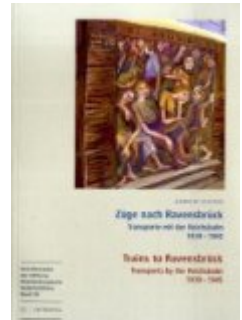


Karolin Steinke. *Züge nach Ravensbrück: Transporte mit der Reichsbahn 1939-1945: Begleitband zur Ausstellung in der Mahn- und Gedenkstätte Ravensbrück.* With English translations by Sujata Banerjee. Berlin: Metropol-Verl., 2009. 143 pp. EUR 19.00, paper, ISBN 978-3-940938-27-5.



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Karolin Steinke's *Züge nach Ravensbrück: Transporte mit der Reichsbahn 1939-1945* is not a monograph. It is a museum catalogue designed to accompany the open-air exhibit at the *Mahn- und Gedenkstätte* at Ravensbrück, a former National Socialist concentration camp. The book was produced in connection with the opening of a display centered on a rebuilt boxcar similar to those used by the German National Railway (Deutsche Reichsbahn) to bring prisoners to this camp and many others throughout Europe during World War II. The exhibit was created to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of the camp by the Red Army on April 15, 1945. The book offers no thesis. However, it is well researched, offering a good impression of the experiences of those forced to travel by rail to and from the camp between 1939 and 1945. It is heavily illustrated with photographs as well as survivors' drawings and paintings. It also includes a map produced specifically for the book and a map copied from a contemporary timetable (*Kursbuch*). Together, they permit the reader to

place the camp in geographical and railway perspective. The text consists of explanations of the camp's significance and the methods used by the Reichsbahn to move people and freight to and from it. The book also features firsthand accounts by former prisoners, some written during the war, some more recently.

Because the book is intended to serve an international audience, all of the text, including photo captions, is presented in both German and English. Generally, the translation flows well. Surprisingly, not all of the material is presented in both languages, particularly in the photo captions. In some cases, the English versions provide a bit more detail than the corresponding German renderings. Some terms are mistranslated. The most difficult is the term *Reichsbahn*. Translated literally into English, it would read "Imperial Railway." The translators most often render it in English as "State Railway," but not always. Since the provincial *Königlich Bayerische Staats-Eisenbahnen* (Royal Bavarian State Railways) and the *Preußische Staatsbahn* (Prussian State Railway) both used

the word *Staat* in their names, it is difficult to see how *Reich* could be translated to have the same meaning for the national government. Since the Reichsbahn was created in the Weimar Republic (not empire) in 1920, and its name was not changed when the Third Reich (Empire) was formed, "national" seems to be a reasonable compromise that can cover both cases. The term "national" also evokes the mystical aspects of the German collective political entity more effectively than "imperial." Additionally, some railway technical terms could have been rendered a bit more accurately. The covered freight cars used to move prisoners and freight to the camp are called in the German text *bedeckter Güterwagen*. Official sources from the early 1920s onward referred to them as *gedeckter Güterwagen*; hence, their railway short designation *G-Wagen*. In the United States such vehicles are called boxcars. The translators render *Rüben* as "turnip." In this context, "sugar beet" would have been more appropriate. The narrative provides information on how some prisoners were brought to the camp in early 1945 in *offenen Güterwagen*, called *O-Wagen* by the Reichsbahn and "gondolas" in American railroad parlance. The Reichsbahn used thousands of these cars each fall and early winter to rush the beet harvest to refineries for conversion to sugar. None of these matters is crucial. Those seeking the last bit of accuracy might find them interesting.

Ravensbrück is located about eighty kilometers north of Berlin. Construction of the camp began in November 1938. The first prisoners arrived in May 1939.[1] The camp was intended to house women, though some men were brought there as well, beginning in 1941. Prisoners performed forced labor. In 1944, a gas chamber was installed to remove the necessity of sending prisoners elsewhere for execution. Medical experiments were conducted there beginning in 1942. Steinke reports that a total of 123,000 were incarcerated in the camp. About 15 percent were Jews.[2] Most prisoners came from the Soviet Union and Poland. The camp's location was chosen specifically be-

cause of the nearby rail connection. Just to the west of the camp was the town of Fürstenberg (Havel), then called Fürstenberg (Mecklenburg), which was situated on the two-track section of the Reichsbahn's main line between Berlin and Stralsund. Service on the line began as far north as Neubrandenburg in 1877 and Stralsund on the Baltic coast in 1878. The Reichsbahn ranked the station at Fürstenberg in the second of its four classes, meaning that it was quite substantial. The photograph of the station reproduced in the book confirms this. The station and its line were subordinate to the Reichsbahndirektion Stettin (National Railway Directorate Stettin), the Reichsbahn's regional operating unit. The station is still served today by Deutsche Bahn, with hourly trains in both directions. The camp itself was located on a secondary or branch line (*Nebenbahn*) that ran eastward from Fürstenberg to Templin. In 1942, the SS constructed an unstaffed station without a building (*Haltestelle*), a flag stop in American terms, on this branch line near the camp to facilitate unloading prisoners. This station was listed in public timetables, though tickets for it were not available and trains stopped only on demand. An industrial track or spur (*Anschlußbahngleis*) led from this branch line to a synthetic fiber plant located just south of the concentration camp. Some prisoners were forced to work in this factory.

The authors effectively set the railway service to Ravensbrück and Fürstenberg in the overall context of Reichsbahn operations. They honestly admit that they do not know the dates of either the first or the last trains that served the camp. Nor have they been able to determine the total number of people transported to and from the camp by rail. None of this detracts in the least from their account. They discuss the Reichsbahn's offer of group discounts for large numbers of people brought to the camp in special trains. This was the organization's normal practice. The railway's accounting records suggest that it made little or no profit on such traffic. The accounts reproduced by Steinke mention frequent and long delays in

the train movements to the camp. For most of the war, they were caused by the low priority of prisoner transports. Higher priority trains for the Wehrmacht and armaments industry were allowed to run first. Accounts also mention indirect routings, which had the same causes. Toward the end of the war, delays were caused by the destruction of rail facilities and disruption of operational control due to Allied air attacks. The account of the trip of former prisoners to Denmark in April 1945 also mentions a lack of coal for the train's locomotive. This, too, was the result of British and American bombing of the railways.

Steinke divides the transportation history of the camp into four phases. The first covered May 1939 to December 1942. During this time, trains bearing women from all over Europe arrived at the camp. Passenger cars and special prisoner cars were used. The second period encompassed 1943. Now, women came mainly from the east. The third phase covered 1944. Steinke estimates that 70,500 people were brought to the camp in this year alone, causing hygienic conditions to deteriorate markedly. Again, trains came mostly from occupied areas. At the end of the year, trains began to arrive from other camps, reflecting the closure of those facilities in the face of the advance of the Soviets. Finally, from January to April 1945, most trains came from other camps such as Auschwitz as they were closed.

The book offers an enlightening discussion of the equipment used by the Reichsbahn to bring prisoners to the camp. This matter has been the cause of much misunderstanding since the war. Steinke demonstrates that the Reichsbahn used conventional third-class passenger cars, analogous to second-class cars today, special prisoner cars, and boxcars for this task. The mention of the prisoner cars, of which the Reichsbahn only had sixty-six, is noteworthy. These cars moved according to a published schedule, with two daily stops, one in each direction, at Fürstenberg. Historical illustrations of them are included. The book also

delivers new information concerning the movement of prisoners using ore hoppers and flat cars from the Reichswerke Hermann Göring in 1945. These descriptions provide an instructive contrast to the impressions of the victims. Virtually all accounts that we have from prisoners, including those presented in this book, describe the boxcars used as cattle cars (*Viehwaggons*). One calls an open car a cattle car. The Reichsbahn owned a limited number of cars designed specifically to move cattle. They were included in the V category, meaning *Verschlagwagen*, translated literally as "shed" or "plank cars." The *V-Wagen* were characterized by sides made of planks that formed slits that permitted air to reach the animals inside. They looked substantially different from conventional boxcars, which had solid walls, in some cases with openings that could be covered by lockable flaps. Peacetime operating practice was to move large animals such as cattle in unit trains (trains composed of a single type of car bearing one type of freight that ran between two stations with reduced transit times). Animals were put in enclosed cars in the winter and occasionally in open cars in the summer. In 1929, less than 1 percent of Reichsbahn traffic consisted of moving animals.[3] On June 30, 1942, the Reichsbahn owned 4,895 *Verschlagwagen* compared to 262,559 boxcars (*G-Wagen*).[4] No documentary evidence survives to suggest that the Reichsbahn ever used *Verschlagwagen* to move victims of Nazi persecution.[5] The misidentification of cars by the victims was most likely caused by two factors. First, most had no knowledge of railway equipment. Second, and more importantly, they were suffering from shock, disorientation, and feelings of victimization at being taken prisoner and mistreated. They projected their feelings on to what they saw.[6]

Another useful service provided by this small book is to highlight the many different types of trains run by the Reichsbahn to support Nazi oppression. The book clearly shows that prisoners were frequently moved in special prisoner cars or

in regular passenger cars attached to the rear of scheduled passenger trains used by the general public. Moreover, prisoners were frequently sent by rail to other camps to work or to be killed. Many freight trains were also run to the camp to supply it with necessities and to bring booty seized in the east or confiscated from Jews in the west. Prisoners were occupied with sorting and refurbishing this material.

Virtually all of the movements of prisoners to Fürstenberg and Ravensbrück were conducted in the open. Prisoners were initially unloaded at Fürstenberg station and marched eastward across the northern edge of the town to the camp. Later, cars with prisoners were left at the freight ramp so the prisoners could be marched through the town to the camp. Finally, prisoners were unloaded at the flag stop near Ravensbrück. Some also boarded there to travel to work at nearby factories. The people of Fürstenberg saw all of this. Steinke includes an account of a young girl who was pulled back from a window in her home and scolded for looking at a column of prisoners. Others saw prisoners being unloaded at the freight ramp. The mayor's son saw prisoners boarding at the Ravensbrück flag stop. People recall averting their eyes from the prisoners as they passed in the streets. They adjusted to the situation.

Finally, the book includes a rich selection of prisoner accounts of trips to and from Ravensbrück. They document the bad conditions during their journeys, conditions that deteriorated as the war neared its conclusion. They recount the violence of the train guards and the female camp guards. They also describe the feelings of the former prisoners as they eagerly took trains to freedom. The latter include two women released in March 1943, passengers on the train to Denmark organized by Count Folke Bernadotte in April 1945, and accounts by women returning to France after the German collapse in May 1945.

Karolin Steinke's short book provides a good impression of the movement of people to and

from Ravensbrück as a result of Nazi persecution. It helps clear up misconceptions about the types of cars used by the Reichsbahn during the Holocaust. It highlights the various types of trains used to implement the racial restructuring of Europe by the Hitler regime. It underscores yet again that the German people witnessed the crimes that their government committed in their name. It also demonstrates that technology, in this case the railway, has no ideological content.[7] The same railway that brought victims to Ravensbrück also brought many of the survivors home.

Notes

[1]. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *Historical Atlas of the Holocaust* (New York: Macmillan, 1996), 153-55.

[2]. Ibid., 156.

[3]. For illustrations of *Verschlagwagen* see Hans Baumann, *Deutsches Verkehrsbuch* (Berlin: Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft, 1931), 243; and H. Behrends, W. Hensel, and G. Wiedau, *Güterwagen-Archiv 1* (Berlin: Transpress, 1989), 165. For traffic patterns and handling methods see Baumann, *Deutsches Verkehrsbuch*, 215-217, 262-263.

[4]. "Übersicht über den Bestand an vollspurierten Lokomotiven aller Art, Güterwagen und Kesselwagen der Deutschen Reichsbahn sowie Privatkesselwagen, soweit sie in den Wagenpark der Deutschen Reichsbahn eingestellt sind, seit dem Jahre 1933," 30 Füs 136, Nur für den Dienstgebrauch, 10. August 1942, Bundesarchiv R005/2352. Note that about three-quarters of the *V-Wagen* were designed to carry small animals such as poultry.

[5]. The surviving *Fahrplananordnungen* mention *G-Wagen*. See, for example, Generaldirektion der Ostbahn, "Fahrplananordnung Nr. 594," 33 H Bfp 16 Bfsv, Nur für den Dienstgebrauch, Krakau, 21. September 1942, p. 2, Bundesarchiv NS 4 Anh. 9. This document is reproduced in Raul Hilberg, *Sonderzüge nach Auschwitz* (Mainz: Dumjahn, 1981), 201-202, appendix 41. In

the Hilberg book see additional examples in appendices 31, 32, 33, 40, 42, and 53.

[6]. On this phenomenon see Simone Gigliotti, "'Cattle Car Complexes': A Correspondence with Historical Captivity and Post-Holocaust Witnesses," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 30 (Fall 2006): 256-277.

[7]. For the argument that technology is ideologically loaded see Mike Cooley, "The Myth of the Moral Neutrality of Technology," *AI & Society* 9 (March 1995): 10-17; Eric Katz, "On the Neutrality of Technology: The Holocaust Death Camps as a Counter-Example," *Journal of Genocide Research* 7 (September 2005): 409-431; Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964); Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963); Langdon Winner, *Autonomous Technology: Technics Out-of-Control as a Theme of Political Thought* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977); Langdon Winner, *The Whale and the Reactor: A Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

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