

# Travelling by Train between Czechoslovakia and Germany after the Munich Agreement

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## Abstract

The following study attempts to analyse an almost unknown aspect of Czechoslovakian-German relations during the so called “Second Republic” (October 1938 – March 1939), namely the railway traffic between the two countries. It is necessary to realize that railway traffic was the most common means of transport for both people and goods at this time and that it was in both countries' interests to keep it functioning. This paper focuses on the situations and problems that everyday passengers faced. Their experiences were the main factor on which public opinion of the railways was based. The contributory role of freight transport is also analysed in short because of its importance to the functioning of the economy. An important question, which this study attempts to answer as well, is the nature of relations between Czechoslovakian railway employees and their German counterparts. Did these relations copy those in “high politics” at the time? Or, could the professionals on both sides of the new borders cooperate to keep the traffic flowing? With the use of several examples, descriptions are given of experiences with colleagues on the other side of the border that were often positive and whereby both sides understood that it was necessary to keep the traffic flowing. Unfortunately, these efforts were on occasion disrupted by the decisions of political or military leaders.

**Key words:** railway traffic, Munich Agreement, Second Czechoslovak Republic, Czech-German relations

## Introduction

The Munich Agreement was without doubt an important turning point in the history of Czechoslovakia, both in terms of relations with Germany and the country's internal development. Historical research almost exclusively focuses on questions concerning the politics or problems of ethnical (self-)identification (Gebhart and Kuklík 2004). Other areas of life such as the economy, transport and sports, amongst other things, have

remained outside the main fields of interest for research. In this study the focus is on an almost unknown aspect of Czechoslovakian-German relations during a period of Czechoslovak history which is now widely referred to as The Second Czechoslovak Republic (October 1938 – March 1939), in particular on railway transport between the two countries. There are a number of important basic questions that this paper seeks to answer. Under which conditions could passengers and freight trains cross the border? How did passengers react to the new conditions? Did the relations between the Czech and German passengers, railway employees, policemen and other groups, copy those in “high politics”, or could these groups find a compromise to keep the railway traffic flowing?

Other researchers may have added more questions or chosen to answer different ones. However, this study does not have the ambition to provide a complete and exhaustive analysis of the consequences of the Munich Agreement. Such an ambition would be better fulfilled in a book rather a short study like this one. It is for this reason that the questions were chosen as they are and do not cover the most important spheres of political and economic relations. The aim is to give a more plastic exemplification of a part of life in the Second Republic to which little attention has been paid to establish what the perception of the railways was at the time.

The material for this study is based on documents housed in the Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, the National Archive of the Czech Republic (Collection of the Press Department of the Ministry of Railways) and from former published studies dedicated to single railway routes (Sýkora 2003; Omelka 2002). The history of the railways in the withdrawal areas of Czechoslovakia has already been analysed (Bufe, Schröpfer and Losos 2003), however this work mainly concentrates on the railway traffic during the Second World War. In contrast, the studies published by Ivan Jakubec focus on different periods or themes, namely the period ending before the signing of the Munich Agreement and the first few years after the First World War (Jakubec 1997), the analysis of the parallel development of the Czechoslovak and German railways, but with little insight into the mutual contacts between the two railway companies (Jakubec 1991), and the period after the Second World War (Jakubec 2006). The economic impact of the withdrawal from the Sudeten-areas in general, without any special focus on the railways, was analysed by the economic historians Jaromír Balcar and Jaroslav Kučera in their work which focused on Czech-German economic relations (Balcar and Kučera 2013). All of the aforementioned studies are recommended reading for the further understanding of the analysed topic.

### **Establishing the new border**

The consequences for the Czechoslovak railway network as a result of the Munich Agreement can be expressed in numbers. The area that the Germans annexed covered 28,800 km<sup>2</sup> with a railway network covering 3,525 km. This was equivalent to 26% of the entire track system or, to make it even clearer, the length of the entire track network of the

whole Slovakia at that time. To operate in the withdrawal areas, the Czechoslovak railway company ČSD was forced to provide 33,000 freight wagons, almost 900 locomotives and more than 2,000 wagons for passenger transport (Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, Section IV).

Taking over the withdrawal area was not completely without problems. Many Sudeten-Germans did everything to make the situation for the Czechoslovak side as hard as possible. For example, at the station Vroutek (north of Pilsen), a Sudeten-German station worker, Mattusch, hailed the last train to Czechoslovakia, which his former colleagues were leaving the station on, with the Nazi salute (Sýkora 2003). At the same time, many Czechoslovak employees committed small isolated cases of sabotage to equipment, wagons and locomotives before leaving their former work positions. Unfortunately, although their wrath and frustration were easy to understand, their sabotage served German negotiators well. They were able to argue that Czechoslovakia had not kept to its side of the agreement and could therefore not expect any good will from the German side in return (Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, Section VI). However, within this context it must be mentioned that even many Sudeten-German employees preferred to move to the rest of Czechoslovakia rather than stay and become citizens of the Third Reich. The main reason was either their Jewish origin or their leftist political orientation (Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, Section VI).

The situation became more complicated by the behaviour of the German army, the *Wehrmacht*, whose soldiers persisted in occupying places that had been agreed would stay on the Czechoslovak side of the new border. Attempts to convince the soldiers to leave these places were in general not successful. Since the Czechoslovak army was, according to the Munich Agreement, not allowed to resist, these places remained on the German side (Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, Section VI).

The new border was definitively agreed upon on 10<sup>th</sup> October 1938. On the following day, negotiations began in Berlin on establishing the flow of railway traffic under the new circumstances. It took more than two weeks to hammer out a final agreement, which was signed on 27<sup>th</sup> October. However, even within the first days of October 1938 several attempts had been made to re-establish the flow of traffic over the new border. Surprisingly, the initiatives often came from the German staff. Unfortunately, the local headquarters of the *Wehrmacht* did not allow any of these attempts to succeed and traffic came to a halt for almost the whole month.

The result of the Berlin negotiations was a strongly reduced passenger railway service. Services were re-established on only the 13 most important railway links. The number of border checkpoints was reduced and the number of passenger services on most of these routes limited to 2-3 trains a day. It should be noted that as late as September 1938 there were still 13 local and 6 long distance train services every day on these routes. The agreement on passenger services was in stark contrast to that for freight services. The agreement simply defined that the number could change without restrictions and was

subject to actual demand. Germany was in need of continuous and flexible deliveries of various Czechoslovak products in order to fulfil its own four year economic plans (Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, Section IV).

On 21 railway links, most of them only of local importance, traffic was not re-established at all. The agreement also defined the conditions for the use of the network for extraterritorial traffic, whereby both countries could use sections of the railway network located on the other state's area. The Germans in particular used these sections to start moving army units and heavy weapons, which awoke mixed feelings and nervousness in the Czechoslovak population (National Archive of Czech Republic, Collection of Press Department of the Ministry of Railways). According to the agreement, Czechoslovak tickets in the Sudeten-area could continue to be used. The reason was simple – the German railway company DRB (for a detailed description of the development of the company's name, see Jakubec 1991) did not have enough of the printed tickets for this area. Even the Czechoslovak operating instructions remained valid.

Despite the agreement, traffic was not re-established as it should have been. The *Wehrmacht* continued to refuse to let the railways operate freely. In several cases, passenger trains were stopped at gunpoint by soldiers armed with machine-guns. It must have been a terrifying experience for those civilian passengers sitting behind the windows looking out (National Archive of Czech Republic, Collection of Press Department of the Ministry of Railways).

It is also important to note that the new border stations often did not have sufficient capacity to handle the new conditions: "The station in Mělník has become one of the largest border stations. There is a toll-house which clears hundreds of wagons every day. Mělník station is too small to handle such a high volume of traffic. Those who suffer the most from this are the people from the village of Blaty that have to cross the railway directly beside the station. Because of the level of railway traffic, the gates are closed almost non-stop. It sometimes takes half an hour until the railway crossing is free to cross again." (National Archive of Czech Republic, Collection of the Press Department of the Ministry of Railways).

It was not only the population living in the neighbourhood who suffered from these new conditions. Working under these provisory conditions was not easy for the staff either, as another article describes: "A little bit further up, there's an old, decommissioned 3<sup>rd</sup> class wagon with icicles hanging from its roof. On the one side there is a shield with the inscription 'Toll-house Zlatá Koruna ČSD'. As we can see, the claims of our toll-officers of the need to quickly build a border station are not unjustified" (National Archive of Czech Republic, Collection of the Press Department of the Ministry of Railways). In the beginning, journalists showed quite a high level of understanding. After a month, when the situation had still not improved, they started to become more critical: "The causes of the problems in the flow of traffic are indeed not the fault of the Czechoslovak Railways, but still, the company should try to do more to improve the situation." (National Archive of Czech Republic, Collection of the Press Department of the Ministry of Railways)

## **Continuing traffic problems**

After the situation stabilised, the Czechoslovak mobilisation schedule was cancelled and a “normal” civilian schedule was employed. The changed circumstances brought with it new complications for passengers along the actual border. Many trains were now classified as being simultaneously domestic and international with the trains effectively having to be divided into four parts: special wagons for passengers travelling within Czechoslovakia, special wagons for passengers travelling within Germany, special wagons for passengers travelling from Czechoslovakia to Germany and special wagons for passengers travelling from Germany to Czechoslovakia. It is clear, that such a complicated system was not welcomed by the passengers. Many newspapers published sharply critical articles, asking rhetorical questions like “How will an old grandmother understand this?” (National Archive of Czech Republic, Collection of the Press Department of the Ministry of Railways). It was also not easy for passengers to understand that some (usually the international) wagons were almost empty during the journey, whilst others (usually the domestic ones) were overcrowded.

These problems were not only limited to the Czechoslovak side. In the Sudeten withdrawal area DRB was responsible for operating the railway network. As previously mentioned, the Czechoslovak operating instructions, signal systems, interlocking plants, etc. remained valid. Unfortunately for DRB, they were faced with the problem of having an insufficient number of employees familiar with the milieu. As a result, small accidents happened which complicated the situation even more. Surprisingly, the company that received the most criticism was the Czechoslovak ČSD, which was seen to be incapable of handling the impact of the accidents. In contrast, the employees of DRB who caused the accidents were applauded for their willingness to solve the problems as soon as possible (National Archive of Czech Republic, Collection of the Press Department of the Ministry of Railways).

In the middle of December, DRB asked ČSD for help with personnel. The newspapers commented by saying “This is the best advert for our Czech railway staff.” (National Archive of Czech Republic, Collection of the Press Department of the Ministry of Railways). It is hardly a surprise that railway employees were unwilling to return to their former work places where they had had many bad experiences. DRB applied for approximately 2000 workers, but got only about 300 – it was simply impossible to convince more people to return (National Archive of Czech Republic, Collection of the Press Department of the Ministry of Railways).

Nevertheless, the situation slowly stabilised. On the 10<sup>th</sup> December 1938, German fees became valid in the Sudeten-area. DRB had managed to create a sufficient supply of tickets for the new railway stations. During December 1938 and January 1939, new international train services began to operate, among them the slightly exotic route Berlin – Prague – Istanbul.

## **Freight traffic**

As mentioned above, the Berlin agreement set out the conditions for freight traffic so that Germany could import practically everything it needed from Czechoslovakia. Unfortunately, it did not work as easily in the opposite direction. Through the withdrawal from the Sudeten-area, Czechoslovakia lost 97% of its deposits of lignite. The import of lignite from Germany was influenced by all the problems DRB was facing in the Sudeten-area. Shortly before the beginning of winter, the import of this necessary raw material fell to only 40 wagons per day. At this point ČSD offered to help by providing staff familiar with the conditions in the areas where lignite was exploited. DRB refused to accept the offer, probably on political grounds according to an order from Berlin (National Archive of Czech Republic, Collection of the Press Department of the Ministry of Railways). The situation with regards to lignite deliveries became so bad that Czechoslovak business leaders seriously began to consider suggestions to import lignite from other countries, even from as far away as the United Kingdom (Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, Section IV). It wasn't until February that the situation stabilised, but by that time the winter had almost past and the demand for lignite did not reach the peaks it had in the previous months.

The problematic situation with sending freight into the withdrawal areas was misused by several private companies that began to offer and provide transportation over the new border, of course for much higher prices than ČSD (Jakubec 1991). This was loudly criticised in the newspapers, but no one was ever indicted for this amoral behaviour (National Archive of Czech Republic, Collection of the Press Department of the Ministry of Railways).

## **Last days before the occupation**

On 14<sup>th</sup> February 1939, just before the occupation of the residual part of Czechoslovakia, DRB opened an information office in Prague in order to better inform tourists and travellers about travel conditions, tariffs, connections, etc. In addition, literally a few hours before the occupation began on the 13<sup>th</sup> March 1939 (officially valid from the 15<sup>th</sup> March), the methods for paying for lignite deliveries were changed.

During the occupation itself, rail traffic between Czechoslovakia and Germany was completely halted. When the trains began to run again on the 18<sup>th</sup> March, it was under completely different conditions. In what was symbolic of the importance of railway traffic, the final train that crossed the border before the occupation was carrying Czechoslovak president Emil Hácha from negotiations with Adolf Hitler in Berlin.

## **Conclusion**

When drawing conclusions on the question of the relations between Czechs, respectively Czechoslovakians and Germans, it is necessary to differentiate between those Germans from the Sudeten-area and those Germans from Germany, Reichsdeutsche. Whilst the first

group actively sought to harm their former colleagues and countrymen as much as possible, Reichsdeutsche railway employees wanted to keep the flow of rail traffic moving and generally did not follow the official aggressive politics against Czechoslovakia. However, for objectivity's sake it must be said that not all Sudeten Germans were motivated by hate and other negative feelings against Czechs and Czechoslovakia; their attitudes were also motivated by their desire to bring to Germany as many advantages as possible, which was in turn considered to be an act of enmity by those on the Czech side. Reichsdeutsche had no reason to hate Czechoslovakia and most of all wanted to be proud of their work. However, in some cases, when the German employees were not familiar with the milieu, like in the lignite mining areas, the traffic nonetheless almost totally collapsed.

With regards to Czechoslovakian newspapers and their style of reporting, it can be said that there was an obvious tendency to describe and present Germany as an example worth following. This was of course not the case at the time immediately after the Munich Agreement was signed. However, later on, during autumn 1938, this tendency became stronger and stronger. This was particularly evident in articles describing the small accidents in the withdrawal areas or on the border crossings. It is clear that whilst the Czechoslovak authorities were criticised for their incompetency, their German counterparts were being praised for their efficiency. Even in situations where Germany was criticised as well, as was the case with the insufficient deliveries of lignite, the criticism of the Czechoslovakian side was more aggressive and could in many cases actually be described as German-friendly. This is all the more interesting and surprising because the Czechoslovak Second Republic was characterized by a spirit of attempting to establish a good and friendly relationship with Germany. Railway oriented articles from this time are not an exception.

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