Prelude

Chemins de fer Orientaux

1867-1883
Prelude 1867-1883

The genesis of the Orient Express — a direct luxury train service between Paris and Constantinople — cannot be attributed to a single person or organization. Several historical developments coincided.

After a train trip through Europe, Sultan Abdülaziz decided that Constantinople should be linked to the West by rail. This plan was carried out by Baron Maurice de Hirsch and his Chemins de fer Orientaux. Meanwhile in the US, George Pullman developed the luxury sleeper car that enabled overnight train travel. The Belgian Georges Nagelmackers introduced this concept in Europe.

Requirements

Still, not all the requirements had been fulfilled. A consultative body was needed to make the highly fragmented European railway companies work together. The first International Timetable Conference took place in 1872, the same year that Nagelmackers introduced his first Wagons-Lits and the first train entered Constantinople. But it would take over 10 years before the Orient Express could be launched.
A journey to Constantinople over the Mediterranean or via the Danube and Black Sea took at least one week.
In 1867 Abdülaziz was the first Ottoman sultan to travel through Europe. He visited the Paris World Exhibition, was received with ceremony in London and visited Brussels, Berlin and Vienna on his way. He mostly traveled in his own imperial railway carriage.

For centuries, the Ottoman Empire had been a closed bastion. From 1840 onwards sultan Abdülmecid carried through reforms. Symbolically, he exchanged the old Topkapı Palace for the Western-style Dolmabahçe. Sultan Abdülaziz continued this policy and modernized government, the navy and schools. He developed good relations with Britain and France and could not refuse the invitation of Napoleon III and Queen Victoria in 1867.

Railway connection
After his European rail journey Abdülaziz decided to construct a railway between Constantinople and Vienna. His empire already had some local railways, but as yet no international connection. Abdülaziz would not witness the — delayed — completion of the railway. Because of high debts and the Bulgarian uprising he had to step down in 1867.
Sultan carriage 1866

Manufacturer: Metropolitan, Birmingham
Length: 9.5 meters
Rahmi M. Koç Museum, Istanbul
As early as 1851 the Serbian Prince Alexander had pleaded in vain for a railway connecting Constantinople with Western Europe via his country. But when Sultan Abdülaziz finally decided in favor of such a connection, it would not run through Serbia but through Bosnia, then still part of the Ottoman Empire.

In 1869 investor Maurice de Hirsch won the concession for 2,500 kms of railways, with a price per kilometer guaranteed by the Ottoman state. For the implementation he founded the Chemins de fer Orientaux, the Oriental railways. Construction started expeditiously at multiple locations: at Constantinople, between Salonika and Skopje and in Bosnia. In 1872 the first train entered Constantinople.

**Delays**

Soon, political changes and the financial problems of the Ottoman state forced Hirsch to agree to a new, limited concession without a link to Vienna. Revolts in the Balkans and the Russo-Turkish War caused further delays. Bulgaria became independent and Bosnia was annexed by Austria. A rail link with the West would be a long time coming.
Railway construction 1875
Construction of a railway viaduct in Thrace, probably at Mustapha Pasha (Svilengrad).
Maurice de Hirsch 1831-1896

Baron Moritz von Hirsch auf Gereuth was from a German-Jewish banking family, raised to nobility by the Bavarian king. He married a Belgian banker’s daughter, lived in Paris and Versailles and mainly invested in Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire.

Hirsch was one of the richest men in Europe. He amassed his capital through sugar and copper speculations and railway investments. Despite a difficult start-up period, the Chemins de fer Orientaux certainly contributed to his wealth. In 1890 Hirsch transferred his interests in Ottoman railway projects to the Deutsche Bank, under pressure of the German imperialist policy on the Ottoman Empire.

Philanthropist

Hirsch helped Jews who were victims of pogroms and donated money to Jewish educational institutions. He founded an organization that enabled Russian Jews to emigrate to Argentina. In this way a part of the proceeds of the Orient Express, through its dependency on the Chemins de fer Orientaux, benefited charity.
The oldest preserved Turkish steam locomotive was part of the first locomotive series of the Chemins de fer Orientaux. They would haul the Orient Express for decades. The locomotive, over 100 years old, was still used for shunting in 1975. Today it is located at Sivas.

**Locomotive 8  1871**

*Chemins de fer Orientaux*
Manufacturer: Wiener Neustädter Lokomotivfabrik
Length: 15.3 meters
Pullman Palace Car Company

1865

Sleeping cars are an American invention. Initially, European railways were too fragmented for long distances. The first sleeping car ran in Pennsylvania in 1839. George Mortimer Pullman introduced the luxury sleeping carriage in 1865 and founded the successful Pullman Palace Car Company.

The richly decorated sleeping cars consisted of benches that were combined into beds at night. Pullman's 'hotels on wheels' also had on-board restaurants and the porters provided impeccable service. The Pullman name became a synonym for luxury and comfort.

Gap in the market

In 1868 the young Belgian Georges Nagelmackers traveled the US by Pullman train. He saw a gap in the European market, but gave the concept his own interpretation. While the American Pullmans were moving dormitories with only curtains offering some privacy, Nagelmackers' Wagons-Lits would be fitted with separate compartments.
Lady in a Pullman sleeper before 1900
Two couches were put together as a bed at night, while another bed was folded down from the slanted ceiling.
European inspiration c. 1870

Besides the American example, Georges Nagelmackers also found inspiration for his plans in Europe, royal carriages being the most important ones.

In the course of the 19th century almost all European monarchs had gotten salon carriages. Around 1870 sleeping carriages were added to the royal trains: moving bedrooms with real beds and every comfort imaginable. For ordinary travelers — even the wealthy — such comfort was not available. However, in some carriages the seats were reclinable and blankets were distributed at night. Couches that could be converted into actual beds only existed in the United States.

First-class

In the class society of the 19th century, there was great difference between the three passenger classes. While the third class had simple wooden benches, first-class carriages had opulent furnishing, the extent of which differed by railway company. One of the earliest luxury trains ran around 1865 from Odessa to Kiev, part of Czarist Russia. The toilets and the dining car were unique for that time.
Sleeping car of Empress Elisabeth 1873 (Technisches Museum Wien)

Sisi’s carriage, inconspicuous from the outside, consisted of a bedroom and a boudoir with washstand and toilet.
In 1870 Georges Nagelmackers worked out his plans for a European sleeping car company. He closed a deal on sleeping cars in the *Indian Mail*, a postal train from Ostend to Brindisi with connection to steamers for India. The agreement was cancelled when the Mont Cenis tunnel was opened; the train now ran through France. The Franco-Prussian War caused further delays.

In 1872 Nagelmackers engaged in a partnership with the American William Mann to run the first four sleeping cars in the Paris-Vienna train. The Ostend-Berlin route soon followed. In 1876 Mann withdrew and Nagelmackers founded his *Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits*. Soon, its network stretched from Madrid to Bucharest.

**Royal**

The Belgian King *Leopold II* was one of the first shareholders of Wagons-Lits and also wielded his influence in negotiations. The two lions in the Wagons-Lits logo referred to the royal involvement.
Mann Boudoir Sleeping-Car 1873
Georges Nagelmackers (left) operated the first European sleeping cars together with William Mann (right).
Georges Nagelmackers
1845-1905

The story goes that Nagelmackers, son of a wealthy banker from Liege, was sent to the US by his father to get over his unrequited love for his niece. This journey eventually led to the creation of a company that drastically changed travel in Europe and acquired a de facto monopoly on sleeping and dining cars.

With a solid financial background and a degree in engineering, Nagelmackers was the right man in the right place. Being a 'neutral' Belgian was an advantage amid the rivalry between France and Germany. His perseverance was an indispensable trait, first when his family decided not to invest in his plans and later during difficult negotiations with railway companies.

Founder
Georges Nagelmackers was the founder of legendary luxury trains, such as the Orient Express, Méditerranée Express, Rome Express, Sud Express, Nord Express and the Trans-Siberian Express. In 1890 he also established the Compagnie Internationale des Grands Hôtels.
International Timetable Conference 1872

When the first sleeping cars appeared on the tracks of Europe, international cooperation was still in a fledgling stage. Consultations were limited to railway companies with directly adjacent tracks. Even in countries with different railway companies operating, there often was no coordinated national timetable yet. International travelers had to figure out their journey using Bradshaw’s Continental Railway Guide or Cook’s Continental Timetables. New editions had to be released every month.

Cooperation

In 1872 railway companies from five countries deliberated for the first time on a joint timetable for long-distance trains. Noteworthy was the participation of both French and German companies. Other European railways soon joined the Internationale Fahrplankonferenz. As of 1879 governments also became involved, as well as Wagons-Lits as the operator of sleeping and dining cars. This paved the road for the Orient Express.
The Vienna World Exhibition featured a full-scale model of the Mont Cenis tunnel entrance. This tunnel between Italy and France was one of the first international railway connections.
Train Eclair 1882

In October 1882 the first luxury train left Paris, a test train that entirely consisted of Wagons-Lits sleeping and dining cars. Until then, Wagons-Lits cars always ran in regular trains. This Train Eclair — lightning train — owed its name to its average speed of 48 km/h, reaching Vienna in 27 hours, more than 6 hours faster than conventional trains.

Part of the 44 passengers were invited guests, others were paying travellers. One of the four sleeping cars was the first one in Europe with bogies. Because of its comfortable running this type of carriage was the future. Also part of the train was Wagons-Lits' first dining car that included a kitchen. The menu included oysters, venison and chocolate pudding.

Result

The Train Eclair only ran once between Paris and Vienna as a trial. With the successful result, Wagons-Lits could persuade eight railway companies to collaborate in a luxury train that would go beyond Vienna: the Orient Express!
Sleeping Car 74  1880

Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits
Manufacturer: Van der Zyp
Length: 12.9 meters

This three-axle sleeping car ran in the *Train Eclair*, the 1882 test train between Paris and Vienna, which was a forerunner of the Orient Express. Besides beds the carriage also had compartments with seats.