



history

## Between Sabotage and Collaboration: The Belgian and Dutch Railways Under Nazi Rule

By Herman Welter, translated by Kate Connolly

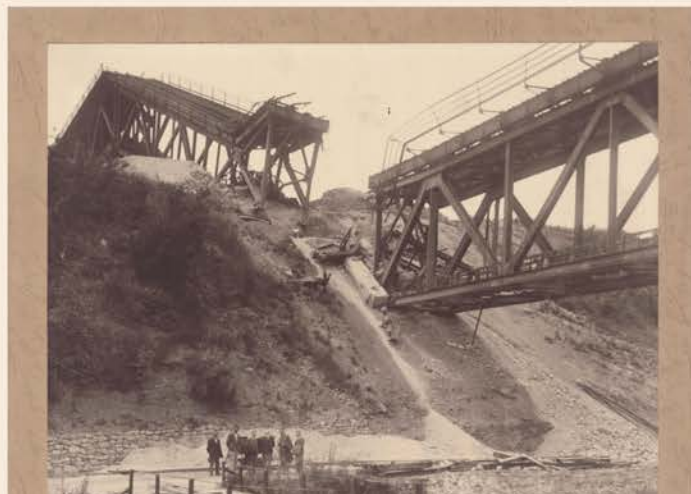
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Caught between economic need and Nazi demands, the Belgian and Dutch railways continued to run during the Second World War. Some workers resisted, while others followed orders, aiding in the deportation of thousands of Jews, Roma and other persecuted groups. Apologies and reparations came slowly: the Netherlands issued apologies in 2005, with compensation in 2019, while Belgium has just finished research and is awaiting further action. How did the railways navigate the war, and what were the consequences?

**O**n 10 May 1940, the German army invaded Belgium and the Netherlands. The Belgian army had offered just eighteen days of resistance when, on 28 May, King Leopold III capitulated —against the wishes of the government. The Netherlands surrendered on 14 May, after the bombing of the historic centre of Rotterdam. Shortly thereafter, both governments re-located to London.

In order to serve the interests of the country, the Belgian and Dutch Railways continued to operate but this required close cooperation with the occupying force. As a result, the NMBS (National Railway Company of Belgium) and the NS (Dutch Railways) were actively involved in the deportation of Jews, Roma, Sinti and other so-called undesirable citizens to the concentration and extermination camps in the east. Finally, after the surrender of the Nazis, Belgium and the Netherlands were left with a severely damaged railway infrastructure.

So how did the war impact both railway companies, and what was the aftermath?



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**The destroyed railway viaduct in Moresnet in September 1944**

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**Belgian Railways**

In early 1940, just before the Second World War, the National Railway Company of Belgium (NMBS), founded in 1926, managed 4,846 km of railway lines, a fleet of 3,414 locomotives and 110,000 freight wagons and carriages. At this time, the NMBS had not yet fully recovered from the heavy damage of the First World War while the Netherlands, which had stayed out of the 'Great War', had a fairly modern railway network at this time.

Narcisse Rulot, a civil mining engineer had been leading the NMBS since March, 1933 but the NMBS was not well prepared for a new German occupation. An arrangement was made with the government whereby the Germans would pay for military transport services. At the same time, ways to solve the problems caused by the mobilisation of railway personnel were discussed.



**The railway workshop - the Arsenal - in Mechelen after the bombing of 19 January 1944**

© Collection NMBS — Train World Heritage

In the Central Workshop in Mechelen, field kitchens were being built and a sanitary train for transporting wounded personnel was under construction. The board of directors had already agreed to transfer some of its powers to management in the event of an occupation, a policy that had also been in place during the First World War (1914-1918). The railway management would follow the government's lead and continue to operate in an unoccupied Belgium or remain abroad.

On 10 May 1940, Germany invaded Belgium. During the eighteen-day campaign waged by the Belgian army in May, 1940, the NMBS was put under military supreme command. During the first week, the 'iron road' played a crucial role in the evacuation of authorities, civil servants and fleeing civilians. After 16 May, the trains stopped running.

**Back to work**

Leading industrial factions called for work to resume in order to avoid a repeat of the financial misery and economic devastation suffered during the First World War. Industry was dependant on the NMBS for manufacturing supplies and foodstuffs.

On 19 June 1940, railway management decided to resume operations in the interest of the country. On 22 June, the staff was ordered to return to work.

The German Wehrmacht Verkehrs Direktion (Army Traffic Directorate) took over the management of the Belgian network. In the interest of delivering necessary industrial supplies and food, the NMBS agreed to cooperate with the occupying forces. German military transport was

possible in principle, as German locomotives and carriages that had been ceded to Belgium under the Treaty of Versailles (1919) now had to be returned.



*With today's knowledge, it seems incomprehensible that there was little or no protest against the deportation trains*

In theory, the NMBS was not allowed to do anything that could be construed to be at odds with its 'patriotic duty'. This meant, among other things, not providing direct military support to the occupier. Nevertheless, from the outset, the NMBS did carry out German military transports. At the beginning of 1941, the management and the board of directors had tacitly accepted that it would be impossible to determine the nature or content of trains running on German orders. Soon, it seemed normal that the NMBS should provide numerous military services such as the transport of troops and military equipment, repairs to German train equipment and uncontrolled deliveries of rolling stock, amongst other things.

### Deportations

Under strict German control, NMBS personnel and the rolling stock were also drafted into use for the notorious deportation trains, the so-called *Sonderzüge*. These trains fell outside the regular timetable and were never discussed in the permanent committee meeting of the board of directors of the NMBS. Presumably, the management only later got wind of these 'special' transports, which were seen as a small part of the broader military services that were accepted as inevitable at the start of the occupation. With today's knowledge, of course, it seems incomprehensible that there was little or no protest against the deportation trains.

In the book *Bezete bedrijf, de oorlogsgeschiedenis van de NMBS* (Occupied Company: the War History of the NMBS), published in 2023, Belgian war historian Nico Wouters analyses the collaboration between the NMBS and the German occupying force. The book came about after a request for a historical study of the role of the NMBS in the deportations made in early 2022 by Federal Minister of Mobility, Georges Gilkinet, and Senate President Stephanie D'Hose to the Centre for the Study of War and Contemporary Society.



The cover of the 1943 timetable with the iconic B logo  
© Collection NMBS — Train World Heritage

### A punishable offense

Between 1941-1944, the records indicate that (at least) 189,542 Belgian forced laborers, 25,490 Jews, 16,081 political prisoners and 353 Roma were deported by train to the east.

The NMBS was paid for the deportation trains. During the occupation, the Belgian Railways received 41.94 million francs via the Mitteleuropäische Reisebüro in Brussels while the office in Berlin paid 8.76 million francs. These amounts included other services apart from the running of deportation trains.

NMBS management realised that denying military services would be punishable and that refusing or protesting was not an option. In such a case, the Germans would simply impose their orders with force. The NMBS thus considered the execution of military tasks as a necessary evil — the price for maintaining passenger transport and food supplies.

### Sabotage

Nevertheless, both on the shop floor and in the various management

teams, various forms of resistance began to appear, such as sabotage and intelligence, people going into hiding, people refusing to work. Certain resistance groups received financial support, including through the Social Service that had been established by NMBS boss Rulot in February 1941.

The management protested against the mounting of German anti-aircraft guns on Belgian trains but from 1943 onwards, the NMBS mainly engaged in economic resistance. Service provision and production were deliberately reduced by delays, minor sabotage, fraud with service hours and reports and mass absenteeism. In 1944, repairs to certain bridges were purposely delayed.



**Civilians at a railway bridge destroyed by the resistance**

© Collection NMBS — Train World Heritage

To prevent citizens from having to go to work in Germany, the NMBS recruited no fewer than 25,000 extra employees because, in principle, railway personnel could not be requisitioned by an occupying force. Furthermore, management refused to dismiss personnel who had been convicted by the German military court.

### Severe damage

Like the First World War, the Second World War had enormous consequences for the railways. In the last year of the occupation, the railway network was severely affected by bombings and sabotage.

The resulting count after the liberation was worrying: of the 4,846 km of track in 1940, only 2,916 km were still operational. Of the 3,414 locomotives, just 2,371 were operational. The fleet of wagons and carriages was halved from 110,000 to 56,000. The number of employees was 97,862.



**The Kinkempois workshop, Liège, after a bombing in January 1944**

© Collection NMBS — Train World Heritage

By the end of 1944, the NMBS was running at a deficit of almost 3 billion francs. Of this amount, 72.5 percent related to the four years of war. This percentage is separate from what the NMBS called 'occupation costs' that, at the beginning of 1945, were estimated at almost 5 billion francs,

62.5 percent of which concerned the execution of regular transports in Belgium on behalf of the German army.

Director-General Rulot was suspended at the insistence of the unions. Eventually, his honor was restored but he never returns as director.

### **Dutch Railways**

On 10 May 1940, Germany invaded not only Belgium and the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, but also the Netherlands. When the Germans reduced Rotterdam to ashes on 14 May 1940 and threatened to bomb other cities, the Dutch army's leadership capitulated. There were many victims, and great damage was caused during those five days of war. The Dutch Railways (NS), founded in 1938, also suffered losses of infrastructure, though most of the railway bridges were, in fact, blown up by the Dutch themselves as acts of resistance.

On 16 May 1940, NS management took back control of the railway system and agreed to carry out military transports for the Germans. 'Loyal cooperation' was the motto, also on the advice of the Dutch military authorities.

On 21 June 1940, the relationship with the German government was formally established. The NS remained the boss in its own house as employee regulations and the rights of railway staff remained in force. A Bahnbevollmächtigter (Bbv — an official representative of the railway) in Utrecht represented the Deutsche Reichsbahn and the Reichsverkehrsministerium (German National Railway and Ministry of Transport). The Bbv's representatives were present at the major stations and also carried out inspections in the workshops.

On 28 May 1940, the Germans repaired the bridge at Venlo and, on 5 June the one at Deventer. Working with the Germans, the NS quickly restored the east-west connections. The bridges at Roermond followed on 22 June. In mid-July 1940, the Rotterdam-Dordrecht-Moerdijk route was passable again and by the end of 1940 all bridges were back in use.

### **Hupkes takes the wheel**

In October 1940, Jan Goudriaan, the president and CEO appointed by the Colijn government in 1938, was taken hostage and imprisoned in Buchenwald concentration camp. Goudriaan was officially freed in May 1941 and then released on 23 July 1941, but on 13 July 1942 he was imprisoned again, first in Haaren and then in the hostage camp Sint-Michielsgestel.



*Thanks to Hupkes, the Germans did not get a grip on the railway company, but it did have to perform services for the occupiers*

Vice-president Willem Hupkes was left with the task, which should not be underestimated, of keeping the railway company going by, on the one hand, maintaining friendly relations with the Germans and, on the other hand, optimally protecting the Dutch railway staff. He instructed the NS employees to show loyalty to the new rulers. By cleverly pandering to the Germans, he partly protected his staff from Arbeitseinsatz (forced labour) in Germany.

Thanks to Hupkes, the Germans did not get a grip on the railway company, but it did have to perform services for the occupiers.

### **Exceptional profits**

Until the autumn of 1941, relations with the occupying forces were good, but the war against Russia led to a shortage of locomotives, personnel, freight wagons and rails. An endless battle ensued between NS management and the German authorities, resulting in increased workshop capacity to repair German locomotives, the delivery of 465 km of rails, and the running of forty German trains within the Essen and Düsseldorf regions.

The Germans seized 14 percent of the locomotive fleet, and four hundred railway workers went to work in Germany. Meanwhile, the NS quietly ran all kinds of deportation trains against invoices.



**Construction of the railway connection at Camp Westerbork**  
Wikipedia

More sabotage cases occurred in the course of 1942 when the NS set up a three-thousand-strong rail guard to protect the main lines.

The years from 1941 to 17 September 1944 yielded substantial profits. For the first time, the railway system showed what it could do in the field of passenger transport. In 1939, 95 million passengers were transported, in 1941, 1942 and 1943, the counts were 114, 167 and 232 million respectively; an increase by a factor of 2.5.

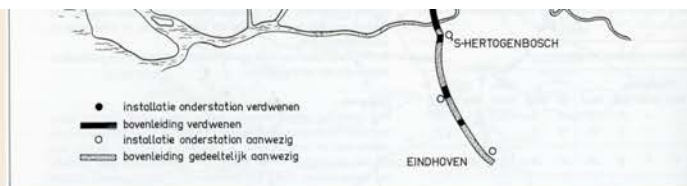
This is reflected in the balance sheet which, on 31 December 1943, showed a completely healthy company. At the end of 1939, the debts had amounted to 494 million guilders. At the end of 1943 they had fallen to 150 million guilders.

### Air strikes

On 28 May 1944, the first day of Pentecost, nineteen people were killed at De Klomp when an electric train was strafed by American fighter planes. From 3 September 1944, the air raids on trains increased sharply. The armour plating on the locomotives and cabins, and the concrete shelters on the coal wagons (tenders) behind the locomotive, offered little protection. The number of deaths among train crews rose rapidly, as did absenteeism due to illness. In the last year the trains ran, the tasks of the train crew become considerably more difficult because there were not yet any automatic doors.

The frequency of the trains decreased rapidly after 5 September 1944. On 12 September 1944, the last coal train from Eindhoven traveled northwards. There were no passenger trains on Sunday 17 September and from 18 September onwards, only a few electric trains were scheduled before 10 am and after 4 pm. There were hardly any steam trains running.





Damage to the overhead line network caused by the occupier between 17 September 1944 and 5 May 1945

© NS

## Strikes

Acting railway director Willem Hupkes did not want to participate in resistance actions unless they were sanctioned by the Dutch government in London. Railway staff did not participate in the April-May strike in 1943. Hupkes realised that a strike could only succeed if the support base among the thirty thousand railway workers was spurred on by the Dutch government in London calling for action, so he worked to make this happen.

On 17 September, 1944, Radio Oranje called for people to stop working via the code message 'Versteeg's children must go under the wool'. Versteeg was Hupkes' alias. They expected a strike of, at most, one month. The optimism of British Field Marshal Montgomery — that the Allies would just cross the Rhine and go via the Ruhr area to Berlin — proved to be based on thin air. The Germans won the battle at Arnhem on 25 September. Until 5 May 1945, the parts of the Netherlands above the major rivers remained under German rule. Hupkes temporarily lost administrative control, but together with the staff council he did manage to maintain control over the correct payment of wages and pensions.

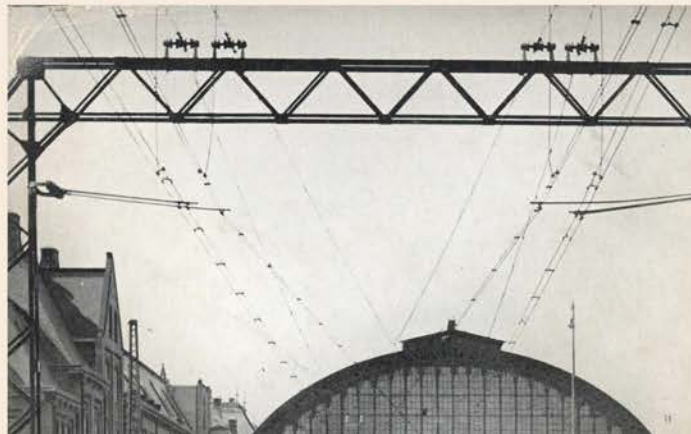
## Famine Winter

In military terms, the strike had little effect. Within a week, the Germans were running their own trains, often with German equipment, mostly at night and at low speed. Three thousand Reichsbahn employees and two thousand non-strikers, mainly in Groningen and Drenthe, were running an average of thirty trains in the Netherlands and twenty to and from Germany — all without signals or level crossing surveillance.

The Germans took no coordinated action against the strike. In January 1945, known as the 'Famine Winter', the Germans even allowed trains going from east to west to be driven by NS personnel. The Dutch government in London, however, decided to continue the strike, which was particularly damaging for the west of the country and resulted in approximately 20,000 deaths because the population was deprived of the food supplies present in the east.

## Railroad robbery

The railway company itself was hit hard. Everything — loose or fixed — was stolen. The new Watergraafsmeer marshalling yard in Amsterdam, put into use in 1942, had become a field of shattered signal masts. Workshops were looted down to the floorboards. All rolling stock was taken to the east. Instead of showing loyal cooperation, the company became a symbol of resistance against the occupier from September 1944 to May 1945.





The east side of Amsterdam Central Station in early May 1945. Train traffic is impossible.

© NS

In 1945, the NS submitted a bill to the government for 772.8 million guilders for the company's recovery. The government would eventually reimburse 373.4 million guilders. Of the 92.9 million guilders it had cost them to provide services to the Wehrmacht, only 4.4 million was re-paid, despite the fact that the Dutch war government had promised to pay for those wartime services. This caused the company profits earned during the war to evaporate.

### Collaboration

During the Second World War, the Belgian and Dutch Railways served both the interests of the country and those of the German occupying force. In essence, this was collaboration. The NMBS and the NS were actively involved in the deportation of Jews, Roma, Sinti and others to the concentration and extermination camps in the east and the railways were paid by the Germans for these transports.

It was not until 2005 that the NS apologised for its cooperation in the deportations of Jews to the Judendurchgangslager in Westerbork. They refused to pay compensation. This was without taking into account Salo Muller, former physiotherapist of the Amsterdam football club Ajax. Together with his lawyer, Liesbeth Zegveld, Muller ensured that the NS agreed in 2019 to compensate the victims and their relatives to the tune of 43 million euros.

The commotion in the Netherlands due to the Jewish transports was the basis for the book *Bezet bedrijf. De oorlogsgeschiedenis van de NMBS* by Nico Wouters, director of Cegesoma, the Study Centre for War and Society. Wouters concludes that the Belgian Railways earned 51 million francs (21 million euros today) from, amongst other things, the deportations of 230,000 citizens, of whom 25,490 were Jews, from the Dossin barracks in Mechelen. The close collaboration with the Germans is a stark contrast to the resistance image that the NMBS cherished during and after the war. Some 6,799 railwaymen have been recognised as resistance members who focused on sabotage of the occupiers and military targets.



The deportation trains are not often mentioned — except for the twentieth transport, from which a number of people were able to escape thanks to a resistance action.

In his book, Wouters does not express an opinion on the necessity of reparations. He leaves that issue to politicians and the NMBS. Is there also a Salo Muller in Belgium?



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journalist, specializing in public transport

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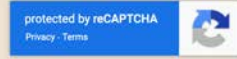
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