



# RAILROADS I. THE FIRST RAILROAD BUILT AND OPERATED IN PERSIA

---

During the three decades between the 1850s and the 1880s various French, Belgian, British, Russian and American concerns attempted to introduce railways to Persia, but these did not materialize, either due to lack of adequate capital or because of the Anglo-Russian rivalry (Jamālzāda, pp. 87-88; Lorini, pp. 158-59; Maḥbubi Ardakāni, II, pp. 321-24). In December 1886, a French engineer and concession-hunter by the name of Fabius Boital received a concession from Naṣer-al-Din Shah to build a small Decauville railway from the capital Tehran southwards to the Shrine of Šāh ‘Abd-al-‘Azim, a popular site of pilgrimage in Ray, a distance of about 6 miles. In addition, Boital received a concession for the construction of tramways in Tehran (Churchill, 27 Aug. 1888 p. 16; “Memorandum on Persian Railways”). Probably due to a shortage of money, Boital sold both concessions to a Belgian company named “La Société Anonyme des Chemins de Fer et Tramways en Perse,” founded in Brussels on 17 May 1887. The company had a capital of 2 million francs (“Acte,” p. 865).

The rail concession provided the Belgian company with the exclusive rights to construct and operate a railway line from Qazvin to Qom through Tehran and Šāh ‘Abd-al-‘Azim for 99 years (“Concession,” p. 45). The president of its executive board was Edouard Otlet (1842-1907), a Belgian international



businessman with a great deal of experience in railroad construction in both Europe and the United States. Another famous international businessman of the time, who was member of the company's executive board, was Lazare Salmonovitch Poliakov (1842-1913), dubbed "The Rothschild of Russia" ("Rapport," p. 8; Gordon to Reuter).

Although the large number of pilgrims (over 300,000 per annum) who visited the shrine (Curzon, I, 617) promised handsome returns for the company, its executives wanted much more: a railway line connecting the Caspian Sea and the south, and passing through Tehran (Oulet à Barbanson). This did not materialize because speedy means of communications connecting the north and south of Persia ran contrary to both British and Russian interests (d'Erp à Caraman Chimay; Wolff to Salisbury, 25 April 1890).

The Tehran-Šāh 'Abd-al-'Azim line was a single line, composed of an 80-centimeters gauge main line, 5.5 miles in length, connecting the capital and the shrine, and of two branch lines, 2.5 miles in length, which connected the main line with some limestone quarries in the hills south-east of the capital. The main line was completed on 31 May 1888, with the opening ceremony, in the presence of the shah, taking place in July 1888. The branch lines were completed in 1893 (Houtum-Schindler, p. 625; Beyens, 1898, p. 14). The locals called the train *māšin dudi* ('smoke vehicle,' i.e., steam engine) and the terminals – *gār* (*gare*) as in French (Amāni).

The task of constructing the line was very difficult since the Belgian company needed to transfer all the necessary equipment – rails, 21 wagons, 4 steam locomotives, etc. – all by sea from Antwerp to Batum on the Black Sea, then by land through the Transcaucasian Railway to Baku, then by sea again to Anzali on the Caspian Sea, and from there once more by land and on the back of animals, through difficult terrain, to Tehran through Qazvin. The weather, customs clearance, shipments and re-shipments, were part of the other difficulties, which the Belgian team, headed by the engineers Guillon, Denis, and Julien, had to face ("Le premier chemin de fer en Perse," p. 1; "Rapport," pp. 3-5; Beyens, p. 14; Curzon, I, p. 617). In order to minimize the difficulties involved in the cumbersome process of shipping from Belgium to Persia, Denis established a workshop in Baku for packing the material from Belgium, bought animals from Tbilisi for transportation, purchased part of the rails from Russia, built boats for river transport, and employed local workers for maintaining the roads. By these steps he was able to transfer more than 1,000 tons of equipment from Raštto Tehran, but these measures proved very costly.



(“Rapport,” pp. 5-6; Curzon, I, p. 617).

The Tehran terminal, a building in the European style, was situated in the southeast of the capital, near the Darvāza-ye Khorasan Street, some 150 meters from the main bazaar. There were two waiting rooms, one on each end, one for men and the other for women, while in the middle of the building there was a hall for the shah. Separate wagons were allocated for men and women. The latter formed a considerable part of the line’s clientele. The line itself passed over a 26 meter-long bridge and a plain covered by trees. It was operated by a staff of five Europeans and sixty Persians (“Le premier chemin de fer en Perse,” p. 1; Amāni; Curzon, I, p. 618).

The train and the journey by it were clearly strange for the local population, and this caused many accidents and produced many superstitious rumors. For example, at the beginning people were reluctant to board the train, which appeared to them as a fire-spitting giant. The Belgian company, which did not anticipate such a financially disastrous outcome, complained to the shah. In order to allay public fears, the shah ordered high-ranking individuals and the commanders of the army to travel with him by train to Šāh ‘Abd-al-‘Azīm. Following their example, local passengers, including clerics, began to use the train. But soon a number of factors caused a decline in the number of passengers: First, the growing number of fatal accidents involved in operating the line; second, the train was labeled ‘Satan’s work’ by clerics, after one of them was run over by it; third, the short distance that it covered meant that many people continued to prefer the leisurely pace of walking or riding on donkeys; and fourth, the relatively expensive price of the tickets was an inhibiting factor (Curzon, I, pp. 617-18; Maḥbubi Ardakāni, II, 325-27; E’temād al-Salṭana, 1991, I, pp. 664, 688; Idem., 1984, p. 52; Wolff to Salisbury, 4 & 6 November 1888; Churchill, n.d.).

Although the line continued to operate until 1962, public use of it was constantly on the decline. Already in 1901 it was reported to be making only a few sporadic journeys. This deteriorated even further with the growing use of road transportation. [Houtum-Schindler](#) believed that had the Russian capitalists not been interested in the enterprise, the company would have been liquidated much earlier than it was (Amāni; “Rapport sur différentes entreprises projetées en Perse; Houtum-Schindler, p. 625). It was not until 1938 that a long railway network was finally established in Iran (Melamid, p. 558).



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

“Acte”: “L’acte de constitution de la société du 17 mai 1887”, *Recueil spécial des actes, extraits d’actes, procès-verbaux et documents relatifs aux Sociétés*, Brussels, 1887, XV, pp. 865-69.

Ḥamida Amāni, “Farār az čark-a-ye nābudi: Eḥyā-ye baqāyā-ye māšin dudi-e k-aṭṭ-e āhan-e Tehrān Šāh ‘Abd-al-‘Azim,” *Hamšahri*, 25 Bahman 1383 Š./13 February 2005, accessed April 7, 2008.

Baron E. Beyens, *Commerce et industrie de la Perse*, Brussels, 1898.

Sidney J. A. Churchill, Memo, at the Shah’s Camp, 27 August 1888, enclosure in no. 13, Sir Henry Drummond Wolff to the Marquis of Salisbury, Gulahek [Golhak], 10 September 1888, FO 539/40 (Confidential 5755).

Idem, Memo, n.p., n.d., enclosure 4 in no. 18, Drummond Wolff to Marquis of Salisbury, Tehran, 27 September 1888, FO 539/40.

“Concession”, enclosure in no. 58, Sir Henry Drummond Wolff to the Marquis of Salisbury, Tehran, 8 October 1888, FO539/40 (Confidential 5755).

Moḥammad Ḥasan Kān E’temād al-Salṭana Šani’ al-Dowla Marāga’i, *Ruznāma-ye k-āṭerāt-e E’temād al-Salṭana*, ed. F. Sarāmad, Tehran, 1991.

Idem, *Al-Ma’āter wa al-āṭār*, ed. I. Afšār, Tehran, 1984.

Le Baron Maximilien d’Erp à Caraman Chimay, Tehran, 10 décembre 1891, *Archives du Ministère des Affaires étrangères de Belgique*, Brussels, dossier 2889 II (1887-1908).

“Extrait pour B Original A. 3467 Légation de Belgique no. 1/1. Lettre d’accompagnement St. Petersbourg, 2 janvier 1889, suivi d’un annexe: extrait du *Journal de Saint Petersbourg*, 1889”, p. 2, *ibid.*

General T. Gordon (former British military attaché in Tehran) to Baron Julius Reuter (President of the Imperial Bank of Persia), Paris, 1 February 1894, FO539/48.



Albert Houtum-Schindler, "Persia," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, XXXI, 1902 (10th ed.), pp. 617-627.

Sayyed Moḥammad 'Ali Jamālzāda, *Ganj-e šāyegān: Awza'-e eqtešādi-e Irān*, new ed., Tehran, 1997.

Eteocle Lorini, *La Persia: Economica Contemporanea e la sua Questione Monetaria*, Rome, 1900.

Ḥosayn Maḥbubi Ardakāni, *Tāriḳ-e mo'assesāt-e tamaddoni-e jādid dar Irān*, 3 vols., Tehran, 1978.

A. Melamid, "Communications, Transport, Retail Trade and Services" in *Camb. Hist. Iran*, I, pp. 552-564.

"Memorandum on Persian Railways," India Office, London, 20 June 1911, FO371/1186.

Otlet à Barbanson, 3 Juin 1887 (copie), *Archives Générales du Royaume*, Brussels, *Fonds Otlet*, liasse 4.

"Le premier chemin de fer en Perse," *L'Etoile Belge*, 7 juin 1888.

"Rapport": "Société Anonyme des Chemins de Fer et Tramways en Perse, Assemblée générale du 4 juin 1888: Rapport," *Archives du Ministère des Affaires étrangères de Belgique*, Brussels, dossier 2889 II (1887-1908).

Sir Drummond Wolff to Marquis of Salisbury, Tehran, 4 November 1888, FO539/40, no. 66, p. 54.

Idem to idem, Tehran, 6 November 1888, no. 127, FO 539/40, pp. 106-7.

Idem to idem, Tehran, 25 April 1890 (most secret and confidential), FO 539/48.

"Rapport sur différentes entreprises projetées en Perse," 1 Octobre 1901, no. 226/84, in "Perse: Industries, Enterprises, Divers", Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, minute, Brussels, le 8 Novembre 1901, *Archives du Ministère des Affaires étrangères de Belgique*, Brussels, dossier 2890 VIII, no. 1360/25.