbied the French government to organize the mass arrest of Jews. Three roundups had already taken place prior to this point, with arrests only targeting Jewish men. The German authorities lacked the police force to arrest tens of thousands of Jews at the same time, so they turned to the French police for help. The Vichy Government entered into (now infamous) negotiations during which they agreed to arrest and “deliver” 50,000 Jews to the Gestapo, provided that only foreign Jews would be caught.⁴⁴ Those Jews were to be arrested all over France, including in the non-occupied zone. The main operation of mass arrest, the

⁴¹ Ahlrich Meyer, *Täter im Verhör: Die “Endlösung der Judenfrage” in Frankreich 1940–1944* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2005), 226-227.

⁴² The delivery of this material led to numerous contacts between various French and German agencies, including the ministries of Industry, the economic division of the SS, and Rudolph Höss himself, the commander of Auschwitz. See: Meyer, *Täter im Verhör*, 219-220.

⁴³ Ulrich Herbert, “The German Military Administration in Paris and the Deportation of French Jews,” in Ulrich Herbert, ed., *National Socialist Extermination Policies: Contemporary German Perspectives and Controversies* (Oxford; New York: Berghahn Books, 2000,) chapter 5.

⁴⁴ See the most up to date analysis in: Joly, *Vichy contre les Juifs*, 76-85.

Vel' d'Hiv' round-up, took place over two days and was only partially successful, even with all of the Paris police and gendarmerie contributing. The target for this operation was 25,000 Jews. The Paris police forces managed to arrest only 13,152 Jews (including 4,500 children). Though an immense number, it fell short of the intended 25,000 who were supposed to be taken. Nearly all of the men, women, and children captured were immediately deported to Auschwitz. SNCF organized 33 convoys in three months (Convoys numbered 6 through 39) to take them there.

Deportation convoys, though made out of freight cars, were considered special voyagers' trains and organized by the *Reichsbahn* and SNCF divisions in charge of them. The chain of command to organize the convoys of Jews from France was as follows: after receiving messages from the Sipo-SD in Paris that a sufficient number of Jews were "available" for deportation, Eichmann transferred the information to his "Transport Officer," Franz Novak. Novak then contacted the Ministry of Transport in Berlin. His contact was Otto Strange, an obscure administrator whose superior was Director Paul Schnell in the Department of Railways. Strange liaised with his Paris correspondent within the WVD on the availability of transport.⁴⁵ It is unknown whether SNCF was consulted by the WVD at this point in the process or if the French national company had to intervene only later, when the convoy was decided with certainty.

As the WVD did not have any transport materials itself, it had to rely on SNCF to prepare the trains. Next, the time and itinerary were set, perhaps in coordination with SNCF, although it is unclear whether this required their active involvement or merely their acquiescence. Nothing is known about this coordination or cooperation between the WVD in Paris and SNCF.

What was SNCF's margin for negotiation? What is certain is that trains for Jews were considered distinct from the very beginning and were given the code name IATP (Jews, Germans, Czech and Poles). No protest on the part of SNCF is known regarding the commission of those convoys. The role of SNCF was to make the cars and engines available and to provide drivers from France to the border of Germany, where they were replaced by German drivers. The first train to Auschwitz was also changed to German operations in Metz, with the Jewish victims transferred from French wagons to German ones.⁴⁶ We know also that the cars were checked by the Sipo-SD before departure. SNCF tended to make older train materials available for these convoys out of fear that those trains would not be returned to France. The Sipo-SD was reluctant to accept such cars, concerned that their poor condition might allow Jews to make holes or breaches in an attempt to escape.⁴⁷ This difference in opinion signifies that SNCF was acting in its best interest – saving the best material for its own use – but never tried to alleviate the fate of the deportees.

Five deportation trains from France stopped in Silesia before their arrival at Auschwitz, where a rapid selection of men for forced labor occurred. Those selected were sent to satellite labor camps of the Auschwitz concentration archipelago. While they never entered any of the three main camps at Auschwitz, most of them died in the following weeks from hardship and mistreatment.

Transports were coordinated throughout Europe and organized in similar ways. If SNCF met the demands received from the *Hauptverkehrsdirktion* (HVD), the abnormalities of those trains – people being transported in dire, dangerous conditions and armed guards with orders to shoot in case of attempted

⁴⁵ Bachelier, *La SNCF sous l'occupation allemande*, 387-388.

⁴⁶ Meyer, *Täter im Verhör*, 230.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 224-225.

flight – could not have been missed by French railwaymen. The clear instruction that all transported Jews would be definitively severed from any French social service, which was clearly stated in the instructions from the Sipo-SD, indicated that those passengers would not return to France.

What was the level of coercion placed on SNCF managers and employees? This is difficult to assess, as so few disobeyed or refused their orders. Disobedience existed and was severely punished. But what about the refusal to help deport Jews? Historian Alfred Mierzejewski describes two German mid-level *Reichsbahn* employees who refused to participate in the Jewish transports and asked to be transferred.⁴⁸ They were not punished. But those men were also employed in Poland, closer to the death facilities, and had precise information about the Jews' fate (which was not the case for SNCF employees and managers). No similar case of refusal is known in France.

Financing the Transports

How were transports from France to the death camps financed? This important question has not been fully answered by historians. What is known is that they were not paid for by the Jews themselves, as was the case in other countries and in Germany. In Slovakia, the trains to Auschwitz were billed to the Slovak government (a satellite of the Reich), which paid using assets looted from Jews. As Jews in France had been despoiled of most of their assets and deprived of their livelihoods by French administrations, no money was available for the Sipo-SD to pay SNCF's bills. As part of its domestic antisemitic policy, the French government endeavored to "Aryanize" the economy, blocking most Jewish assets and properties.⁴⁹ These blocked assets were thus unavailable to German agents, with the exception of one billion francs imposed as a collective levy on the French Jewish community in December 1942. It is possible that part of this sum, at the disposal of the German military high command, was used to pay for the transports to Auschwitz.

Another Germany agency, the *Dienststelle Westen* (a branch of the German Ministry of Eastern Territories), organized the looting of furniture. The *Dienststelle* used the money obtained from sales that made up part of the booty to German municipalities to pay for the trains transporting stolen furniture and objects from France to Germany. In the case of those specific convoys, the looting of Jewish properties directly financed the transports of plundered wealth to Germany. But those trains were peculiar, and it is difficult to reconstruct the financial circuits that paid for deportation convoys in a similar manner.

Raul Hilberg describes the rising costs of Jewish transports from Western Europe and how it created a problem for the military command in Paris. He has found a decision made by the *Reichsbahn* dated July 14, 1942, which authorises a group tariff for transports from France, Belgium, and the Netherlands.⁵⁰ The group tariff (same as for an excursion) was applied to each deportee: half the price of a third-class ticket from Drancy to Auschwitz. Hilberg has also found mention of the transports' cost: the first 18 trains from France cost 76,000 Reichsmark from Drancy to the German border and 439,000 Reichsmark from the border to Auschwitz (the equivalent of about \$304,000 USD and \$1,756,000 USD at the time, respectively). The exchange rate between the Reichsmark and the Franc was fixed at 1 to 20. After negotiations between the *Reichsbahn*, the Sipo-SD, and the Ministry of Finances, it was decided that

⁴⁸ Mierzejewski, *The Most Valuable Asset of the Reich*, 125-126.

⁴⁹ See, on this question: Jean-Marc Dreyfus, *Pillages sur ordonnances. Aryanisation et restitution des banques en France 1940-1953* (Paris: Fayard, 2003).

⁵⁰ Hilberg, *The Destruction of European Jews*, vol. 2, 555-556.

the military high command in Paris would pay for the transport to the border using the French Francs available thanks to the occupation levy. The rest of the trip to Auschwitz was paid for by the Sipo-SD. It is not known if this agreement was implemented and, if so, if it continued until the end of the war.

There is a strong suspicion that SNCF billed the *Mitteleuropäische Reisebureau* (MER) for transports of Jewish victims from Le Bourget/Bobigny to the German border, with the MER then billing the German military high command. The bills were paid from a Bank of France account in which huge sums of money from the occupation levy were available (400 million francs per day from the end of 1942). The deportation of Jews from France was thus partly paid for by the French people themselves.⁵¹

The financial aspects of transports from French camps to Paris-Austerlitz and, via buses, to Drancy, remain even more obscure. The infamous “Schachter invoice” states that on August 12, 1944, the central financial service of SNCF billed the French Ministry of the Interior 210,385 Francs for “transport from internment camps, surveyed sojourn centres, internees, expelled, etc.”⁵² The circuit of money is even less clear in this case. Were the transfers from the French camps paid for by the French state? Or did the Ministry of Interior claim the money for the authorizing authority, in this case the WVD? Was the Schachter invoice ever paid to SNCF?

Did SNCF benefit from transporting Jews to their deaths? In the absence of a detailed analytical account of the financing of deportations, it is impossible to say. As mentioned before, we have a strong suspicion that the transports to the border, on the convoys’ way to Auschwitz and other camps, were billed by SNCF. It is not that SNCF sought this “business,” but the payments are important to show that those abnormal transports were part of a business-as-usual functioning of the national company. On a moral level, would not the provision of free transportation have been even worse, making SNCF an even more willing accomplice of genocide?

The Railwaymen

Employees of SNCF emerged from the occupation as heroes. A cult devoted to them was carefully developed, both by the French Communist Party and by the Gaullist power. We know for certain that among the 400,000 SNCF employees, only a small minority of them entered active Resistance groups. This, however, does not mean that they all approved of the policy set by SNCF leadership. Ludivine Broch has brought attention to the fact that a minority of SNCF workers aligned with the ideology of the Vichy regime; the “values” of the new order met their requirement for a family-oriented, authoritarian and orderly society.⁵³

Before the war, SNCF was not known for its labor disputes. The five regional railways that were later merged to create SNCF remained calm in 1936, when massive strikes swept France. In 1938, a communist-led strike attempt failed. The relatively high number of railway men and women who joined the Resistance represent, in that sense, a significant change in the political and social culture of the national company. This can be explained by the successes of the French Communist Party in recruiting – clandestinely –

⁵¹ Meyer, *Täter im Verhör*, 232.

⁵² See a copy of the invoice in: Alain Lipietz, *La SNCF et la Shoah: le procès G. Lipietz contre Etat et SNCF* (Paris: Les Petits Matins, 2011), 170-171.

⁵³ Broch, *Ordinary Workers*, 80-86.

new members in the very time of occupation. Railwaymen were subjected to stricter control during the occupation. Men suspected of communist leanings were identified and expelled, with SNCF administration initiating those purges. From 1942 on, many railway workers supported the Resistance, even though they did not directly participate. Many of them (but not all) were communists.

We know of only one case in which an SNCF railwayman – a driver named Léon Bronchart – openly disobeyed a deportation order, and this involved a convoy of (non-Jewish) prisoners of war. Bronchart was granted the title of “Righteous Among the Nations” in 1995 by Yad Vashem, not for this incident but for his rescue of at least two Jews outside of his work at SNCF. For his activities in the *Résistance*, he was deported to the Dora concentration camp, which he survived.

Among the *cheminots* it was probably indifference towards the fate of Jews that reigned, as was the case among the mainstream French population. There is no testimony of overt approval for deportation among SNCF workers but there is evidence of many small gestures of sympathy and discreet help. There are also no examples of an attack on, or sabotage of, a convoy; the only such case in Western Europe took place in Belgium. Thanks to a modest and courageous act by three Resistance fighters, 241 Jews escaped the 20th convoy to leave the Malines camp (the Belgian equivalent of Drancy).⁵⁴ Ultimately, 118 of the 241 escapees survived the war.

Many *cheminots* tried to give water to Jews locked in the trains but even this was dangerous. Trains were heavily guarded by armed SS personnel and by German policemen. Railwaymen did, however, collect letters and little notes thrown from the trains. Those notes were subsequently posted to families and became the last sign of life from thousands of victims. Some railwaymen also helped the few known escapees from their trains.⁵⁵ In the first convoy to Auschwitz (March 27, 1942), one deportee managed to escape. But the number of escapees – successful or not – grew from 1943 on.

Although no more information about the systematic killing in Auschwitz was made available, it is probable that the absence of any news from the former deportees raised anxiety among Jews. The terrible uncertainty about their fate upon arrival must have incited more and more Jews to attempt the dangerous move of jumping from the trains. They clearly had the necessity of jumping before the train reached Germany in mind as they knew their chances of being helped after escape were greater in France than in the Third Reich. When the transport from February 13, 1943 crossed the border at Novéant, guards noted that eight Jews were missing. They had managed to break a hole in the wagon between Bar-le-Duc and Lérouville.⁵⁶ It seems that escape attempts occurred in most transports from February 1943 on. Few were successful. Many Jews were shot while jumping.

Jews who did managed to jump from the trains needed the support of ordinary French men and women living or working near the railway if they were to survive their escape. This group included policemen, workers, housewives – people of various backgrounds and occupations who sheltered Jewish children and helped Jews go into hiding. Some railway workers helped too, such as Gabriel Philbert, who lived with his wife Simone in the village of Nançois-sur-Ornain (Meuse). The couple sheltered Félix Goldschmidt,

⁵⁴ Maxime Steinberg and Laurence Schram, *Transport XX*, Éditions du Musée juif de la déportation et de la Résistance, 2008.

⁵⁵ On the escapes from trains, the best analysis is: Aldrich Mayer. *Täter in Verhör*, 251-263.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 254.

a Jew who had jumped from convoy number 62.⁵⁷ About 150 Jews attempted to escape a deportation convoy, half of them successfully.⁵⁸

Altogether 55 SNCF workers were declared “righteous gentiles” by Yad Vashem, the last one in 2020. Those men and women sheltered Jewish children and helped Jews go into hiding. It may well be that more SNCF employees behaved heroically to save Jews. Again, no complete survey of those actions exists. For example, a discreet testimony written by the son and daughter of Jews who were saved tells the story of the *cheminot* Marcel Hoffman, who on September 11, 1942, helped several Jews escape the train from Lens (north of France) to Lille-Fives, where they were to be transferred to a convoy to Auschwitz.⁵⁹

SNCF recently commissioned a survey of the 2,229 railwaymen who were murdered in WWII, whether deported to Nazi concentration camps (1293), shot in France (484), or killed by torture (57). Half of them were killed for being Resistance fighters.⁶⁰ The others were taken hostage by German forces – mostly the Wehrmacht and the Gestapo – for attacks they took no part in and were shot. Finally, in August 1944, SNCF workers joined the general insurgency strike against German occupiers. SNCF contributed to the liberation of Paris by the Resistance a few days before French troops of General Leclerc entered the capital city. It also prevented the last convoys of Jews from departing to the East, saving the last internees of Drancy. The general strike was called by the various unions active within SNCF, primarily the communist unions. This was a general call to Parisians during the time of the Paris uprising against German occupiers and in no way a demand from SNCF leadership. However, it is remarkable that the railway workers followed it so massively, maybe as a last-minute attempt to collectively resist the occupation authorities. The same move could be seen within the Paris Police. It greatly helped to refurbish the global image of the national company and to build the myth of an SNCF made entirely of Resistance fighters, from early on in the occupation.

The Long Journey of the Victims

The history of convoys to the East should also be written from the standpoint of victims. Out of the 75,721 Jews deported from France, only 4,000 returned.⁶¹ Many of them have described the horrendous conditions of their transport. First, the journey was extremely long. Timetables were not always kept, and trains stopped for hours in stations or in the middle of fields.

One survivor, Leo Bretholz (who jumped from convoy number 42), gave oral testimony of his deportation from Drancy:

⁵⁷ View the file of the Righteous among Nations at https://righteous.yadvashem.org/?searchType=righteous_only&language=en&itemId=5745341&ind=NaN.

⁵⁸ Tanja von Fransecky, “Fuir un dispositif d’extermination. L’évasion de l’équipe du tunnel de Drancy du 62^{ème} convoi de déportation,” *Histoire@Politique* 32 (May-August 2017).

⁵⁹ See testimony in: Mandelbaum, Daniel, Jacqueline Mandelbaum-Bleibtreu, “Le 11 Septembre 1942: Les cheminots et les déportés juifs en gare de Fives-Lille,” *Tsafon* 76 (2018), accessible at <https://journals.openedition.org/tsafon/1471>.

⁶⁰ Thomas Fontaine, ed., *Les cheminots victimes de la répression, 1940-1945* (Paris:Perrin/SNCF, 2017).

⁶¹ Alexandre Doulut, Serge Klarsfeld and Sandrine Labeau, *Mémorial des 3943 rescapés juifs de France (convoi 1-82). Liste et témoignages* (New York; Paris : The Beate Klarsfeld Foundation – Les Fils et Filles des Déportés Juifs de France – Après l’oubli, 2018).

The dehumanization started in the cattle car. It started for real. Because in the middle of the car, there was a bucket, it was for your need, to release yourself. And one bucket, the one you use at home, time and often that it filled up in very short time, it was kneeling and standing and basically in human waste and all modesty has disappeared. For women and children and everyone.⁶²

Conditions were so horrendous that historian Simone Gigliotti, who has published the only complete analysis of the journey, writes:

Testimonies of deportation transit reveal an intimate, disturbing, and taboo-breaking episode in the history of victims' suffering during the Holocaust. The terrorizing impact on deportees of compressed space and indeterminate journeying was not unknown to the bureaucrats. Their job was to actively and knowingly collude in the production of false truths and destinations, and to present these transports in records and to the victims as resettlement.⁶³

Historians writing about the transports show that, far from being an interim period between arrest and arrival to the concentration and death camps, the train journey was an integral part of victims' persecution. It was a moment when uncertainty about one's fate ("Where are we being transported?") became the certainty of hardship and extermination. People who are supposed to go to work would not be transported in such dire conditions. Worsening conditions on SNCF trains from 1943 on provoked a rising number of escape attempts.⁶⁴ Acting on the orders of the Sipo-SD, SNCF workers blocked the trains' small windows, restricting the already minimal airflow and making it increasingly difficult for Jews to see outside their wagon. One had to be raised to the level of the tiny openings to see the names of the train stations as the train passed through.

The journey was an experience of collapse: the collapse of modesty, with no ability to isolate or relieve oneself in private, and the collapse of intimacy for the many families who were deported together. Transported Jews suffered immediately of thirst and exposure to the elements. Train cars were terribly overheated in summer and horrendously cold in winter. Inmates did what they could to organize themselves during the journey, taking turns for a quick breath of fresh air or a glance through the small openings. Children were crying, elderly and sick people fainted. In some trains Jews even perished, foreshadowing the death waiting for all upon arrival. Gigliotti writes:

Deportation testimonies are rebuttals to the image of resettlement. The initial push into the carriage, the rush for sitting and standing space, the train's unconfirmed destination, the compression of bodies, and the violation of social boundaries were nothing compared to the overpowering assault of excrement, urine, and vomit, and the dearth of water and food.⁶⁵

⁶² USC Shoah Foundation, Visual History archives, Interview Number 8503, November 9, 1995 (interviewer: Joan Jacobs, Baltimore, Maryland, segment 69).

⁶³ Simone Gigliotti, *The Train Journey. Transit, Captivity and Witnessing in the Holocaust* (Oxford; New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 2.

⁶⁴ Meyer, *Täter in Verhör*, 228.

⁶⁵ Gigliotti, *The Train Journey*, 4.

She maintains that “survivor testimonies of this experience provide a portal to a hidden Holocaust inside trains.”⁶⁶ The dire conditions of transports, which SNCF facilitated, can thus be described as part of the genocidal project. Trains became a part of the destruction process. Jews realised that during their journey. Railway workers must have realised it too. But what about the SNCF bureaucrats in their offices?

Conclusion

The answers to be found in archives regarding the role of SNCF in the Holocaust are limited and uneven. If the general policy of SNCF towards its different and various authorities of control and comptrollers is known even in part, the documents needed to describe and analyse the exact role of the national company in organizing deportations to the East have yet to be found and studied. SNCF’s responsibility in the Holocaust can, though, be assessed, especially when considering the global role of railway companies throughout Europe in transporting three million Jews to their death. In that sense, SNCF did not act differently than other Western European companies (the situation was, of course, very dissimilar in Germany and in the East). SNCF did not take the initiative to organize transports but, based on information we have up to now from archival sources, it also did not protest or attempt to avoid them either.

Only 25% of Jews in France were deported⁶⁷ (which is one of the lowest rates in Europe, comparable only to Italy and Denmark). This amounted to precisely 75,721 persons. The relatively low rate (compared with 75% of Jews deported from the Netherlands, for example) can be explained by many factors, including the late reluctance of the French collaborationist government to fully assist with arresting Jews. However, it cannot be explained by any resistance from SNCF. Once commissioned by Eichmann’s office in Berlin, with orders transmitted to the German military command and the Paris branch of the *Reichsbahn*, SNCF fully complied. The only signs of disapproval were isolated gestures by individual workers. The leadership of SNCF did not want to take any risks for the company they were in charge of.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁶⁷ Klarsfeld, *Le Calendrier de la déportation de la persécution des Juifs en France*, 1126.

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