

The Great Train Race. Railways and the Franco-German Rivalry, 1815–1914. *By Allan Mitchell*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2000. xv + 328 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, maps, tables. Cloth, \$69.95. ISBN 1-571-8166-4.

Reviewed by Boris Barth

Railway construction in the nineteenth century was not only the necessary condition for industrialization in Europe; it also facilitated the administrative and military aspects of nation-building. From the beginning, three models of national railway systems developed in Europe: first, the British, with unfettered private enterprise; second, the Belgians, with a unified and strictly controlled state network; and third, the German and French mixed system, which combined private and public interests. Mitchell's analysis of the mixed system in France and Germany is promising, because the railways that were built during the first period of the European industrial revolution in both nations are comparable, despite their emergence from completely different traditions: on the one hand, the long-standing etatist tradition of France; on the other, the conflicts of center and periphery before the German nation-state, with its complex structure, was formed in 1871. Mitchell concentrates on four levels of research: local, representing the details of a particular public or private railway concern; regional, entailing the interaction and conflicts of individual railway enterprises; national, involving the concept of center and periphery and conflicts between state bureaucracy and administrative organization, military interest, and economic competition; and, finally, international, charting the commercial and military competition between the two national railway systems.

Mitchell analyzes in detail the debates and conflicts in France and Germany between liberals, who were pressing for economic modernization by private initiatives and were thinking in international terms, the unbound particularism especially in some of the southern German states before 1870, and the numerous interventions by the different military institutions, which immediately discovered the enormous advantages of new rail connections. Railways offset Germany's three commercial handicaps in the post-Napoleonic era. First, many of the small southern state boundaries had been breached during the Napoleonic wars; second, the regional networks were only weakly linked; and

third, there were insufficient outlets for selling goods (p. 55). However, most of the problems that cropped up in railway projects before 1870 were solved by private enterprises.

In centralist France, the government became more actively involved, establishing a national scheme of administration before railway networks were created. Thus, although the German states built their tracks more rapidly, they did not have the uniform standards that prevailed in France. The scene changed after the German victory of 1871 in “the first and only major railway war of nineteenth-century Europe,” which taught one lesson: “in future warfare, rapid transit would be decisive” (pp. 81ff.).

In France, after 1871, the state intensified its supervisory power, but the basis of the railway industry remained the private company. In Germany, and especially in Prussia, however, the private railroad sector was nearly eliminated. By 1890 France and Germany were taking divergent paths to nation-building, a development that had far-reaching consequences for labor conditions, technical innovation, internal cost structure, and rail construction. Overturning the predictions of contemporary liberal theory, and spurred by the country’s enormous economic takeoff, the German railroads became both denser and more profitable than the French system. Before 1914, the more industrialized German economy claimed the advantage.

Mitchell relies on unpublished, previously unexamined French and German sources. His book is an important one that will be of interest not only to economic and business historians but also to the general reader. His analysis, written in a clear and precise style, reveals a wide economic, military, and political perspective and a good grasp of the comparative international situation. My one criticism is that he does not pay enough attention to the fact that there was also close international cooperation before 1870, especially in financing the railways. German and French banks sold the same railway loans and shares and financed common projects abroad, and French private capital indirectly helped to launch the period of German economic prosperity.

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