Panel: “State Institutions and Extermination Practices in Nazi Germany”

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Title: The German National Railway (Reichsbahn) Under the Nazi Regime: The Transformation from a Glorified Past to an Enduring Legacy of Horror

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Tina Gasnarez is a senior and is currently pursuing a B.S. in Secondary Education-Social Studies, and a Certificate in International Studies at IPFW. Recently, she earned the top undergraduate award for her history research poster at the 2014 Student Research and Creative Endeavor Symposium (IPFW), and is a recipient of a 2014-2015 Ron Venderly Scholarship Award. This summer, Tina plans to culminate her year of Holocaust studies and research by experiencing the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C.

Abstract

The German railway system heralded the country’s much-desired advancement towards modernity and prosperity. As early as 1814, German planners of the railway system envisioned their railway to be an innovative means of travel that it would boost unity, national strength, and increase trade with neighboring countries. However, one segment of the population would be noticeably absent from the initial phase of securing the financial support it needed to launch the railway system: Jews. Railway funding from Jews would be restricted until 1848. From its inception, anti-Semitism was rooted in the formation of Germany’s railway system. The early exclusionary practices by Germany’s railway planners against Jews set in motion a chain of events that would lead to the largest mass transit of humans to the Nazi concentration and death camps over one hundred years later. When Adolf Hitler became Germany’s Chancellor in January 1933, he immediately began to weave his Nazi ideology into every aspect of German life, and this included Germany’s most cherished enterprise, the German National Railway Company. The largely autonomous and apolitical railway company had successfully transported people and goods from East to West at dizzying speeds. It had become one of Germany’s largest employers and one of its most influential. However, the leader of Germany’s advancement towards modernity and prosperity suffered a massive derailment when its leaders allowed the railway system to become the Nazi regime’s own malevolent vessel: “The Most Valuable Asset of the Reich.” From the willing actors within the Reich who orchestrated the forced deportations of millions of Jews into the darkened cattle cars to the death camps in Eastern Europe, the Reichsbahn, as it was later renamed, was forever transformed from a symbol of national pride and progress into one with a horrific and enduring legacy rooted in anti-Semitism.

Bibliographical Note

For my research analysis, I utilized secondary sources about the history of the German railway system by noted historians, Alfred C. Miersejewski and Todd Samuel Presner. I read several books about the Holocaust inside Germany’s boxcars by authors such as Simone Gigliotti. In
addition, I read the personal testimonies during the Nürnberg Trials of the survivors on the Holocaust trains, as well as the SS officers who participated in Adolf Hitler’s final solution.