

'The trains of misery' from Le Monde (30 October 1945)


Caption: On 30 October 1945, the French daily newspaper Le Monde describes the scenes of desolation at German railway stations that have been partly destroyed by the Allied bombings.

Source: Le Monde. dir. de publ. Beuve-Méry, Hubert. 30.10.1945, n° 270. Paris: Le Monde. "Les trains de la misère", auteur:Jacques, Anne , p. 4.

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The trains of misery

A war marked by mass exodus and deportation must inevitably end in a wide-scale movement of people returning home and being repatriated.

The time has finally come when the exiled can think of returning home. The whole of Europe is talking about convoys and transport; at present, the journey across Germany provides a strange spectacle.

The scene is a German railway station, the crumbling remains of modern or Gothic buildings with isolated walls pointing skyward, heaps of rubble and ironwork, twisted rails, a narrow wooden walkway which replaces the bridge that has collapsed into the river ...

Only the names of the stations change. In the eyes of the traveller, however, the anonymous ruins, caused by fire, destruction or punishment, go on forever. Only here, the disaster seems more recent than elsewhere. In the fog of a dull dawn and the squalor of a mining area, men, women and children can be seen on the ground, on roofs, silently picking up stones and passing them from one to another. Even so, the bombing seems to have been but yesterday.

On the right, a train that caught fire still clutters up what used to be the platform of a station with its burned out carriages; further on, the shattered panes of a glass roof still litter the tracks. Electric cables lie in tangled heaps, and only torches light up the night, except for those wood fires that the numerous refugees who live in this hellish place keep burning in makeshift hearths.

Yes, I did say live, because the trains full of German civilians remain in the stations for 10, 12, 24 hours sometimes.

It is really sad to see these conquered people, the air full of silence and resentment, against a backdrop of ruined towns, a sight similar only to that of France during those few weeks in June 1940.

I do not believe that we have come across one passenger train during this long journey across Germany. Civilians are allowed only on goods trains, sitting on top of wagons already loaded with goods. There are blackened heaps of coal covered in shivering bodies, frozen stiff in the damp night air, barely awakening in the early morning fog. There are also wagons full of beams between which lie sleeping the bodies of women and children, dressed in men's trousers, hardly distinguishable from their fellow travellers, draped in the grey or green uniforms of the 'demobilised' Wehrmacht!

But the Germans are not the only ones in Germany.

Around and about pass all that a world war can leave behind in the way of occupying troops and civilians in exile.

Priority naturally is given to the American trains: sealed coaches full of 'our boys', indifferent and at ease.

Priority is also given to the Russian trains, full of soldiers of the Red Army, covered in canvas awnings, adorned with flags, slogans and the inevitable portraits of Stalin and Molotov. Women in flat caps sing and smoke with the men and wave. Or else they play cards, stretched out in the straw.

Next come the foreign trains. So that they may be recognised, they fly their own flags, like ships at sea. They meet, greet each other and part.

As for the route, it is engraved on everyone's heart. After having dreamt of it steadfastly for so long with such tenacity, it is time to go home, to one's own country.

During the course of a single day, one meets Bulgarians, Poles, and Belgians. And more hateful, more desperate than the others are those still being deported: the Germans being evacuated from the Sudetenland.

Marshalling yards for human merchandise ... All the peoples of Europe, the conquered, the weak and the strong, queue up in front of each bridge (what fragile wooden bridges!), be it in order of good luck or honesty.

It is difficult not to ponder the prospects for a man — or the well-being of the sick — caught up in the tangled web of people moving from one place to another, coping for months with a return journey entirely dependent on the mood of a stationmaster or the skill of a diplomat.

Thus, in a siding, a long train waits. Women in full skirts climb down and sadly comb their long hair and tie it up with copper pins. The train bears the marks of its past: 'Deportati romani' and then, in chalk, its route: 'Dachau — Berlin — Praha — Bucuresti'.

But Bucharest is far away, and the bodies stretched out on the straw are like skeletons ...

We pass by wagons with animals fighting, others full of German prisoners, their bars at head height just showing lips and weary eyes or simply their dirty hands. Sometimes a peaceful scene goes by, such as this wagon which is like a stable with chickens, some cows, a woman milking and two children with red hair, drinking milk.

Relationships form from platform to platform, as trains meet. Conversations can very easily start up because we are travelling at five kilometres an hour. We meet another hospital train.

— 'Red Cross,' we shout. 'Where have you come from?'
— 'From Paris. Going to Warsaw. And you?'
— 'Swiss. From Bern. Going to Prague.'

Each country organises and equips a convoy and sets out to the rescue of its people, living off its own provisions, fearing bandits and scroungers at the stations. Every mishap is to be feared, the worst of which — and the most frequent — is to have one's engine stolen.

The wagons themselves are quite higgledy piggledy. The carriages coupled together but which do not belong together are still recognisable. There are the words: Belgique — Deutsche Reichsbahn — SNCF (accompanied by the useful instruction: 'Must not leave France') and, over all this, in fresh white paint, the sign of requisition, mark of the victor: Allied Forces.

It is not true that an excess of fatigue or shared misery makes these Europeans forget their friendships or grievances. On the contrary, there is more than ever a need to recognise one's allies. Here, the word compatriot takes on its real meaning. From train to train, from platform to platform, from siding to siding, signs of friendship or hateful glances are exchanged. The Czechs remember Munich, the Poles Warsaw ...

However, the Red Cross once again takes on its charitable role. What a blessing it is to meet, on these trails of misery, in these derelict stations, a hospital train: doctors — nurses — medication!

Each time we stop, the sick and wounded rush to the doors of our carriages, 'French? Can we come up?' they shout in every language. It is not necessary to understand, we just say yes.

Everywhere there are wounds still weeping, received on the battlefields that have fallen silent. It seems that honour has died with the end of the war.

In a quarter of an hour, we deal with an inflammation that knows no boundaries and open for the tenth time an abscess on the heel, a problem for children everywhere who run barefoot on the railway tracks.

A woman shows us her sick child. 'It's serious,' says the officer. 'You must see a doctor as soon as you reach home.' But a makeshift interpreter translates the answer: the woman is nowhere near home yet, and

there are no doctors in her country ...

The Russian soldiers that we treated display their medals, their pride and joy, heavy, round, silver or bronze medals hanging from sky blue ribbons: Finland — Stalingrad; and Polish soldiers, before kissing our hands, assemble for a princely salute, clicking their bare heels together. People still run behind the convoy as it moves off. Prosze, prosze, aspirin? Aspirin, it is a truly wonderful gift.

Yet as we leave the station, we see a less sad sight. An Italian train is waiting here, full of Ruritanian uniforms, flags and wilted flowers, banners and big smiles. (The Italian soldiers are everyone's friends!)

As a goodbye gesture, one of them shouts out, in a mixture of languages and idioms, the unnecessary explanation for this whole to-do, expressing the one and only wish of an exhausted population: 'Fertig guerra. At home!'

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