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Autor:	Della Gana, Giles
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The Schweizerische Nationalbahn

by Giles Della Gana

It would not be unreasonable to say that railway promotion and construction in Switzerland was a fairly orderly business. Thus current operators have been spared the expensive duplication of routes and facilities that helped to weaken railway finances in Britain. However there was a brief period during the 1860s and 70s when there was an outbreak of railway rivalry. Part of the trouble seems to have been a clash of personalities, rather like that of Sir Edgar Watkin of the South Eastern Railway and James Staats Forbes of the London, Chatham and Dover fighting it out in south east England to the ruination of both companies.

The moving spirit behind the so-called Schweizerische Nationalbahn (SNB) was a banker and politician named Stampfli. He was bitterly opposed to the power and influence of Alfred Escher, head of the Schweizerische Nordostbahn (NOB) (See part 3) and later, the Gotthardbahn. Stampfli was three times President of the Confederation and, from 1861, an advocate of railway nationalisation. Resigning from the Federal Council in 1863, he took over the management of the Federal Bank, which he had been instrumental in founding, to further his railway plans. He joined with the political and business interests based in Winterthur that were also opposed to Escher, the SNB being formed on 5 April 1875.

A scheme for a railway from Winterthur, branching near Etzwilen, to Singen and Kreuzlingen/Konstanz was promoted in July 1872. These lines were opened on 17 July 1875 shortly after their incorporation into the SNB. A westward thrust from Winterthur to Lake Geneva was planned, but the purchase of the Olten-Solothurn-Busswil Gaubahn, by which it would have gained access to the lake, by the Schweizerische Centralbahn (SCB) resulted in the scheme being cut back to Zofingen. As the whole SNB enterprise was promoted by politicians for political ends, rather than

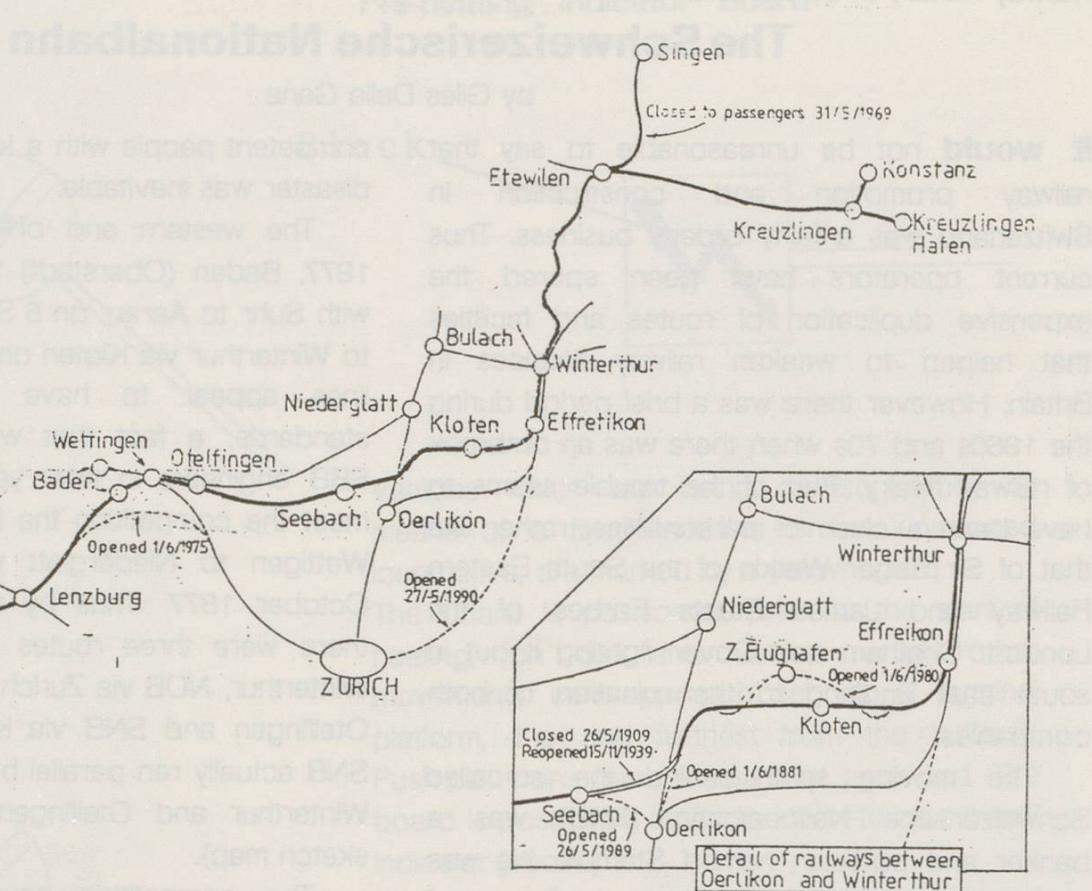
competent people with a knowledge of railways, disaster was inevitable.

The western end of the SNB opened in 1877, Baden (Oberstadt) to Zofingen, together with Suhr to Aarau, on 6 September and Baden to Winterthur via Kloten on 5 October. The SNB lines appear to have been built to low standards, a fact that was to inconvenience SBB engineers in later years (see below). To meet the competition the NOB built a line from Wettigen to Niederglatt which opened on 1 October 1877. Thus by the end of the year there were three routes between Baden and Winterthur, NOB via Zurich, NOB via Bulach and Otelfingen and SNB via Kloten. The NOB and SNB actually ran parallel between Effretikon and Winterthur and Otelfingen and Wettigen (see sketch map).

The competition severely weakened the NOB (again, see part 3) and devastated the SNB. The death blow came with the failure to gain access to Zurich and in 1878 the Federal Council ordered the company to be wound up. The various communes affected took over working on a temporary basis.

The company was put up for auction on 30 August 1879, but failed to find a purchaser. A second attempt found the section east of Winterthur passing to the Federal Bank at Bern who sold it, at a loss, to the NOB from 1 June 1880. The western section of line was also taken over by the NOB from 1 October 1880. Surplus track was removed between Effretikon and Winterthur in 1880 and Otelfingen and Wettigen in 1882, the former SNB line being diverted into Oerlikon in 1881 (again see map). The whole affair was a financial disaster, the project had cost SFr 31 million, of which only SFr 4 million was recovered by sale, the cantons and towns who had put up the money having to bear its loss. The Federal court was to be occupied with disputes into the present century.

There is an interesting, if not ironic, sequel



The Schweizerische Nationalbahn

to the story of the SNB. When the SBB were building the Heitersburg cut-off, opened 1 June 1975, their engineers followed the NOB route from the Lenzburg area. Although not all of the alignment could be used owing to its sharp curvature, three piers of the Fislisbach viaduct, raised by 2.2m, were incorporated into a new structure for the high speed line. The Zurich

Flughafen line, opened in 1980, more or less follows the course of the SNB through Kloten, though 75% of the new route lies underground. The NOB line from Niederglatt to Oetelfingen was closed by the SBB on 6 March 1969 and the line from Etzwilen to Singen closed to passengers on 31 May of the same year.

Publications Consulted

Modern Railways

August 1975 and June 1980

Schienennetz Schweiz

Hans G. Wagli, Sébastien Jacobi and Roland Probst

The Railways of Switzerland

Railway Gazette Publication 1947



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