

# The Orient Express: Birth of a Legend

Angela Tate looks at the storied history of the world's most famous train

A PAIR OF KEEN eyes glancing at *The Times* on a certain morning in 1883 would have discovered a small paragraph detailing the inaugural voyage of the new, quick railway service linking Paris and Constantinople. By the 1880s, the premiere of a railway service would normally incite the barest curiosity — but this was no ordinary train, this was the Orient Express. However, the train, for all its aura of glamour and mystery, nonetheless emerged from humbler origins, in the guise of a young Belgian banker, Georges Nagelmackers.

## Nagelmackers' Dream

Born in 1845 to a wealthy and well-connected family, close with the royal family of Belgium, young Nagelmackers dreaded the thought of a lifetime stuck in the sedate, ponderous world of finance. He dreamt of trains. Not just any sort of train, but a luxurious, elegant train that would combine the highest levels of comfort with travel to exotic destinations. During Nagelmackers' youth, trains had rapidly changed the way everyone traveled. From royal to farmhand, the railway enabled travel for all, in a moderately comfortable and expedient manner. He wished to take train travel another step: a transcontinental railway. But would European nations, politically complex and mutually suspicious, relax their guard to welcome his train?

To escape a failed love affair, his parents sent the young man abroad, hoping the new sights and sounds of America would cure him. Nagelmackers was instantly infected with the ideals of the young country. The Civil War had ended, and prosperity was in the air; with it, the newly built transcontinental railway linking America "from sea to shining sea." Traveling everywhere, Nagel-

mackers was inspired by the cooperation of rival companies and fascinated by the new experience of big passenger cars built as saloons. In cars decked out with mirrors, carved woodwork and ingenious methods of turning upholstered seats into sleeping bunks for night travel, the Americans, unlike their European counterparts, were

scription or the purchase of stock in the company.

Nagelmackers experienced another series of setbacks, this time that of a war, and a disreputable and wily American business partner by the name of Colonel Mann. But he bounced back, and the company was reborn as La Compagnie Interna-



The Orient Express is shown departing Vienna for Paris in this undated photo.

building specially designed vehicles for comfort and luxury.

Nagelmackers spent just over a year in America before returning, full of plans. His father was just as enthused and amazed by Nagelmackers' impressions, and together, they proposed the organization of a railway company to King Leopold II of Belgium. Combining the methods of American ingenuity and European elegance, Nagelmackers et Cie was formed. With the King's name heading the list of subscribers, and a letter of introduction from Leopold, it was guaranteed that every social climber in Belgium, and those related to the King, would eagerly contribute to either the sub-

tionale des Wagon-Lits. He now negotiated running rights for Wagon-Lits over various lines, linking Paris to other capitols, such as Rome and Berlin, and Calais, for the British trade. He introduced his first dining-car on a trial run from Marseilles to Nice. Despite its tiny kitchen and saloons set aside for both sexes, it was a huge success, and Nagelmackers felt ready to realize his dream.

## The Orient Express

The fashionably dressed, obviously wealthy crowd milling about Paris' Gare de l'Est the evening of 4 October 1883 was waiting to be awed. Heavily advertised by Wagon-Lits months in advance, newspapers christened it a "land liner" and a "grand hotel on wheels" — one headline colorfully proclaiming it "The Magic Carpet to the Orient". Grandiose names for a train it seems, but this was the sort of publicity Nagelmackers deserved, as a reward for the painstaking journey to this inaugural trip. Previous years found him personally following the tortuous routes around Europe to find the best possible way to link Paris and Constantinople, and negotiating rights for a train made entirely of Wagon-Lits to cover the journey, via Strasbourg, Vienna and Bucharest, forming the Orient Express. Now, the magnificent train was making its premiere.

Amongst the selected dignitaries invited aboard the train's maiden voyage were novelist and journalist Edmond About, and Henri Opper de Blowitz, Paris correspondent for *The Times*. Both have left delightful accounts of their trip aboard the train, and, that night, as they mingled with other important guests, they were ready to be impressed. As the Orient Express chugged into the station, resplendent in "gleaming, royal-blue livery picked out with gold", its glorious interiors were lit by gas lamps from within, allowing those standing on the darkened quay a peek inside the magnificent vehicle in which they were to travel.

The passengers entered the train and met further splendors. Each car accommodated 20 passengers, and the compartments, paneled in teak and mahogany with inlaid marquetry, featured plush, leather-embossed seats which at night, were converted to beds and covered with silk sheets, the finest wool blankets and counterpanes filled with the lightest of eiderdown. About accounted his delight in the train, testing the speaking tube providing communication with the conducteur, and

the toilet cabinet, which featured Italian marble fixtures and decorated porcelain basins. During his explorations he noticed a servant stationed outside the door. His duty? To clean the cabinet after

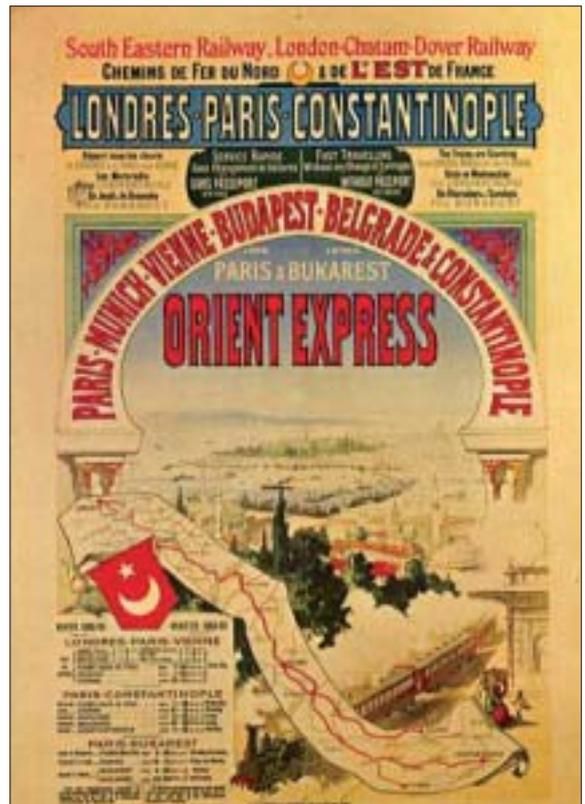
lery and plates of the finest porcelain, gold-rimmed and adorned with the crest of the Compagnie. Waiters attired in powdered wigs, tailcoats, breeches and stockings circulated through the car. The



Above: Route of the Orient Express. Right: Poster advertising the Winter 1888-1889 timetable for the Orient Express.

each use in preparation for its next occupant.

What most impressed passengers was the dining car. Gas chandeliers cast light on a scene of opulence: at one end, for ladies, a double compartment fitted with delicate Louis XV furniture and wall tapestries imitating Watteau, and at the other, an ornately furnished gentlemen's smoking room, filled with bookcases featuring reading materials from England, France, Germany and Austria. Between them was the dining salon. Scarcely a surface was free of carved scrolls, cornices and scallops, curlicues and swags of flowers in marquetry and gilt. Tables laid with snowy damask cloth, with napkins folded to form butterfly patterns, were completed by settings made up of the finest Baccarat crystal, solid silver cut-



conducteurs and their attendants were scarcely less elegantly appointed in peak cap, gold-braided uniform and highly polished boots in the Compagnie's signature royal blue.

As the train made its way across France towards Bavaria,

male passengers quickly discovered a most important amenity as they shaved for supper. Wagon-Lits were equipped with brand-new bogies, enabling men to shave, for the first time, without fear of cutting their throats.

In the tiny, cramped quarters of the kitchen placed at the end of the dining car, the chef de cuisine and his staff aboard the train worked miracles. Not only were they expected to provide the rich, heavy dishes favored by passengers, but cultural specialties, such as kosher or halal meals, were to be accommodated — even at the last minute, as one chef discovered when a Maharajah traveling with his wives desired spiced lamb during a storm. Passenger quirks were to be catered to, as in the case of an Austrian archduchess who would feed her three poodles only slices of milk-fed calf, or a British financier who only ordered a light soufflé with dry biscuit and a morsel of cheese.

### Spies' Train

The Orient Express, running through the Continent's most sensitive areas, became a perfect mode of travel for the secret agents of many nations, and the channel used for the collecting and passing of intelligence. The Queen's Messengers of England, and the couriers diplomatiques of France forged contracts with Wagon-Lits for the provision of reserved compartments once a week on the train, cost being paid whether accommodation was used or not. Nearly always retired officers up to the rank of colonel, and distinguished war veterans, Queen's Messengers could be recognized by sight: each wore a badge with the emblem of a silver greyhound, the elaborately sealed bag handcuffed to their wrist for added security. In contrast, French couriers traveled inconspicuously, impeccably dressed and sometimes accompanied by a beautiful woman, allowing them to easily pose as a wealthy, idle passenger.

Other, more sinister passengers who kept alive the dangerous, mysterious aura that surrounded the train were Basil Zaharoff and

Calouste Gulbekian. The former, an Anatolian arms dealer, used the Orient Express to complete his illicit transactions; the latter, an Armenian oil tycoon, also known as "Mr. Five Percent", due to his practice of taking that amount from every oil concession he brokered, used the train to combine pleasure trips and intelligence

the site of the Armistice Convention in 1918, where the Allies accepted German surrender. However, 22 years later, that same car was hauled to Compiegne by Hitler, where he accepted French surrender. The car was shipped to Berlin and then destroyed in 1945 when the Axis powers began losing the war.



Above: The Orient Express trapped in snow, 62 miles from Istanbul.  
Below: Agatha Christie's room at the Hotel Pera Palas in Istanbul where she wrote *Murder on the Orient Express*.



Photo by Steve Hopson, www.stevhopson.com

gathering.

A natural result of the tensions and intrigues not only aboard the train, but in embassies and royal courts of Europe was the First World War. Wagon-Lits found its service curtailed and then interrupted for the duration of the war. A consolation to the seizure of the remaining cars behind the Western front by Germany — who promptly consolidated them into a line named "Mitropa" and connecting Berlin with Constantinople — was the use of car No 2419 as

### Heyday of the Orient Express

The last thing on anyone's mind at the end of the modern world's first catastrophic war was the pleasurable, frivolous train service linking Paris with the decadent Orient. Foremost in thought was the drastic transformation of Europe's map: mighty empires had fallen, and from them, unstable republics and socialist states carved. Miles of tracks lay mangled and Wagon-Lits' missing trains curtailed a new beginning. But politicians, eager for a return to a past peace

included an article in the Treaty of Versailles, addressing the need for an international train service.

Instead of the original route, to avoid Germany, the Orient Express transformed to the Simplon-Orient Express by use of the tunnel built in Italy prior to the war and completed in 1932. This new route connected Paris to the newly named Istanbul, via Milan, Venice and Yugoslavia. Despite its inauspicious beginnings, the interwar period was to create and cement in popular culture, the glamour and mystery of the Orient Express.

Most of that myth was promulgated by Agatha Christie's mystery, *Murder on the Orient Express*. In it, Christie's dapper detective, Hercule Poirot, solved a mystery aboard the train while trapped in a snowdrift. But this calamity did befall the Orient Express! On a trip occurring late January 1929, the train was lost in the snow just over the Turkish border. Weather conditions in Europe that winter had been appalling and a blizzard set in, freezing

major rivers, ports and canals, and swift winds swept from Russia to Austria. All motion had frozen, except the Orient Express. Wagon-Lits' concern for its reputation forced the train to press on despite worsening weather and after reaching Turkey, the train shuddered to a halt. It remained that way for six days, until Turkish troops, laden with provisions and a motorized sledge came to the rescue.

Fictionalized portrayals of the train abounded, including Graham Greene's *Stamboul Train* and Eric Ambler's *The Mask of Dimitrios*, while Hitchcock immortalized the train in his classic thriller, *The Lady Vanishes*. Even James Bond made an appearance aboard. Through these mediums, the Orient Express was now immersed in popular culture. Little did anyone know a train of its kind would never be seen again.

#### **Requiem for a Train**

The introduction of cheap, non-stop flights from Europe's major

capitals, and the arrival of the Boeing 707, confirmed the dawn of a new age in travel. No longer was the journey considered a part of vacation; it simply was the quickest route between two points. The Orient Express limped on in the post-WWII years, shuffling routes and shortening them in an effort to compete with airlines. Though travel by train was less expedient, it was most convenient for avoiding long lines and waiting periods. But the sort of passenger who could afford — and desire — this mode of travel diminished quickly over the following decades until Wagon-Lits could no longer afford to operate the line. When a final journey was announced and the line broken up — with select cars sold at auction — those who remembered the train were only left with fading memories and the knowledge that never again would there exist such a train to capture the imagination of the masses.

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