

Lifelines and Land Cruises

*Comparing Rationales and Attitudes Towards Long-Distance
Passenger Trains on Four Continents*



Amtrak's eastbound *Empire Builder* carries privately owned rail cars through eastern Washington State on August 8, 2014. Photo by the author.

Malcolm M. Kenton

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Dr. Ray Sommer

George Mason University

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Introduction

Long-distance passenger trains (LDTs), here defined as those whose routes are 600 miles or greater or which travel overnight and offer sleeping accommodations, have existed since the early days of railroading. Ever since railroad lines reached lengths sufficient to connect disparate regions of a continent, which began in the early 1850s in North America and Europe, there have been passenger trains covering the entire lengths of those lines. For over 70 years after that, passenger trains remained the fastest and safest way to travel long distances, in spite of the danger and discomfort of long rides in wooden coaches with open vestibules behind steam locomotives in the early days. Hence, they dominated the travel market for distances longer than one could walk or ride a horse or bicycle.

Even after the automobile proliferated and road networks were built to allow them to travel far and quickly, and after air travel became an affordable and widely available option for medium- and long-distance trips, long-distance passenger trains remain on every continent except Antarctica. They remain an economical means of carrying large numbers of people and are most heavily used in regions, generally rural in character, where road and air networks are sparse and the train remains the only inexpensive alternative to some degree of isolation. LDTs continue to offer an unparalleled way to experience a continent's varied landscapes in comfort and mingle with a cross-section of a country's denizens. Hence, they are popular with both domestic and international tourists, serving the same role over land as cruise ships do on seas and rivers.

This paper attempts, in summary fashion, to offer a global perspective on the role of long-distance passenger trains in contemporary national and continental-scale transportation systems. It will survey LDTs' political and cultural positions in a sampling of five large regions: North America (the United States and Canada), continental Europe, Russia, China and Japan

and Australia. It will also review the attitudes expressed by these countries' citizens and users of LDTs, and sociological studies of trains' position in their cultures. It will conclude that attitudes towards, and rationales for, LDTs are generally consistent across these five areas, and that there is remarkable consistency in the ongoing commitment on behalf of all levels of government to supporting them, as they are by and large operated or funded by government. It will also discuss how the same trains serve the two distinct, but complementary purposes of offering tourists a "land cruise" experience and meeting the need for basic mobility, particularly for people living in areas with few other affordable or practical travel options.

North America

From the beginnings of railroading to the 1970s, all intercity passenger train service in the United States and Canada was operated by the private railroad companies that also owned the tracks and are the predecessors of today's Class I "freight railroads."¹ In the United States, as federally regulated "common carriers" in interstate commerce, they were required to carry any passenger willing to pay the published fare, as well as any type of freight shipment whose shipper was willing to pay established rates — rates and fares that were tightly regulated by a federal commission until 1980.² LDTs never turned a profit for North American railroads, but railroads sustained them in no small part through attaching cars carrying the US Mail (until 1967) and package express, and through some cross-subsidization with freight revenues.³

But as passenger, mail and express traffic declined steadily from the end of World War II onward, railroads were unable to sustain reasonable service levels, and some actively worked to

¹ "America on the Move: Passenger Trains." Smithsonian Institution. National Museum of American History. Accessed November 16, 2015. http://amhistory.si.edu/onthemove/themes/story_42_7.html.

² Dempsey, Paul Stephen. "The Rise and Fall of the Interstate Commerce Commission: The Tortuous Path From Regulation to Deregulation of America's Infrastructure." *Marquette Law Review* 95, no. 4 (Summer 2002): 1151–2012, pp. 1151-1152.

³ Patton Jr., Edwin P. "A Plan to Save the Passenger Train." *Business Horizons* 12, no. 1 (February 1969): 5-15, p. 8.

discourage patronage by making their passenger service as miserable as possible.⁴ In an act that was as much about saving the “freight” railroads as it was about preserving passenger service, Congress in 1970 transferred the railroads’ common carrier obligation to transport passengers to a newly created quasi-governmental corporation that would enjoy cut-rate access and schedule priority on all private railroad lines in the country.⁵ This corporation came to be called Amtrak, and has continually faced unreliable and meager levels of annual federal funding, several rounds of service cutbacks, and ups and downs in the quality of its on-board service (due in no small part to Congressional micromanagement). Amtrak’s skeletal network of trains — most routes are served by only one train a day in each direction, with two only served three days a week — remains relatively unchanged to this day.

A similar process began in Canada in 1976, when the country’s two major railroads, Canadian National (CN, then a Crown (governmental) corporation, later privatized) and Canadian Pacific (CP, a private company), agreed to form a separate passenger operator: VIA Rail Canada. The federal government bought out VIA Rail, originally a CN subsidiary, in 1978 and it became a separate Crown Corporation. It preserved the intercity passenger train services that CN and CP were threatening to discontinue. VIA Rail has never been formally sanctioned by the federal Parliament through enabling legislation, so it lacks an “explicit mandate or [...] a legal framework outlining its governance powers and responsibilities,” and it does not enjoy the rights of access to, and priority treatment on, host railroads that Amtrak does.⁶ When VIA Rail took over operations, it ran nearly all the same trains that CN and CP had just beforehand. But

⁴ Lyon, Peter. *To Hell in a Day Coach: An Exasperated Look at American Railroads*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1968.

⁵ Amtrak Reform Council. “A Summary of Current Legislative Provisions Prescribing the Legal and Regulatory Framework Governing the National Railroad Passenger Corporation (Amtrak).” Policy Paper. Washington, DC: Amtrak Reform Council, December 4, 2000.

⁶ Dupuis, Jean. “VIA Rail Canada Inc. and the Future of Passenger Rail in Canada.” Background Paper. Library of Parliament Research Publications. Ottawa: Parliament of Canada, November 18, 2011. <http://www.parl.gc.ca/Content/LOP/ResearchPublications/2011-93-e.htm>.

the network has continued to shrink ever since, to the point where VIA Rail operates only two primary long-distance routes: Montreal to Halifax and Toronto to Vancouver, each served only three days per week (Toronto to Vancouver only two days per week in the winter). It also runs two thrice-weekly overnight services that serve remote parts of the country and are mandated and funded by the government: Winnipeg to Churchill, Manitoba and Jasper, Alberta to Prince Rupert, British Columbia.⁷

While VIA Rail's network has shrunk to less than half of what it was in 1976 (including the loss of nearly all passenger service on CP-owned lines), and its future is uncertain, two private companies have been profitably offering luxury tourist train services in the Rocky Mountains of Alberta and British Columbia. Rocky Mountaineer Railtours and Royal Canadian Pacific offer itineraries that are designed for leisurely taking in scenery by daylight, make no intermediate stops, do not sell one-way tickets, and stop mid-route for passengers to spend the night in hotels.⁸ These trains compete directly with the western half of VIA Rail's transcontinental Toronto-Vancouver route, the *Canadian*, an image of which appears on the back of Canada's ten-dollar bill.⁹

While the *Canadian*, equipped with well-maintained 1950s-built stainless steel equipment that includes dome cars and a round-end observation car, has always offered high-quality meals and a refined atmosphere to its sleeping car guests, VIA Rail took more direct aim at its competition in 2014 by introducing even more deluxe "Prestige Class" sleeping cars, priced at around \$7,000 CAD for the entire one-way trip.¹⁰ These run on the same trains that make stops

⁷ "VIA Rail Canada: Explore Our Destinations." Corporate Site. VIA Rail Canada, February 27, 2014. <http://www.viarail.ca/en/explore-our-destinations/trains>.

⁸ Fletcher, Joe. "Travel Tips: Canadian Train Travel to Banff." *USA Today*. Accessed November 16, 2015. <http://traveltips.usatoday.com/canadian-train-travel-banff-13428.html>.

⁹ Bank of Canada. "The Design of Canada's \$10 Polymer Note." Bank of Canada. Accessed November 16, 2015. http://www.bankofcanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/design_10.pdf.

¹⁰ Johnston, Bob. "Luxury Re-Imagined." *Trains* 75, no. 5, May 2015. (Fare estimate from www.viarail.ca)

in many remote villages, providing year-round transportation where few other options exist, and that habitually operate many hours late thanks to VIA Rail's complete lack of leverage to command dispatching priority from its host railroad, Canadian National.

Contrary to the current conventional wisdom that the "sweet spot" for North American passenger trains is in corridors of 100 to 600 miles, the *Washington Post's* editors argued in 1979 that "short-haul passenger trains do not have the money-making potential of the long hauls," comparing the situation to a taxi driver refusing to take a customer around the block when another is willing to pay much more for a 27-mile ride to the airport. "People in the corridors simply don't ride far enough to generate enough revenue to cover the costs of building and maintaining the system," they submit, adding that business and leisure travel are complimentary: "the long-haul passenger [is not] buying a frivolous service. Recreation has become very important to the nation's economy."¹¹

Most estimates are that Amtrak's long-distance routes lose upwards of \$100 per passenger, though comparable numbers are rarely given for the highway and air travel networks as a whole, accounting for all their associated and external costs. The most commonly-used arguments in favor of maintaining or expanding Amtrak's LDT network are that there is ample demand for them as evidenced by consistently high ridership, that these routes essentially serve as multiple corridors served by one train, and that they are necessary to maintain an interconnected national network (which ensures the political support in Congress necessary to fund Amtrak).¹² Critics tend to maintain that North America lacks the population density necessary to support economical passenger rail services, and that taxpayers should not subsidize the handful of

¹¹ The Editors. "Long-Distance Trains: Potential for Profit (Editorial)." *The Washington Post*, March 19, 1979. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1979/03/19/long-distance-trains-potential-for-profit/a11ee378-7286-4ba9-980d-e7884a5e8324/>.

¹² Jaffe, Eric. "3 Reasons to Keep Amtrak's Long-Distance Trains Running." CityLab, April 18, 2013. <http://www.citylab.com/politics/2013/04/3-part-case-long-distance-trains/5330/>.

Americans who refuse to drive or fly or want a nice excursion.¹³ But few in either camp tend to apply the same standards to passenger trains as the competing modes. Perhaps the national passenger train network would be more economical if the country were not trying to maintain three separate national travel systems — highway, air and rail — at once, and opted to cut subsidies to one or both of the alternatives.¹⁴

Ross Capon, a rail policy expert who headed the US National Association of Railroad Passengers for 38 years, summarized LDTs' worth in 2001 in terms of their importance “to people who live in or are trying to reach small communities where alternate public transportation does not exist, does not go to the right place or — in the case of some small-town commercial flights — is unaffordable,” and that trains are “essential to people who don't like to fly or cannot fly for medical reasons.” “Long distance trains are the melting pots of US and Canadian transportation, carrying passenger railroading's lowest-income riders ... and some of its wealthiest,” Capon adds, also noting that passenger trains's existence forces host railroads to maintain their lines to higher standards than they might otherwise.¹⁵

One key to the longevity of both Amtrak and VIA Rail in spite of hostility from national political leaders and freight railroads has been significant supportive public sentiment in the localities that enjoy service. One particular example is the successful effort of local-level politicians in the US Gulf Coast states to preserve daily service on the New York-Atlanta-New Orleans Amtrak route. These same officials have been making the economic case for restoring service between New Orleans and Florida that has been suspended indefinitely since Hurricane Katrina wracked the area in 2005. The former Republican mayor of Meridian, Mississippi (who

¹³ Nourish, Bruce. “Talking Sense About Amtrak.” Seattle Transit Blog, April 18, 2013. <http://seattletransitblog.com/2013/04/18/talking-sense-about-amtrak/>.

¹⁴ Transit, Cap'n. “The Density to Support Long-Distance Trains.” Cap'n Transit Rides Again, April 20, 2013. <http://capntransit.blogspot.com/2013/04/the-density-to-support-long-distance.html>.

¹⁵ Capon, Ross. “Let's Not Forget Long Distance Trains.” *Railway Age* 202, no. 6 (June 2001): 76.

now leads a pro-smart growth advocacy group in Washington), who had used a revitalized train station to spur the redevelopment of downtown, successfully got his fellow Mississippian, then-Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, to work to save the New York-New Orleans route and preserve Amtrak funding.¹⁶ While numerous Gulf Coast mayors, county officials and economic development proponents have expressed support for the New Orleans-Florida restoration, and a federally-backed working group has been formed to this end, their promises to their constituents have yet to be backed by serious commitments of the requisite local and state funding.¹⁷

While these local leaders seem to have a sense of the value of train service to their vicinity, very few efforts have been made to quantify these benefits. One such effort was a study commissioned by the Montana Department of Transportation and conducted by R.L. Banks and Associates in 2003 regarding the economic boon from Amtrak's service to the state. It estimated the total annual economic worth of one LDT to the state to be \$7.6 million, including direct annual expenditures by nonresidents arriving via Amtrak of \$135,000, and direct spending by Amtrak of between \$5.3 and \$5.7 million.¹⁸ Amtrak directly generates 30 jobs in Montana, and its service indirectly supports hundreds of others, particularly in the tourism sector around Glacier National Park, a popular destination to which Amtrak is one of the most reliable and convenient means of access.¹⁹ The LDT is "no small part of everyday life to many Montanans who live in rural isolation along the line and who depend on it to get to medical appointments, send their children to college, travel ... for a day's shopping, visit out-of-state, etc," the authors concluded. "Support for small town transportation service can be marshaled because it results in

¹⁶ McCommons, James. *Waiting on a Train: The Embattled Future of Passenger Rail Service*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing Co., 2009, page 245.

¹⁷ Sharp, John. "Momentum Builds for Amtrak's Gulf Coast Return." News & Commentary. AL.com, October 14, 2015. http://www.al.com/news/mobile/index.ssf/2015/10/momentum_builds_for_amtraks_gu.html.

¹⁸ R.L. Banks & Associates, Inc. "Analysis of the Economic Benefits of the Amtrak Empire Builder to Montana." Helena, MT: Montana Department of Transportation, July 2003. https://www.mdt.mt.gov/publications/docs/brochures/railways/empire_builder.pdf, pages 1-2.

¹⁹ Ibid, page 2.

a lesser use of resources if by rail, all the more so if a cluster of such communities is served by one single rail schedule, as is the case in Montana,” they add.²⁰

Canada’s most internationally famous LDT, the Vancouver-Toronto *Canadian*, is generally oriented towards global tourist market while also providing a modicum of essential year-round service to small, isolated communities on the route. The Montreal-Halifax *Ocean*, by contrast, is much more geared towards locals, serving the same purposes for them as the more frequent, daytime Corridor services connecting Windsor, Toronto, Montreal and Quebec City.²¹ But in spite of this, and the fact that VIA Rail invested in upgrading on-board services in 2003 with an expectation of a 62% increase in revenues over five years,²² the railroad cut service frequencies from six days a week back to three in 2012, citing declining ridership (a claim that train advocates dispute).²³ However, a year after the halving of service, VIA Rail reported a ridership increase of 13% on the route.²⁴ Advocacy organization Transport Action Atlantic will continue to push to make the service daily, and community meetings have been held along the route.²⁵

Observers of American passenger rail offer a variety of explanations for why, since 1971, there has always been just enough political support to maintain a skeletal national system that only serves most destinations once a day in each direction, if even that often. One contends that even Amtrak’s biggest supporters are content just to have trains and don’t push hard enough for

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Johnston, Bob. “Experience Counts Aboard the *Ocean*.” *Trains*, July 2006, page 43.

²² Ibid, page 44.

²³ Power, Bill. “Via Rail Cuts Ocean Route Runs.” *The Chronicle Herald*. April 14, 2014. <http://thechronicleherald.ca/business/111171-via-rail-cuts-ocean-route-runs>.

²⁴ CBC News. “Maritime Rail Service Still Not Adequate: Transport Group.” *CBC News New Brunswick*, October 8, 2015. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/new-brunswick/via-rail-ridership-increased-maritimes-1.3262932>.

²⁵ Transport Action Atlantic. “Press Release: Maritime Meetings on VIA Rail Draw Strong Support.” Advocacy Blog. The National Dream Renewed, September 30, 2012. <http://nationaldreamrenewed.ca/maritime-meetings-on-via-rail-draw-strong-support/>.

higher-quality equipment and services.²⁶ Another factor is that the generation currently in charge has little to no experience with high-quality passenger train service, either that which existed in the US before 1960 or that which exists abroad today. “A train is just not part of everyday life for most of us,” as McCommons puts it.²⁷

Another issue is the complex relationship between Amtrak and the freight railroads that host its trains — the same railroads that agreed to relinquish their common carrier obligation to transport passengers to Amtrak in 1970. Over Amtrak’s first few years of operation, it and the host railroads worked out a contractual agreement whereby the passenger carrier only reimburses its hosts for the avoidable portion of the costs of accommodating its trains, but not for its entire fully allocated share. Amtrak “underpays the [freight railroads] by a couple hundred million [dollars] per year,” said a spokesperson for the freight railroads’ trade association.²⁸ An additional sticking point is liability insurance for passenger train mishaps, which host railroads insist cover all damages, even those resulting from the host’s gross negligence, using the rationale that the host would not be exposed to such risk “but for” the presence of passenger trains on their property. This makes insurance for passenger operators very expensive, and Amtrak’s no-fault policy is backed by the federal government. Legislation is the only remedy that would remove this major hurdle to the expansion of passenger service.²⁹

A number of US states — including California, Washington and North Carolina — that have invested in making their corridor trains more frequent have found that greater frequency increases the farebox recovery ratio (the portion of the operating costs covered by passengers’ fares and other payments, such as for on-board food and beverages) and thus lowers the per-

²⁶ Op cit. McCommons, page 16.

²⁷ Ibid, page 20.

²⁸ Ibid, page 87.

²⁹ Ibid, page 256.

passenger subsidy requirement. The ratio for the Portland-Seattle *Cascades* corridor went from 43 to 70 percent when the number of daily round-trips doubled from four to eight.³⁰ This success has yet to be duplicated on a long-distance route, but there is nothing to indicate that this principle would discriminate based on route length.

Europe

On the other side of the Atlantic, the European continent has retained a denser passenger train network than North America, and trains have a greater share of the travel market in Europe. Nevertheless, the continent's network of international overnight sleeper trains has been declining, with competition from new high-speed rail lines that greatly reduce travel time between well-traveled city pairs being a key factor. "For 20 years and more, rail innovation on the Continent has focused with nearly complete single-mindedness on high-speed daylight travel," veteran passenger rail industry observer Karl Zimmermann wrote in 1999, calling the "high-speed imperative" "a benign contagion."³¹

A second factor is the imposition of a value-added tax on international train travelers, while international air travelers within Europe are exempt. A third is a mentality of competition between each country's national railroad in an era where European Union policy has allowed other operators, including foreign ones, to run trains over any railroad.³² This replacement of single national railway companies with many has created complexity that has hampered international cooperation. One observer contrasts this with Britain, where night trains "continue to thrive," even in a liberalized competitive environment, in the absence of cross-border

³⁰ Ibid, page 51.

³¹ Zimmermann, Karl. "Sleeping through Europe." *Trains*, February 1999, page 73.

³² Connolly, Kate. "Rail Passengers in Europe-Wide Protest against Night Train Cuts." *The Guardian*, June 19, 2015, sec. World news. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/19/rail-passengers-protest-night-train-cuts>.

difficulties.³³ Finally, stricter accounting rules have made it impossible for railways to cross-subsidize their overnight services from more profitable business lines, so the overnights must now either be profitable or subsidized by one or more country's governments.³⁴

A fourth challenge to Europe's overnight trains is an operational one. They require dedicated rolling stock and train crews, and need dedicated fleets of locomotives which the railways are unable to borrow for other uses, meaning "poor utilization of costly assets." Plus, these fleets' average age is considerably higher than that of the conventional, daytime passenger trains, and renewing or replacing the fleet will be a considerable added cost in the near future.³⁵ Finally, the railways that operate overnight trains have not been marketing them to the widest possible demographic. They have failed to convey to business travelers that the value of being able to travel while sleeping, go from city center to city center, and arrive refreshed is worth paying more than it costs to fly, and failed to portray the uniqueness of the overnight train experience to leisure travelers.

Nevertheless, the remaining overnight sleeper trains retain a devoted following. According to one estimate, a Copenhagen-Amsterdam train carried more than enough passengers each day in 2013 than would fill two of the Airbus planes typically used for short-haul flights in Europe, while ridership on Germany's night trains rose from about 60,000 to 1.5 million in the past decade.³⁶ There have even been traveling protests by pajama-clad rail advocates against overnight route discontinuances across the continent.³⁷ Many echo Zimmermann's sentiment

³³ O'Sullivan, Feargus. "Goodnight to Night Trains?" Blog. CityLab, October 28, 2014. <http://www.citylab.com/commute/2014/10/goodnight-to-night-trains/382012/>.

³⁴ Barrow, Keith. "Europe Needs a Shared Vision for Overnight Trains." Trade News. *International Railway Journal*, August 12, 2014. <http://www.railjournal.com/index.php/blogs/keith-barrow/europe-needs-a-shared-vision-for-overnight-trains.html>.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Op cit. O'Sullivan.

³⁷ Op cit. Connolly.

that these trains are not “the fastest way of getting there, [nor] the cheapest, [but] no doubt, the most memorable.”³⁸ As a *Financial Times* writer puts it, “the train retains attractions for those who still enjoy the process of travel.” He describes the camaraderie that comes more easily between strangers on a long train trip than on a shorter one or a flight, and how even the “fleeting glimpses” of passing landscapes “gave a sense of place; they helped make real the physical distance that separates London from Madrid, and gave the journey between the two a greater immediacy” than a flight does.³⁹

While Zimmermann blames the railroads for not sufficiently marketing these aspects of overnight trains to leisure travelers, the *Financial Times*' Tyler Brule says they aren't doing enough to woo business travelers. “The current services that shudder through Europe are not targeting a business traveler on an expense account so much as backpackers who are trading up to single-bed accommodation,” he claims. “The service is often next to non-existent, the facilities dirty and the carriages tired.” Brule suggests that railroads position themselves as alternatives to staying in a hotel and taking a very late or early flight, and that they partner with airlines to offer combination tickets (one way by rail, the other by air). “It might be worth getting together a good airline, a visionary rail company, a rolling stock manufacturer and a top hotel operator” to handle on-board services, he concludes.⁴⁰ O'Sullivan echoes this conclusion, saying it is possible to “provide [overnight trains] both for passengers looking for cheap travel and for people for whom the train itself is a destination.”⁴¹

³⁸ Op cit. Zimmermann, page 78.

³⁹ Green, Toby. “The Train in Spain Passes Mainly without Strain.” *Financial Times*. July 21, 2007, sec. FT Weekend - Travel.

⁴⁰ Brule, Tyler. “Overnight's the Way to Go: When Short-Haul Flights Mean Sleep Deprivation and Ungodly Hours, the Business Travel Market Is Ripe for Premium-Class Sleeper Trains.” *Financial Times*. May 22, 2004, sec. FT Weekend - Last Word.

⁴¹ Op cit. O'Sullivan.

While European railways and their passengers are in a much more advantageous position than passenger railroads and their riders in North America, there are clear parallels between the plights of long-distance trains on both continents. They are both hamstrung by not being on a fully level playing field policy-wise with their competition — highways and air travel — including unequal taxation. A lack of interregional cooperation (between countries and their national railways in Europe, and between states/provinces in North America) and a dearth of vision and innovation on the part of large companies that are bound by the often conflicting dictates of legislatures also plague both continents' passenger services.

Russia

Railroads are arguably even more politically, economically and culturally central to this vast nation spanning the Eurasian continent than they are within the European Union. Vast portions of Russia's landmass are only effectively reachable by train; train travel is part of the everyday lives of most Russians; and control of the railways — synonymous as it is with control of the territory — has been paramount for Russian leaders from Tzars Alexander III and Nicholas II, to the Soviet dictators, to current President Vladimir Putin. The Trans-Siberian Railway, a project personally overseen by the last Tzars that became the world's longest single rail line when finally completed in 1916, served the same nation-unifying role as the US's first transcontinental railroad, completed in 1869. "Russian literature is filled with romantic passages about train travel," writes Scott McDonald in *Russian Life* magazine.⁴² The government-owned Russian Railways generates about three percent of the country's GDP and has an annual budget of about \$6 billion. The company is thought to be rife with corruption, the full extent of which is not yet known.⁴³

⁴² McDonald, Scott. "Riding the Russian Rails." *Russian Life*, January 1996.

⁴³ Gaaze, Konstantin. "The Changing Price of Loyalty: What Does Vladimir Yakunin's Resignation Signify?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 21, 2015. <http://carnegieendowment.org/2015/08/21/changing-price-of-loyalty-what-does-vladimir-yakunin-s-resignation-signify/iezl>.

An NPR foreign correspondent who has ridden many Russian trains says shorter-distance (1,000 mile or less routes) trains tend to carry regular intercity commuters, while longer-distance ones are more populated with Russians going to see far-off families.⁴⁴ This suggests that Russians may make regular trips of longer average distances than Americans and other Europeans. He and other travelers have also described how lively Russian trains are, particularly how freely vodka flows and how easily Russian travelers tend to make new friends on trains.

While the overnight passenger services on the Trans-Siberian and other lines, some of the world's longest passenger train routes, are not in peril of shrinkage and disappearance the way those of western Europe and North America are, the government-owned Russian Railways nevertheless is facing financial difficulties that are impacting its passenger services. The company lost a record \$1.7 billion in 2002, owing mainly to the rising costs of running passenger trains, the BBC reported, and 15% of its freight revenues were being used to cross-subsidize passenger service, two-fifths of the equipment used for which was regarded as obsolete. Its losses declined to \$645 million in 2014, and were expected to decline further in 2015, helped in part by a 10% across-the-board fare increase.⁴⁵ Its farebox recovery ratio that year was 45%, comparable to the average for US commuter railroads, but well below figure of upwards of 80% that Amtrak has claimed for its most recent fiscal years. The BBC report blames rising automobile travel and lower air fares for the ridership decline.⁴⁶

The *International Railway Journal* reported in March 2013 that Russia's Finance Ministry planned to cut about \$170 million in subsidies for LDTs and divert it to aviation improvements,

⁴⁴ Smith, Erica. "NPR Host Shares His Trans-Siberian Journey, Views On Russia." St. Louis Public Radio, November 4, 2014. <http://news.stlpublicradio.org/post/npr-host-shares-his-trans-siberian-journey-views-russia>.

⁴⁵ Op cit. Gaaze.

⁴⁶ "Trains Struggle as Russians Turn to Cars." BBC. February 26, 2003, sec. Business. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/2800535.stm>.

arguing that statistics show that more Russians are opting to fly rather than take the train.⁴⁷ Russian Railways head Vladimir Yakunin, a political ally of Putin, had made repeated calls for greater government investment, but announced his resignation in August 2015, perhaps under pressure from Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, with whom Yakunin had clashed for years, and who has the power to appoint a successor.⁴⁸ Russian Railways' official corporate strategy envisions a 1.3 to 1.7-time increase in long-distance and interregional passenger service by 2030, in tandem with development of "high-speed and ultra high-speed service," but also "provides for a gradual decrease in the scope of traditional long-distance passenger service."⁴⁹ The railway wants to "preserve predominance of socially significant carriage in the regulated segment in the overall long-distance passenger turnover" while decreasing government subsidy and moving some passengers onto high-speed lines.⁵⁰ There has been no mention anywhere of eliminating routes or segments in Russia, a course of action critics often suggest for American and European railways.

China and Japan

Russia's southwestern neighbor, China, is another country where railroads are a backbone of the modern economy and a lever and conduit of political power. Like the Russian Federation, the People's Republic of China has exclusive ownership of the nation's rail lines, but the Chinese government exercises even more direct control over its railroads through the Ministry of Railways, which is a government department rather than a state-owned company. One oft-noted example of the political use of the Ministry is the 2006 completion of the Qinghai-Tibet

⁴⁷ Vorotnikov, Vladislav. "Russia to Cut Long-Distance Passenger Subsidies?" Trade News. *International Railway Journal*, March 19, 2013. <http://www.railjournal.com/index.php/main-line/russia-to-cut-long-distance-passenger-subsidies.html>.

⁴⁸ Op cit. Gaaze.

⁴⁹ Russian Railways. "Development Strategy of Russian Railways Holding for the Period Until 2030." Russian Railways. Accessed November 8, 2015. http://eng.rzd.ru/statice/public/en?STRUCTURE_ID=7, page 9.

⁵⁰ Ibid, pages 25-26.

Railway, the world's highest in elevation, completing a commercial link between Tibet and the outside world that Chinese regimes have sought for centuries and has aided the Han Chinese cultural assimilation of historically autonomous Tibet.⁵¹

China's role as chief supplier of inexpensive manufactured goods to the developed world is made possible in large part by a rail network that both cheaply and efficiently moves these goods to seaports and airports for export, and also moves masses of laborers from their widespread homes in the countryside to the major manufacturing centers, mostly near the coasts. It also returns these migrant workers to their home villages once every year in February for the Spring Festival, also known as Chinese New Year.⁵²

Crang and Zhang conducted a sociological study of this migrant population and the way they express themselves. They found that being a "floating population," at home neither in the city nor in their natal rural villages, was a key part of their identity, and that the shared experience of the mass movement home every February — often cited as the largest recurring mass migration in human history — is "characterized by specific corporealities, material cultures, and senses of social stratification."⁵³ Not being of a particular homeland, despite being in this position out of economic necessity, automatically makes the migrant workers lower-class in the eyes of tradition-bound Chinese society, with their position connoting "a potentially dangerous detachment from the moral order that in China has always been associated with strong connections to localities."⁵⁴

⁵¹ Mishra, Pankaj. "The Train to Tibet." *The New Yorker*, April 16, 2007. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/04/16/the-train-to-tibet>.

⁵² Crang, Mike, and Jie Zhang. "Transient Dwelling: Trains as Places of Identification for the Floating Population of China." *Social & Cultural Geography* 13, no. 8 (December 1, 2012): 895–914. doi:10.1080/14649365.2012.728617, pages 898-899.

⁵³ Ibid, page 895.

⁵⁴ Ibid, page 897.

“Migrant lives are seen as either here or there, and the route in-between is taken for granted,” and “travel itself is an extremely important part of this migration experience” and “a modality through which [migrant workers] experience oppression.” The annual travel ritual, characterized by waiting in line for days to buy a ticket and then being crammed into a third-class hard-seat coach with only enough room to stand, sit or lie down and no room to move about the coach or the train, binds the migrants in “shared misery.”⁵⁵

As with Russia and, at least historically, with Western Europe, the United States and Canada, Chinese long-distance passenger trains serve as a means of national cohesion and as a strong cultural symbol. Although China has invested great sums in building modern high-speed railways connecting its major cities in a mere fraction of the travel time offered by conventional trains, the fares on high-speed trains are out of reach for most working-class citizens. Thus, in contrast to the situation in Europe, there remains a large market for conventional overnight services making local stops and connecting major industrial cities to the distant hinterlands, so there seems little danger of shrinkage in the route network. There is simply no other economical means of moving such large quantities of people who cannot afford even the most basic of creature comforts while traveling. In the writings and poetry of the migrant workers, like the literary forms that accompanied the rise of this new-found form of mobility in 19th-century Europe and North America, Crang and Zhang perceive the evolution of a labor force physically and mentally prepared for the strenuous, low-wage labor that is key to China’s global prowess in manufacturing.⁵⁶

Crang and Zhang also make the more universal observation that “Public transport can not only be a site of mingling, being together, and face-to-face contact, but also a site of identity

⁵⁵ Ibid, page 896.

⁵⁶ Ibid, pages 896-897.

differentiation, segregation and the assertion of social hierarchies.”⁵⁷ Before there were trains to bring people into face-to-face contact for extended periods of time, societies were a lot less stratified. The Industrial Revolution intensified previous class divisions both by changing the economic relationships between people and by putting them in greater contact in the course of their daily travels, which spanned greater distances than previously possible. Freedman observes the same effect in Japan (see below), as does Wilken in Australia.⁵⁸ In China, the railroads have made the population mobile in a way it never was before, and created a new form of non-stationary “place” with which people identify, but this mobility is “disadvantaged, confined, and comes at a high price for [working class travelers’] dignity.”⁵⁹

Japan, while it lacks both the expansive landmass and the repressive authoritarian government of China, also supports a network of overnight passenger trains that enjoy broad public sympathy. In fact, the same Japanese railway companies that brought the world its first “bullet trains” in the mid-1960s also invested in new “luxury” overnight services that are described as akin to “a business hotel on wheels.” Instead of abandoning overnight routes, a West Japan Railway Company spokesman told the *Asian Wall Street Journal* in 1999, “we decided we had to change the trains to something new.” These high-dollar services were marketed to women using images of romance, as “a symbolic product to show the good side of railways,” according to the spokesman.⁶⁰

The experience of train travel has also had a tremendous effect on the formation of modern Japanese culture. It was the expansion of rail lines radiating from Tokyo in the 1910s

⁵⁷ Ibid, page 900.

⁵⁸ Wilken, Rowan. “Seen from a Carriage: A Rhythmanalytic Study of Train Travel and Mediation.” In *Trains, Culture and Mobility: Riding the Rails*, edited by Benjamin Fraser and Steven D. Spalding, 91–113. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012.

⁵⁹ Op cit. Crang and Zhang, page 911.

⁶⁰ Landers, Peter. “Luxury Sleeper Trains In Japan Lure Travelers With Image of Romance.” *Asian Wall Street Journal*. June 2, 1999, sec. Asian-Pacific News.

that caused the city's population to burgeon and brought different segments of society into regular contact for the first time — Freedman cites the example of married male white-collar workers commuting by train being seduced by teenaged girls taking the train to and from school. “The daily commute was implicated in and characteristic of changing sensory perceptions of urban crowds, shocks, and spectacles and in psychological adjustments to the new systems of signs and practices in the city,” Freedman observes. “Trains were places to watch and for being watched, and altered the way people viewed the landscape and each other.”⁶¹ The culture that these shared experiences brought about still largely defines Japan today.

Australia

The position of long-distance and overnight passenger trains in the Land Down Under has more in common with that of North America than with Europe or Asia. Most train services are concentrated along the east coast of the vast continental nation, with only three truly long-distance routes crisscrossing the continent, all operated by the same private company: the *Indian Pacific* (Sydney to Perth, east-west), *The Ghan* (Darwin to Adelaide, north-south) and *The Overland* (Adelaide to Melbourne, northwest-southeast). These trains earned revenues of \$86 million in 2014. Their operating firm, Great Southern Rail (GSR), was sold in early 2015 to an Australian private equity fund for \$3.7 million USD.⁶²

One difference between these two trains and their North American counterparts is that, like Canada's Rocky Mountaineer Railtours, they cater almost exclusively to foreign tourists and are priced accordingly. They run only twice a week, make almost no intermediate stops and are not intended to provide basic transportation to isolated communities in the vast Outback, while even VIA Rail's thrice-weekly (twice weekly in winter) *Canadian* provides a modicum of year-

⁶¹ Freedman, Alisa. “Commuting Gazes: Schoolgirls, Salarymen, and Electric Trains in Tokyo.” *Journal of Transport History* 23, no. 1 (March 2002): 23.

⁶² Fender, Keith. “Australian Long-Distance Passenger Operator Sold.” *Trains News Wire*, April 2, 2015. <http://trn.trains.com/news/news-wire/2015/04/australian-long-distance-passenger-operator-sold>.

round basic transportation to rural residents. Nevertheless, they receive annual federal government subsidies of \$6.6 million USD.⁶³

The Ghan operates over a line whose construction began in 1891 but was not completed until 2000. The line through some of earth's most desolate landscapes, which was widely panned as the "nowhere to nowhere" railway, is thriving with freight traffic, much of which used to go by truck. Before the global economic downturn of 2008, about a third of *The Ghan's* passengers came from overseas. Now, that number is closer to a fifth, but is growing again.

GSR does not see much less expensive internal flights as competition (one can fly between Darwin and Adelaide for a third the price of a coach ticket on the train and more than a tenth the price of a sleeper berth), as its passengers pay for the experience rather than the transportation, but is worried about cheaper flights to Asian tourist destinations chipping away at ridership.⁶⁴ In August 2015, the federal government announced it will cut GSR's subsidy starting in July 2016, which will force the company to halve the frequencies of *The Ghan* and the *Indian Pacific* to once weekly from twice weekly. Around half of these trains' riders (over 75% of those who are Australian residents) continue to receive discounted fares.⁶⁵

However, there are some long-distance routes within Australia's northeastern state of Queensland and southeastern state of Victoria that do provide basic transportation to rural residents, along with serving the tourist market, and do receive government subsidy. The state of Queensland subsidizes five train routes, with two receiving almost \$2,000 per trip, along with 16 long-distance motor coach routes and ten air routes. While the government officials quoted in an ABC (Australian Broadcasting Company) article expressed interest in paring down duplicative

⁶³ Smith, Kevin. "Iconic Australian Passenger Trains Suffer Subsidy Cuts." *International Railway Journal*, August 10, 2015. <http://www.railjournal.com/index.php/australia-nz/iconic-australian-passenger-trains-suffer-subsidy-cuts.html>.

⁶⁴ R.M. "Desert Train." *The Economist*, February 14, 2014. <http://www.economist.com/blogs/gulliver/2014/02/rail-australia>.

⁶⁵ Op cit. Smith.

services, they all expressed the importance of keeping the service going. “The train services that are delivering services for tourism, they will be preserved, they will be there,” said a member of the state’s parliament.⁶⁶ A citizens’ rail advocacy organization in Queensland, RAIL Back on Track, says these five rural routes “all add value to the economy of Queensland, directly and indirectly.” The group notes that public transportation services are also subsidized in the more populous southeastern portion of the state, and that the true cost of all types of transportation infrastructure and its environmental impacts is rarely fully considered.⁶⁷

Australian sociological researcher James Page notes that around 90% of all Australian train passengers receive reduced fares by holding a welfare concession card. He argues that the concession fare level should simply be made universal, which would make trains more price-competitive with increasingly inexpensive flights. He also suggests that the railways revisit the practice of not running LDTs into major city centers at peak commute times in order to free capacity for short-distance commuter trains, as this gives the long-hauls less convenient schedules. Australians have very little appetite for new high-speed rail lines compared even to Americans. Page maintains that the country’s demographics, the high capital costs of new lines and the need to make local stops to serve “rural and regional centres” make “bullet trains” impractical. He suggests that Australian politicians are too uncritically supportive of rail and should insist that railways focus on improving their services to attract riders or risk declining patronage that might justify funding cuts.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Arthur, Chrissy, and Paul Robinson. “Government Reviews Qld’s Long-Distance Travel Subsidies.” Text. *ABC News*, February 13, 2013. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-02-13/qld-government-reviews-long-distance-travel-subsidies/4515868>.

⁶⁷ Dow, Robert. “Queensland: Long Distance Passenger Rail Travel Is a Winner! (Press Release).” RAIL Back on Track, April 12, 2012. <http://railbotforum.org/mbs/index.php?topic=8113.0>.

⁶⁸ Page, James. “Reviving Long-Distance Passenger Rail in Australia.” Online Journal. *On Line Opinion*, December 2, 2013. <http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=15784>.

Conclusion

Operating long-distance passenger trains is a business in which is nearly impossible to make a profit, even when the bulk of the clientele are willing to pay thousands to utilize a travel mode that offers unmatched mobile comfort and even opulence, or when coaches are jam-packed as in China during the Spring Festival. Nevertheless, most parts of the world retain at least some level of LDT service, and governments often subsidize it (if they do not provide it directly) as a way of providing mobility and an affordable travel choice, particularly to residents of rural communities that have few other travel options, as well as to support their tourism industries. These trains are intertwined in the cultural fabric of every country they serve, though the degree to which they are seen as public utilities or extensions of the government seems to vary with countries' wealth. Wealthier countries like the United States and Australia tend to treat them as private enterprises, while less wealthy ones like China, India and Russia treat them largely as social enterprises. In western Europe, the two concepts are blended, with the recent unbundling of train operators from infrastructure owners and liberalized competition shifting attitudes more towards the private enterprise model.

While the last several decades have witnessed shrinkages in LDTs' frequencies and level of coverage, and in spite of persistent complaints that passenger train subsidies are wasteful, especially when less expensive air and/or bus service is plentiful, there remains enough political will in all the countries examined here to maintain at least some semblance of a national or continental network. Some say this is a case of nostalgia and sentimentality trumping economics. But passenger trains do offer a quality of social, cultural and ecological experience that no other overland travel mode yet devised can match — an experience that played a large role in shaping the cultures of modern, industrial societies. The world's governments have decided that preserving this experience for present and future generations, even in the most minimal fashion

— along with the external benefits that passenger trains generate (like those documented in Montana and attested to in eastern Canada and Queensland) — is something worth paying for. Trains’ capacity to move large quantities of travelers efficiently and with less pollution per passenger than other motorized modes also suggests that they will continue to play an important role in meeting the transportation needs of a growing and increasingly urbanized global population in an era of resource constraints and tremendous environmental challenges.

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