

**Conflict Transport: Holocaust Histories, Routes and Witnesses**

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## **“Conflict Transport: Holocaust Histories, Routes, and Witnesses”**

We live in a world on the move. When has it not been so? The forced movement of civilian populations during war and conflict, and the anticipated departure of many to escape persecution, has principally, though not exclusively in the modern industrial age, been carried by the railways. Vehicles of promise and peril, transnational ambition and misguided colonisation, the transport of civilians by rail is also deeply implicated in genocidal projects globally. These forms of movement have included practices often associated with Nazi-engineered displacement during the Holocaust (1933 – 1945) such as the use of state and co-opted transnational railway networks, trains, and stations and/or other vehicles as part of multi-leg journeys such as trucks, jeeps, and carts, and archipelagic and maritime routes using passenger liners, fishing boats and ferries. The scale and severity of ethnic cleansing and expulsions across all regions of Europe, Asia, and the former Soviet Union during the interwar, Second World War, and post-war periods is difficult to conceive without the critical role of railways, and workers, staffing, and bureaucrats.

Before then, railways had carried European imperial expansion across Africa during the nineteenth century, and evidenced its failure, such as in the Cape to Cairo railroad project. More traumatically, seemingly unending railroad caravans contributed emblematic images of the partition of India in 1947. Yet the absence of extensive railway

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3 networks and engineering infrastructure was little impediment to forced displacement  
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6 and relocations of civilian enemies, often as a preface to killing in Armenia, Bosnia,  
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9 Rwanda, and Cambodia. The methods here varied due to the location of victims (in cities  
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11 and rural areas), topographical diversity, and distances covered. Oftentimes, the  
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14 perpetrators in these genocides co-opted buses and trucks, and resorted to historically  
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17 familiar and punishing forced marches of victims to places of extended incarceration and  
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20 persecution. They sought out mountainous landscapes, valleys, ravines, and deserts to  
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22 enact genocidal violence in situ, and in designated destinations. The evidence of these  
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25 killings was buried in the earth and rivers for decades, a disappearance that remains the  
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28 subject of ongoing forensic investigations, particularly in Bosnia and Poland.

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30 These chilling but by no means isolated examples of forced movement point to an  
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33 ageless practice of displacement,<sup>1</sup> overland or maritime, of civilians so designated as  
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36 enemies by usually male leaders determined to create mono-ethnic, religious, or political  
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39 states. These examples in twentieth-century Europe, Asia, and Africa also reveal the lack  
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42 of sustained scholarly attention to the notion of a witness-centred "conflict transport" (its  
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45 conceptualisation, lived experience, transnational geographies, testimony, and reportage).

46 The notion of conflict transport incubated in this special issue speaks to  
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49 establishing the cartography and historical geographies of railway and multi-vehicular  
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55 <sup>1</sup> These examples are drawn mainly from the twentieth century, but for an ancient world insight, see Lene  
56 Rubinstein, "Immigration and Refugee Crises in Fourth Century Greece: An Athenian Perspective," *The*  
57 *European Legacy* 23, 2018 (1-2):5-24.  
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3 network operations, and their impacts on the separation, estrangement, and local  
4  
5 internment of targeted civilians. Conflict transport additionally speaks to the labour of the  
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7 railways, their engineering and management infrastructure, local impacts on communities,  
8  
9 and ideologies that shaped private and state-owned rail companies' asset usage during  
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11 conflict or to engender potential conflict. We can also think of the realms of accountability  
12  
13 for co-opting state assets such as railways in the perpetration of genocidal displacement  
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15 of people and goods.  
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22 How do courts prosecute the agencies, individuals, and practices of conflict  
23  
24 transport? How do societies reconcile local and global histories of the political co-option  
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26 of vehicular assets to advance destructive agendas with their more normative present-  
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28 day use and appeal, as mobility machines and assets of sustainability to advance green  
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30 agendas and climate-responsive futures? In some of the historical examples cited, we have  
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32 cases of demonstrated accountability for involvement in conflict transport. The 1961  
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34 Jerusalem trial of Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi bureaucrat widely seen as largely responsible  
35  
36 for coordinating the deportations of three million Jews to their deaths in concentration  
37  
38 and extermination camps between 1941 and 1944 was the first of many accountability  
39  
40 actions for Nazi and collaborationist bureaucrats, some of them less successful, such as  
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42 the failed investigations of Albert Ganzenmueller, the State Secretary of the Reich  
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3 Transport Ministry, who, like Eichmann, was involved in European-wide deportations of  
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6 Jews.<sup>2</sup>  
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9 The *Deutsche Reichsbahn* was, like other European railways during the Second  
10  
11 World War, involved in the transport of goods, artworks, and looted items, as were  
12  
13 prominent shipping lines. Many of the successor organisations of wartime railways,  
14  
15 including the *Deutsche Bahn* (DB) the *Nederlandse Spoorwegen* (NS), and the *Société*  
16  
17 *nationale des chemins de fer français* (SNCF), have commissioned overdue investigations  
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19 of the wartime practices of their predecessor organisations. Sometimes these  
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21 commissions resulted after Holocaust survivors, including Salo Muller in the Netherlands,  
22  
23 waged valiant campaigns about the inhumane practices of deportation. A few of these  
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25 investigations had transnational implications, as the SNCF was compelled to offer  
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27 compensation to Holocaust victims to secure lucrative rail contracts in the United States.  
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35 That this special issue focuses mainly on wartime deportations of Holocaust victims  
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37 does not intentionally marginalise the fate of items owned by Jewish refugees, and by  
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42 <sup>2</sup> On the topic of Germany and the railways during the period of National Socialism and the Holocaust  
43 (and in multiple countries), see Raul Hilberg, *Sonderzüge nach Auschwitz* (Mainz: Dumjahn, 1981); Alfred C.  
44 Mierzejewski, *The Most Valuable Asset of the Reich: A History of the German National Railway, Volume 2,*  
45 *1933-1945* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Simone Gigliotti, *The Train Journey:*  
46 *Transit, Captivity and Witnessing in the Holocaust* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009); Ludivine Broch,  
47 *Ordinary Workers, Vichy, and the Holocaust: French Railwaymen and the Second World War* (Cambridge:  
48 Cambridge University Press, 2016), Peter Hayes, Christopher R. Browning, and Raul Hilberg, *German*  
49 *Railroads, Jewish Souls: The Reichsbahn, Bureaucracy, and the Final Solution* (New York: Berghahn Books,  
50 2019); Tanja von Fransecky, *Escapees: The History of Jews Who Fleed Nazi Deportation Trains in France,*  
51 *Belgium and the Netherlands* (New York; Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2019). Translated by Benjamin Liebelt.  
52 Originally published in German as *Flucht von Juden aus Deportationszügen in Frankreich, Belgien und die*  
53 *Niederlanden* (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2014); Sarah Federman, *Last Train to Auschwitz: The French*  
54 *National Railways and the Journey to Accountability* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2021),  
55 and Andrew Loew, *Deportiert* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 2024).  
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3 extension, the maritime hinterland economy of "conflict transport". Not dissimilar to the  
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6 circulation of looted artworks and their transport to auction houses, castles and private  
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9 residences across Germany, France, and Switzerland, among other locations, historians at  
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11 the German Maritime Museum in Bremerhaven have designed a "LostLift database,"<sup>3</sup> a  
12  
13 digital search engine to track the trajectories of the material belongings of Nazi-era Jewish  
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16 refugees. This database contains information for roughly 7,000 items that an estimated  
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19 5,000 German-Jewish families had shipped to the ports of Bremen and Hamburg prior to  
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22 their persecution-induced emigration, but which were held in warehouses due to the  
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25 termination of shipping from September 1939. With no prospect of movement, these  
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28 items were confiscated by municipal authorities and ordered to be sold at public auctions  
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31 to the highest bidder.

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33 This database showcases how historians, individuals, civic groups, and research  
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35 institutions have utilised archives and other records to reconstruct the European and  
36  
37 global routes of regime-authorized persecution of Jewish communities and the  
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39 meandering routes of their personal, confiscated belongings, across Europe. That scale of  
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41  
42 forced movement, of juxtaposing personal biography in a shifting cartography of  
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45 transnational genocide, is encapsulated in Yad Vashem's ambitious digital aggregation  
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48 project, "Transports to Extinction", which intends to serve as "an active memorial, helping  
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51 restore these deported men, women and children their individual names, faces and  
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55 <sup>3</sup> Kathrin Kleibl and Susanne Kiel (ed.), *LostLift database*, German Maritime Museum - Leibniz Institute for  
56 Maritime History: <https://lostlift.dsm.museum/en> (Accessed 24 June 2024).  
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3 voices."<sup>4</sup> This individualization is enabled through search trajectories that take users  
4  
5 through to Yad Vashem's hyperlinked archive of photographs, biographies, testimonies,  
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7 films, archive materials and literature – a digital modality that enables interaction with  
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9 landscapes, train transports and routes that activate historical and mnemonic deportation  
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11 trajectories.  
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17 Although this special issue contains no digital iteration that emulates the scale of  
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19 Yad Vashem's project, the documentation of unpredictable trajectories features in the  
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21 articles by Christine Schmidt, Daan de Leeuw, and Jacob Flaws. They are all rooted in  
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23 archival research, prioritise landscape and environment as historical characters in  
24  
25 witness retellings, and practice a sensitivity to spatial experience. They represent  
26  
27 analogue research interventions about the appropriation of railways, their experience,  
28  
29 and networked localities. Each article ventures into the different scales, locations, and  
30  
31 experiences of Jewish and non-Jewish witnessing, and configurations of proximity to  
32  
33 conflict transport and how it was reported in early and recent testimony collections and  
34  
35 eyewitness reports. These articles also invoke the "classical" geography of the Holocaust  
36  
37 and its deportation routes (to and within Eastern Europe) rather than the vastly varied  
38  
39 continental and global routes also engendered by "conflict transport". With the latter, I  
40  
41 encourage future authors to look to and beyond the classical geography of the  
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43 Holocaust and adopt an optic that views conflict transport as multi-perspectival and  
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55 <sup>4</sup> See the entry on Yad Vashem's "Transports to Extinction" website:  
56 <https://www.yadvashem.org/blog/transports-to-extinction-part-ii.html> (Accessed 24 June 2024).  
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3 trajectory enlarging that brings attention to its agents (the Nazi regime) and its  
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5 responses (individuals, and humanitarian assistance via sponsored emigration) and  
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7 understanding the routes and obstructions that capture the continental, and ever-  
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9 shifting scales and global itineraries of Nazi-engineered displacements since the  
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11 regime's inception. Adopting an elastic view globalises our notion of the mechanics and  
12  
13 operationality of conflict transport, adding foot movements (such as late war death  
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15 marches), ships, trucks, and cars to the ubiquitous steering influence of railways and its  
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17 managers, co-opted, and collaborating with the Nazi regime.  
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24 This enlarged geography of conflict transport also orients to other routes – it  
25  
26 includes forced movement and anticipated flight to escape further persecution via trains  
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28 and ships (refugees' routes) to nearby countries (France, the Netherlands) and abroad  
29  
30 (including Palestine, the United States, the United Kingdom, Argentina, South-East Asia,  
31  
32 Australia), the destruction of deported and resident Jewish communities in Eastern  
33  
34 Europe and the Baltic regions (targeted by the German Army and the *Einsatzgruppen*, as  
35  
36 depicted in the Holocaust by Bullets map),<sup>5</sup> deportations for forced labour within the  
37  
38 concentration camp network and to colonial internment camps in cities and deserts in  
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40 North Africa,<sup>6</sup> and the emigration, arrest and transportation of refugee German and  
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42 Austrian Jews and so-called enemy aliens across countries and islands then in the British  
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53 <sup>5</sup> See Yahad in Unum's map, "The Holocaust by Bullets":

54 <http://www.yahadinunum.orgwww.yahadmap.org/#map/>

55 <sup>6</sup> See Aomar Boum and Sara Abrevaya Stein (eds), *The Holocaust and North Africa*, (Stanford: Stanford  
56 University Press, 2018).  
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3 Empire.<sup>7</sup>  
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6 Although this special issue is focused on the Holocaust, the practice and politics  
7 of conflict transport is not confined to it and calls out for further comparative,  
8 aggregating, and contextual research. The Holocaust provides a prominent example  
9 where railways were mobilised for genocidal destruction on a transnational scale –  
10 ministries, transport secretaries, bureaucrats, railway workers, and stations were all  
11 operationally complicit; their legal accountability for this involvement has been less  
12 satisfactory and forthcoming. As we have seen historically and witnessed persistent  
13 refugee movements from North Africa and the Middle East to European countries,  
14 particularly in recent decades, and in the use of trains to rescue and evacuate people  
15 and animals from Ukraine to Europe in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in late  
16 February 2022, the concept of "conflict transport" becomes a conceptual and  
17 experiential navigator to advance further investigations of the history, geography and  
18 representation of internal and cross-border displacement.  
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41 The articles in this special issue collectively affirm that history is written on and  
42 with the rails – by the passengers at overground and underground stations, platforms,  
43 and on trains, and those who see and respond to their trauma and desperation. The  
44 historical accounts of conflict transport continue an ageless story to which we are all  
45 witnesses.  
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55 <sup>7</sup> See the excellent novel originally published in 1938 by Ulrich Alexander Boschwitz, *The Passenger* (trans.  
56 by Philip Boehm); (London: Pushkin Press, 2021).  
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