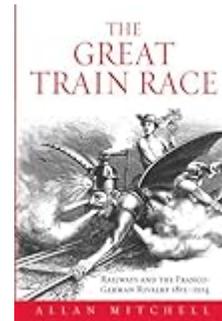


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Allan Mitchell.** *The Great Train Race: Railways and the Franco-German Rivalry, 1815-1914.* New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2000. xv + 328 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57181-166-0.



**Reviewed by** C. Edmund Clingan (Queensborough Community College, City University of New York)

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Railroads are hot. They attract both romantics of yesteryear and apostles of progress. A scholar may approach them as a political problem, an economic problem, or a social problem. Many have written off railroads as being obsolete, but they have clung to life. At a time when most air carriers have been nationalized and/or faced bankruptcy, derision over the state subsidies given to railroads has subsided. New high-speed rail connections have appealed to the fast-paced business life and the slow-paced tourist. France and Germany have been leaders in upgrading rail service and exploring the horizon of even faster (if obscenely expensive) magnetic levitation rail technology.

Allan Mitchell, Professor of History at the University of California, San Diego, has spent much of his career comparing developments in nineteenth-century Germany and France. *The Divided Path* looked at the convergences and divergences in social policy between the two nations. Now he has provided an interesting study that should be useful to historians of economics and business, France, Germany, and the nineteenth century. Mitchell has delved into the national, railroad, and military archives of France and the national, state, and military archives of Germany to craft his story.

Germany and France formed a middle way between the state-run Belgian model of railroad construction and

the private British model. The French and Germans used a mixed model that led to considerable tension. National rail development in France had to contend with the demands of the private rail companies while German rail unity was challenged by the states. The main players were four French companies—the Eastern Line, the Northern Line, the Paris-Lyon-Mediterranean line, and the Paris-Orleans line—that held state concessions, and four German states—Bavaria, Baden, Wuerttemberg, and Saxony—that vied with the German railroad office.

Mitchell focuses on the political, economic, and military aspects of rail development. He uses a “parallel lives” approach to tell the story of each in a given time frame (1815-1870, 1870-1890, and 1890-1914) then has a short chapter comparing the two nations in that frame. The thesis is that military necessity drove both to outdo the other in length of track and the density of tracks along a line. This thesis does not work terribly well for France in the 1815-1870 period. Although military considerations dictated that tracks were built away from the border and on the other sides of rivers, a nation obsessed with military competition would not have allowed the private companies as much sway as France did. After the Franco-Prussian War both nations eyed the other’s construction with deepest suspicion. Mitchell concludes that by 1914, Germany had won the great train race, but it did not mat-

ter much after the Schlieffen Plan failed.

That complaint aside, Mitchell does a fine job of providing brief histories of the private French companies whose profits often depended on leadership. The most successful was the Northern Line, which was tied to the Rothschild bank and was the only company not to need state loans by the 1850s. As rail development expanded, the German coal, steel, and locomotive industries (especially Borsig of Berlin) benefitted from both German and French expansion. Mitchell somewhat downplays the role of railroads in the wars of German unification. He asserts that the battle of Koeniggraetz was won by horses, infantrymen, and the needle gun. In the 1870 war, railroads played a negative role for France: troop deployment was slowed by the Paris-centered network. By that time, Helmut von Moltke had coordinated schedules so that troops and supplies could move across Germany without stopping; this cut six days off the mobilization calendar.

One might assume that the 1870 debacle would lead to French nationalization, but the companies fought back ferociously. The political fights that consumed France during the 1870s delayed consideration of railroad reform. Leon Gambetta's ally Charles de Freycinet proposed a public-private partnership in 1879. The government could not even prevent French firms from buying German-made locomotives. Only the First World War

ended private control of the French railroads.

For Germany, nationalization in the smaller states occurred to prevent Prussia from picking them off following unification and the sale of Prussian lines to the Reich. In the aftermath of unification, an Imperial Railroad Office was created in 1873 to advise the Chancellor. Bavaria, Saxony, and Wuerttemberg prevented the parliament from uniting the system. Bismarck and his aide Albert Maybach turned to a piecemeal approach. The state Prussian lines were sold to the Reich and Prussia began to buy private lines. This took ten years to execute. Bavaria, Saxony, and Wuerttemberg responded by nationalizing their own lines to keep them out of the Reich web. By 1890, almost no private lines existed in Germany.

For Mitchell, this was clearly a labor of love, and it is a pleasure to see a job well done. The book has a full scholarly apparatus along with vital charts and maps to keep things clear.

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