

Transit ferroviaire à travers la Suisse (1939–1945)

Rail Transit across Switzerland (1939–1945)

(Publications of the ICE, volume 4)

Gilles Forster

ISBN 3-0340-0604-7 (Chronos Verlag) / 2-601-03288-X (Éditions Payot)

Summary

The study on transit comprises two unequal parts: one on the transit of people, the other on that of goods. The part considering the transit of people addresses on the one hand the supposition that deported Jews were transported across Switzerland, and on the other the question of the transit of Italian workers on their way to Germany. As far as the first point is concerned, the conclusion reached was that no train with deportees from France made use of the Swiss railway network. Of a total of 43 such trains setting out from Italy, it proved possible to identify the routing of 40: none went through Switzerland. It seems certain that the remaining three trains used the eastern passes in crossing the Alps – these provide a more direct link between Italy and Poland, via Austria. The Brenner railway line had remained usable – it was undamaged at the time of the movements in question. Moreover the political context was hardly favourable at the critical period (the end of 1943 and 1944), for the Swiss authorities had become stricter and from the summer of 1943 on, they had refused the transit of Italian workers. The hypothesis of the transit of deportees is based solely on rumour, but rumour which, till recently, continued to be propagated (chapter I).

More than 180 000 Italian workers crossed Switzerland on their way to Germany between 1941 and May 1943 (II.2). As nationals of one of the Axis countries they cannot be considered as forced labour; their status cannot be compared to that of workers from Eastern Europe, or to that of French workers conscripted into the *Service du Travail Obligatoire* (Compulsory Labour Service). The situation changed between July and September 1943 with the overthrow of Mussolini and the German invasion of northern and central Italy. Thereafter workers were recruited forcibly in that country. But our investigations have not revealed any transit of this sort through Switzerland later than the summer of 1943 (II.5).

The transit of goods can be seen as an important service rendered to the Reich. Swiss rail links had a number of advantages over their Austrian competitors. Situated as they were between the industrial areas of the Ruhr and Lombardy, their geographical position was advantageous, as were their transport capacity and the efficiency of the network (III.1). During the Second World War, transit traffic volumes were more than three times pre-war volumes. This period represents a break in the long-term development of transit traffic (see chart 2, III.2).

Germany had become Italy's principal supplier of raw materials, particularly coal, as early as the thirties. In normal times three quarters of the deliveries went to Italy by sea; the Allied blockade set up in 1940 meant that the whole of Italy's supplies had to move by rail (IV.1). This increase in transit traffic did not, however, mean that there was an increase in Italy's overall resources. From the autumn of 1940, Mussolini's ability to pursue his imperialist programme was limited.

Transit traffic and Swiss imports are closely linked by the principle of freedom of transit, but there was never any direct correlation between the two (chart 3, IV.2). Transit traffic was never the subject of real negotiations, even if the Germans never stopped putting difficulties in the way of Swiss products crossing the Reich. During the war more than 40% of Italy's coal supplies passed through Switzerland; the proportion even increased: in 1944 more than 60% of fuel for Italy went over the Gothard and Simplon passes (IV.3). Correlating the areas in which coal was mined with the routes chosen across the Alps shows that routing during the war was always rational, and determined by economic logic (IV.4). The blackout imposed on rail installations, for instance, shows that the volumes in transit were close to their theoretical maximum (IV.6). Transit via the

Gothard and Simplon passes seems therefore to have been essential to Italy's economic life, and was valued as an itinerary that relieved the Austrian passes. The Germans considered it one of the four major services provided by Switzerland (IV.7). It was to be interrupted only in February 1945, at a time when the principle of free passage had already fallen into disuse. Might not earlier restrictions have allowed Switzerland to make a contribution to hampering the Reich's war effort in Italy (IV.8)?

The transit of war materials and equipment is an issue that has given rise to many questions since the war. In 1942, the German Secretary of State, Ernst von Weizsäcker, stressed the military significance of the Swiss railways for supplying the *Afrikakorps* (V.1). This related above all to «dual-use» goods (i.e., which had both civil and military uses). As a neutral, Switzerland did not consent to the transit of arms for the troops in North Africa, which was in any case forbidden by the Hague Convention. A problem arose in respect of the transit of war materials and equipment between private parties, which may be allowed under the Convention. Switzerland authorised the transit of consignments of this sort on a case by case basis. In general, the Swiss authorities preferred to think that arms consignments crossed the Alps via the Brenner Pass. However, the superficiality of inspections – many trains crossed the country under seal – makes it impossible to totally refute the hypothesis that such consignments passed through Switzerland. This lack of rigour is explained by technical constraints. This, however, still constitutes an infringement of the law of neutrality (V.2). From the summer of 1943 on, following very strong pressure from the Allies, Switzerland was to impose quotas on the transit of liquid fuels, which were classed as goods essential to the war effort (*kriegswichtige Waren*) (V.3).

Traditionally, Italian exports to Germany were consumer products, such as fruits, vegetables and textiles. The war was to change the nature of this trade. Besides rising in volume (chart 4, VI.2), it was increasingly to be made up of goods which were important for the conduct of the war, such as iron and chemicals. The most significant changes were, however, to occur with the German occupation of Italy in September 1943. At the behest of Albert Speer, the German authorities in Italy pillaged Italian industry and arranged for its transfer to the Reich (VI.2). The high quality of industry in the north of Italy, principally the aircraft industry and the metallurgical sector, explains why the German armaments minister considered in January 1944 that transit – south-north as well as north-south – was one of the two most valuable services provided by Switzerland to Germany (the other being the foreign currency market). Its importance was such that the Germans were to give up the thought of waging an economic war against Switzerland (VI.5). Once south-north transit had started again in October 1943, the Swiss authorities became aware of the irregular nature of the traffic. They noted that a large part of the goods passing through Chiasso had been requisitioned. In November 1943, they were to adopt a certain number of measures to restrict transit traffic of this sort: these included forbidding the transit of goods consigned by the German authorities, as well as that of second-hand goods (VI.3). These measures, however, quickly became insufficient. From March 1944 on, therefore, a whole series of measures were to be introduced involving the imposition of quotas and transit embargos (VI.4). These would hamper the German authorities, but did not wholly prevent them from carrying out their programme. Only from the summer of 1944 on did the Swiss measures begin to bear fruit. The Germans' «double track» strategy, using the St. Gothard Pass as a fallback for the Brenner, was to become increasingly impracticable, since the measures taken by the Swiss prevented traffic exceeding the capacity of the Austrian passes from being diverted through Switzerland. The Federal Council's policy on south-north transit seems to have been firmer than that applied to north-south traffic (IV.8 and VI.6).

The Swiss railway tunnels played a central part in dissuasion. Until the winter of 1942/43, the threat was seen as coming above all from the Allied side. It was only in the months leading up to the Allied landing in Italy that the Swiss authorities were to begin to worry about the possibility of preventive action by the Germans (VII.1). Nonetheless, in the light of the Axis powers' interest in passage across Switzerland, as early as spring 1940 groups in the General Staff had thought up a

dissuasive strategy: any power intending to seize the Swiss tunnels must expect to see them destroyed. Implementation of this strategy took time because of technical difficulties and the opposition of certain circles. It was only in the spring of 1942 that arrangements on a modest scale for the destruction of the tunnels became effective. It is worth noting, however, that from the beginning of the war the Germans had in mind that the Swiss would destroy the tunnels if invaded (VII.2 and VII.3).

The Swiss railway companies (the Swiss Federal Railways (SBB) and to a lesser extent the BLS Lötschberg Railway) looked at transit traffic above all from the commercial point of view, and were happy to see it grow, without taking into account the political context (VIII.1). The financial difficulties of the thirties, and the fear that their transalpine links would fall out of favour given German plans for the reorganisation of the European rail network, are the main considerations that explain this attitude (VIII.2). The railway companies continued to have little room for manoeuvre. They did not for example fix their tariffs themselves. Coexisting with commercial competition, there was between the SBB and the *Reichsbahn* an administrative bond, which we have called «*professional solidarity*» (VIII.3). As far as transit was concerned, the blend of such solidarity and competitive spirit led to acceptance of most of the German requirements. At the same time, the *Reichsbahn* was able to take advantage of its close links to the SBB to secure a satisfactory response to the demands it made of the Swiss political authorities. This administrative set-up would have been less of a problem if the government had pursued a clear policy. In practice, the government preferred to use the pretext of the technical character of the decisions to avoid issuing directives. It would be wrong to reproach the SBB for the lack of political decisions. But the way things were done was certainly harmful to Swiss interests, and reduced the chances of obtaining benefits in return (VIII.5). The SBB's revenues arising from transit traffic (VIII.6) rose sharply: from 20 million francs in 1938 to more than 70 million in 1941. They contributed to restoring the balance sheet to health, even if they never constituted more than 16% of total revenues. Because its network essentially comprised a single transit route, the BLS's results were more affected by this exceptional situation. Transit gave rise to as much as 50% of the company's total receipts. These did not, however, prove easy to collect, for from the beginning of the war they were incorporated into the Italo-Swiss clearing system (VIII.7). Since the Italian authorities did not adequately provision the account intended to pay the railway companies' bills, the Swiss state had to guarantee these debts. In consequence, at the end of the war the belligerents owed 89 million francs, more than total transit revenues for 1943 and 1944.

Switzerland sent abroad about a quarter of its rolling stock, mainly to Germany and Italy (IX.1). These movements were exclusively intended to obtain supplies for Switzerland. It would therefore be wrong to suggest that this provision of wagons amounted to a Swiss contribution to making good the Germans' shortage of rolling stock. As for locomotives (IX.2), the SBB's hiring out of 25 of their steam engines to the *Reichsbahn* can similarly be explained by the need to secure coal imports. The refusal to provide a further 25 locomotives despite German attempts at intimidation tends to confirm this impression.

Additional information:
www.uek.ch

Book orders:
Chronos Verlag
Münstergasse 9, CH-8001 Zürich
Fax: 0041 / (0)1 / 265 43 44
e-mail: info@chronos-verlag.ch
www.chronos-verlag.ch

Éditions Payot
18, Av. de la Gare, C.p. 529
CH-1001 Lausanne
Fax 0041 / (0)21 / 329 02 66