

Railways during World War II

History of railways

18 grudnia 2020, Bydgoszcz

In 1939, Polish State Railways had 220 thousand employees. It was a well-organised occupational group. 85% of railwaymen were members of trade unions. Most of them were also members of the Railway Military Training Organisation who had done compulsory military service.

As part of mobilisation activities, some railwaymen were summoned to join the army. In the last weeks before the outbreak of war numerous cases of German sabotage against railway facilities were recorded. Some acts of sabotage were prevented thanks to vigilant railway workers. The most tragic act of terror was an explosion of a time bomb on 28 August at 11:18 PM in the waiting room of the railway station in Tarnów. The lethal device was planted by Antoni Guz from Bielsko. 20 people were killed under the ruins of the destroyed railway station and 35 were injured.

Evacuation and military transport

When war broke out railways were handling emergency and general mobilisation transports. Also, the first evacuation trains pulled out on the route. Germans carried out bombing raids and airborne fire attacks on railway stations, echelons but also on evacuation trains carrying civilians and identification-bearing sanitary trains. Large railway stations such as those in Bydgoszcz, Grudziądz, Inowrocław, Toruń, Łowicz, Piotrków Trybunalski, Skierniewice, Kraków, Lublin and the stations of the Warsaw railway junction were bombed – some of them even more than once. Despite this fact, railwaymen and sappers were able to restore traffic on the damaged lines within 3–4 hours.

The first military transports were put into operation before mobilisation was declared; 5 large troops were transferred at that time. Subsequent echelons were transported under a mobilisation plan which provided that 32 out of 56 large troops would be transported by rail, as a whole or in part, to build-up points. In total they were to account for 3/5 of Polish forces. This task required 3 thousand trains. In addition, railways had an obligation to deliver 700 thousand reservists from emergency mobilisation and 400 thousand from general mobilisation and 100 thousand soldiers withdrawn from the west to reserve centres situated in the east. Railway troops were supposed to remove damages to railroads.

Railway war - air raids and the resistance movement

The attack of Nazi Germany on Poland on 1 September 1939 was also aimed at main junction stations and railway lines. Bombing raids on the stations in Tczew and Kutno started at dawn. Also, the bridge on the Bugonarew in Modlin was bombed. To prevent the progress of the German army, Polish sappers blew up some railway structures e.g. viaducts, tunnels in Żegiestów (on the line Muszyna–state border) and in Łupków (on the Łupków-Medzilaborce line), bridges in Tczew, Grudziądz, Bydgoszcz-Fordon, on the Bydgoszcz Canal, in Toruń and in Płock.



Soldiers at the railway action station in Warsaw - 1939

The events in Szymankowo became a symbol of the heroism of railwaymen. Here, Polish railwaymen prevented an insidious seizure of the bridge in Tczew by the Germans. The scheduled transit train was followed by an armoured train which was sent to a sidetrack and derailed. In retaliation Germans murdered the railwaymen from Szymankowo. In Chojnice, instead of the scheduled train, a German armoured draisine pulled into the station followed by an armoured train. Polish railwaymen and soldiers had been able to take control of the draisine and destroy the bridge before the armoured train reached it. Two railway companies took part in the defence of Warsaw.

Trains used for defence

Armoured trains were used in the defensive war, including "Danuta" (No. 11) and "Poznańczyk" (No. 12) which took part in the Battle of the Bzura and were destroyed. "Generał Sosnkowski" (No. 13) was derailed and damaged after a bombing raid near Łochów. "Paderewski" (No. 14) was destroyed near Łowicz, and "Śmierć" (No. 15) suffered damage during fighting near Modlin. "Pierwszy Marszałek" (No. 51) fought both against Germans and the Red Army and was damaged in combat with Soviet airplanes. "Piłsudczyk" (No. 52), "Śmiały" (No. 53) and "Bartosz Głowacki" (No. 55) were seized by the Soviets in Lviv (Podzamcze), and "Groźny" (No. 54), fighting in Silesia, was destroyed by the crew when they reached a blown-up bridge on the Dunajec.

New order in the occupied territories

As a result of the warfare, 11 large bridges were destroyed, 8,000 smaller structures were damaged

and 25,000 damages to stations and tracks were recorded. Some trains and evacuated rolling stock – the exact number is difficult to estimate – reached the eastern parts of the Republic of Poland that on 17 September were occupied by the Red Army.

Both occupying forces introduced their own order. The Germans divided the conquered territory. In the area of the General Government (95 thousand sq. km), on 19.11.1939 the General Directorate of Eastern Railways (Ostbahn) (GEDOB) was established in Kraków. District directorates were set up in Kraków, Warsaw, Radom and Lublin. The general organisation of divisions in the new general directorate was not changed compared to the organisation before the war. German identification symbols were applied on the rolling stock. At the beginning of 1940 the German railway police, called the Bahnschutz, was established as another element of the system of repression. Poles could travel by all trains except fast trains. Also, they could not sit in carriages for Germans. On the other hand, Jews were not allowed to travel without pass cards. In the territories incorporated into the Reich Poles could use the train service only if they were issued special pass cards. Polish railwaymen, and in particular members of the Silesian uprising, plebiscite activists, members of the Greater Poland uprising, and activists involved in social activity before the war were subject to repressions including executions by firing squads and imprisonment in concentration camps. Managerial and other functions were handled by the Germans.



Polish prisoners of war loading an artillery gun on a railway wagon - 1939

Railway transport was a very important element of the German war machine, therefore, when the fighting ceased in September 1939, the occupying power commenced the reconstruction of the destroyed railway network. Railwaymen were called to work. Work on railways offered protection against being taken away to Germany and forced to work and railway passes enabled travelling after curfew. The war production required efficient technical back-up. Thus, some workshops (e.g. in Nowy Sącz) and factories (Chrzanów) were expanded. The steam locomotives and wagons were

marked with vainglorious slogans: "Alles Rädern müssen rollen für den Sieg! (Wheels must roll for victory!)" and "V" signs painted on locomotive smoke-boxes.

The railway conspiracy

In the meantime, Polish railwaymen organised acts of sabotage spontaneously or under emerging conspirators' organisations, to make operation of the railway difficult to a varying degree and extent. Among other things, they poured sand into wagon grease tanks, falsified transport documents, replaced address stickers on wagons, or assigned double numbers to wagons after repairs. The official gazette of Ostbahn of September 1943 listed the numbers of 500 wagons and 200 tankers which were lost while carrying cargo. 25% of tankers of the former Polish State Railways' network were sabotaged. In 1942 every fifth steam locomotive was out of order. Railwaymen provided enormous support in organising illegal deliveries of foodstuffs to cities, in conspiracy carriage of mail and courier mail or hiders and in warning against round-ups at railway stations and in intelligence operations. They were at a risk of severe repressions for such activities.

Prior to the attack on the Soviet Union, railway transport in Poland became particularly significant to the Reich. In the territory of the occupied country the Germans gathered 102 divisions of the Wehrmacht, i.e. nearly 3 million soldiers! Following the outbreak of the war between the Germans and Soviets on 22 June 1941 the Commander-in-Chief of the Polish Armed Forces, General Władysław Sikorski, ordered the chief commander of the Union of Armed Struggle, General Stefan Grot-Rowecki to intensify the sabotage and subversion activities in the Reich and in the direct vicinity of the German army. At that time 420 military transports passed through Poland every day. During sabotage and subversion actions in the second half of 1941 as many as 1935 steam locomotives were damaged and 91 were held in repair workshops, 91 railway transports were derailed and 237 were set on fire. In addition, 2,851 wagons were damaged. At that time Ostbahn employed 150 thousand Polish railwaymen, 60 thousand Polish railway workers, 8.3 thousand Germans and 3.5 thousand rail guards.



A train derailed by the Union of Armed Struggle - 1940

Sabotage on railway lines passing near the frontline was further intensified in 1942. The largest achievement of the Warsaw District Union of Retaliation was Operation Wieniec (lit. Operation Corona) in the night of 7/8 October 1942, in which the rails surrounding Warsaw were blown up at the same time. Operation Bariiera (Barrier) interrupted railway traffic at 92 points simultaneously. Actions at German rail transports were also carried out by partisan groups of any political orientation, including Soviet groups.

Destruction plans during the final years of the war

At the second stage of the war the retreating Germans purposefully destroyed railway lines on their way. They blew up tunnels, bridges, water towers and pump stations. The occupying forces burnt down and demolished railway station buildings and engine houses, and sappers blew up the poles of teletechnical networks. The Germans took machines, tools and rolling stock away to the Reich. 4 out of 11 main workshops were completely destroyed (Warsaw Chmielna, Warsaw-Praga, Eastern Warsaw and Łapy). 80-90% of machines and equipment was lost by the workshops in Pruszków, Tarnów and Nowy Sącz. Smaller losses were suffered in Radom, Gdańsk, Poznań and Bydgoszcz. The Germans stole all equipment and machine tools from the regained territories, from, among other places, Opole, Oleśnica, Świdnica, Ostróda and Stargard Szczeciński. They also took away most machines from Wrocław and from 2 steam locomotive and wagon workshops in Gliwice. Only in Piła was complete equipment saved.



The Main Station in Gdańsk, destroyed during the war

The total losses suffered by Polish railways, also calculated taking into account territories allocated after 1945, amounted to 16 billion zlotys (in pre-war currency). 38% of railway lines, 46% of bridges (including all major bridges), 50% of tunnels, 37% of railway buildings, 6 thousand steam locomotives and 60 thousand wagons were destroyed.



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