Touring between war and peace

Imagining the ‘transcontinental motorway’, 1930–1950

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Why shouldn’t we already get used to the idea that Laplanders will spend their summer vacations on the Nile and Ghandi’s followers will put snow-chains on their tyres and participate in the yearly rallies to Nordkap. . . . Much too much the notion reigns in this world that the automobile is a national means of transport, while already whole continents may be crossed quickly, comfortably and reliably by car and intercontinental travel is only a matter of [a few] years away.¹

In a solemn ceremony on 23 November 1939 a representative of the Yugoslav royal house cut a tricolour ribbon on a new bridge across the river Save at Belgrade, thus inaugurating a stretch of road reaching from Belgrade to the Hungarian border. Following a brief religious ceremony, the Yugoslav Minister of Public Works spoke of the road’s significance:

The obligations we have accepted and the fact that the Western states, as well as Hungary, have constructed their part, have faced us with a pressing duty. When one considers our financial possibilities and the length of the route we had to build, one must recognise that we have, in a short period of time, constructed the majority of the road which measures 551km in length. Only 175km remain to be achieved.

The traffic on this section of the international road from Belgrade to the Hungarian border, with a length of 203km, that we open today, will bind our capital to the large countries of Europe.²

While it is clear from his words that other nations were the driving force in the road’s construction, the Minister refrained from mentioning any of them by name except neighbouring Hungary. Most of his audience will have known, however, that he was speaking of the road from London to Istanbul.

The London to Istanbul road was an initiative proposed in 1930 by the Alliance Internationale de Tourisme (AIT), an international confederation of auto and bicycle touring clubs, to create an international road specifically
for automobiles. Within a few short years they successfully lobbied eight European governments to adopt it into their national road-building plans. In the years that followed, the road garnered considerable publicity in the motoring world and captured the interest of the International Red Cross and the League of Nations. Even after the Second World War had ultimately stopped its construction, images of it appeared as both hope and legend into the early years of the Cold War.

What was it about this particular project that inspired such a response from both governments and certain publics in many different countries? On one level, it was just one of several plans proposed during the interbellum for a motorway system throughout Europe, none of which came to fruition before the start of the Second World War. Rather than view it as a failed project, however, as in the historiography to date, the point of departure for this study is the project’s relative success. Although determining the level of the road’s actual completion is problematic, the road was undeniably under construction for a number of years, and more than once reported to exist.

To understand the persuasive power of the AIT’s road plan we must understand its ability to reflect and mobilise specific visions of automobility. This means looking beyond mere expediencies of ‘transport’ to understand the culture that surrounded the automobile at that point in time. As Kurt Möser reminds us, ‘many features of this “means of transport” have little to do with transport as a utilitarian function but much to do with non-rational, or symbolic, social and psychological choices’. Roads are of course intricately linked with such cultures, and indeed played a large part in creating the expectations and desire for automobiles in many parts of Europe well before there were cars to fill them. The legends surrounding the German Autobahn provide ample evidence of the powerful symbolism of roads, even when there were relatively few cars to drive upon them. The beginning of the 1930s marked roughly the end of the automobile’s ‘uneven victory march’ from plaything of the rich to a technology that was well embedded in law, society and everyday life. This was far from the era of ‘mass motorisation’, however. While cars had an assured place on roads built for and shared with other modes of transport, they were still relatively rare, and the notion of roads strictly for automobiles was mostly in its infancy.

Beyond trying to understand the road as a mere conduit for automobility in general, we must also consider the specific practice(s) of tourism for which it was constructed. Particularly we must explore tourism as both a response to, and an engine of, modernity, closely tied into modern ideas of work and leisure time, modern technologies of transport, and the modern desire to gaze upon ‘authentic’ and often pre-modern places. Tourism is thus as much about building modern structures as about mobilising images and identities.

Many studies have shown the way tourism and tourist organisations have fundamentally shaped transport technologies. Tourism has also played an
important role in a number of nation-building projects in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A road for tourism is not only a means of getting from place to place but a means of mobilising specific visions and meanings of the places through and to which it leads. While ‘tourism’ after the First World War connoted leisure travel by any number of means, and still most often via rail, the field of activity supported by the AIT was explicitly limited to leisure travel by car or bicycle. This is an important distinction, for while tourism in its broader sense was within reach of some greater segments of society, road touring in private automobiles was still mostly restricted to the wealthier classes in the 1930s. In an era when ever larger groups of people were being mobilised through package holidays via train and motor coach, touring in private cars provided many of those who were better off with the means of getting away from the ‘beaten track’ of tourism.

Finally, we must see the road in its transnational context, and explore how various meanings of the road worked across national boundaries. This is an important consideration, for while most European observers in the inter-war period saw cars as national objects, ‘a car’s notionally unique national qualities depend in part on how motoring audiences from other nations regard it as both artefact and image once it travels, literally and figuratively, across national borders’. Indeed, popular images of automobiles and automobilism appeared frequently in international contexts. The clash of nations in the First World War, and subsequent tourism to its battlefields, played an important role in making automobiles both visible and desirable. Other international activities, such as races and rallies, stories of long, adventurous motor tours and even motor shows all highlighted the nationality of both cars and drivers. While both tourism and road building also provided ample space for mobilising national stereotypes and drawing national comparisons, both processes were fundamentally concerned with smoothing the literal and figurative path of car and driver across those national boundaries. As such, they provide us with an interesting case to explore how meanings of automobility were produced and negotiated at an international level.

In what follows I explore the way in which the various visions and practices of international auto tourism shaped both the planning process and the physical representation of the road itself. I first provide an account of the planning process of the AIT, beginning with the road’s proposal and tracing its progress roughly until the start of the Second World War. I point in particular to the profound tension visible at many levels of the project between the practices of tourism and other forms of automobility for which the road was also nominally intended. In the next section I explore this tension further by showing how notions of rationality and utility were mapped on to the road as an essential part of its ‘modernity’. In the final section I show how place images of its route, particularly contemporary notions of ‘East’ and ‘West’, entered simultaneously into narratives of modernisation and of touristic desirability.
The AIT was, and remains to this day, a confederation of various national motoring and bicycle clubs, founded in 1919 out of the acrimonious ashes of the Ligue Internationale des Associations Touristes, or LIAT, that had been torn apart by the First World War. In regular correspondence, and in annual meetings, the group co-ordinated the exchange of touring information between the various clubs, lobbied collectively for the needs of motorists and even maintained an international ‘black list’ of motorists who violated its rules. Although its member clubs were from all over the world, the central core was European, with another substantial sub-set consisting of Europeans living in the colonies. Most members of the AIT thus belonged to a cosmopolitan class that had moved relatively freely across borders before the First World War. Acting in that spirit, the AIT was instrumental in developing and promoting the system of triptychs and carnets de passage et douane for cross-border automotive travel. These documents, obtainable through local touring clubs, allowed (relatively) swift clearing of borders for motorists—vital in an era where automobiles were considered luxury goods liable for import duties at national borders. In sum, the AIT was made up of more or less wealthy men who were well accustomed to bending the ears of governments on behalf of the needs of the motorist.

This was the group to which representatives of the British Automobile Association (AA) first proposed the plan in the closing moments of its annual general meeting in Istanbul in 1930. Besides a suggested route, the proposal contained eight points for the relevant touring clubs to take up with their respective governments. Particularly in light of some of the grand rhetoric that would come to surround the road, the actual proposal was relatively modest. Of eight points, only the first three involved actual road-building work. The remaining points were measures for making the journey convenient for the touring driver, and included special twenty-four-hour frontier posts, special signs, maps and information for the route and any necessary hotel improvements. Most significantly, the plan nowhere advocated building new roads, merely adapting existing roads to the stated purpose.

The British imprint upon the road was clear from the start, with its starting point of London and its destination clearly intertwined with British colonial ideas. At the time the plan was proposed the possibility of its extension to India was mentioned, and at the AIT’s 1932 meeting the proposal had been fleshed out to two extensions to the road that would be built from Istanbul, one travelling east to Calcutta, the other branching south to Cape Town (Figure 1). Even though the road did not pass through the Netherlands, the Dutch added their own imperial vision by proposing an extension to their colonies in Indonesia. In this regard the road plan resembled the routes of the first civil aviation carriers in Europe, such as the British Imperial Airways, the Dutch KLM and Air France, which had begun to offer services to exotic, non-European destinations for the elite, individual tourist. They further showed some resemblance to the railway plans
proposed by Bressler and Barduzzi during the same period, although without the same ambitious engineering works or overt geopolitical goals. In June of 1933 the AA and the AIT sponsored the first survey expedition of the proposed route, undertaken by motoring journalist William Fletcher Bradley (1876–1969) along with his daughter Margaret and a representative of the Siddeley motor company. That the road’s ‘surveyor’ was neither a trained surveyor nor an engineer points to the priority given to promoting a route for Western auto tourists above the desire to create a new road.

Figure 1 ‘London to Bombay by road’, Source Western India Automobile Association brochure *From London to India—by Road!* (1938), p. 16, reproduced by courtesy of the Automobile Association, London.
Bradley’s account formed the basis for a promotional pamphlet put out by the AA in favour of the route, with illustrations by his daughter. The pamphlet was clearly directed in part at a nationalistic British audience, with its emphasis on the quality of the British Siddeley Special automobile and its resemblance to then-common travelling accounts of the heroic (British) drivers traversing national borders and exotic lands.

The AIT’s lobbying activities were effective, and soon a permanent committee was established to oversee road construction, which met for the first time in Budapest in 1935. The committee was made up of delegates of the AIT, Ministers of the respective national governments, as well as representatives of the International Red Cross and, in 1937, the director of the League of Nations Section on Communication and Transport. According to reports to the 1935 conference, nearly every country through which the road passed had adopted it into its national road-building schemes, and most had given it priority. Perhaps the only country not to react immediately with enthusiasm was France. The initial trajectory for the route included Calais as the arrival point from Dover, but by the time of the 1935 conference France had dropped out of the planning. Belgium, on the other hand, stepped enthusiastically into the gap. Apart from giving its branch of the London to Istanbul road high priority in its road-building plans, the Belgian merchant navy also put a special car-carrying ferry, christened London–Istanbul, into service between Dover and Ostend in 1936. In spite of the AA’s key role in the project, the British government’s representative claimed to be ‘not so directly interested’ in the road but assured the meeting that the British would dutifully meet their international obligations.

While the AIT’s plan was for a single road, it also evoked the grand visions of a Europe-wide network that had been proposed by other road engineers in the period. Indeed, it was the project’s stated aim to form ‘the first channel to conduct road traffic to and from Europe, and from and to the continents of Africa and Asia’. Traffic would ‘flow into and out of the Route at hundreds of points, so that the destiny of Route 1 depends on our efforts now and in the future’. In the maps produced by the various touring clubs, in effect, ‘Europe’ was presented as a naturally given space (often with no national boundaries shown) of which the planned route was the central artery and gateway to the two adjacent continents. Placed in between the other continents, Europe was presented as a single civilisation, reaching out an enlightened hand to the colonies. European nations could thus put themselves on the map of Europe by joining themselves—and in particular their capital cities—to this artery. For many, in countries that were not part of the proposed route, the plan appeared an opportunity to put their country ‘on the map’. The Touring Club of Norway proposed a route that would come down from Kirkenes above the Arctic Circle, to connect with the road via Germany. By connecting to the London–Istanbul route, and so to Cape Town, the road would thus create a north–south axis, spanning from the ‘Northern Cape’ to the ‘Southern Cape’. The practical value of such long-distance roads was of course minimal, not only in terms of the number of
cars extant to travel on them, but also in terms of the number of people who would have the money and leisure to make such journeys. The value of the road lay far more in its ability to reflect various fantasies about the places of nations and tourists in larger geographies.

While it seemed to serve the luxury tourist, the road was also a response to the economic crisis of the 1930s. Its economical approach to road building, resurfacing existing roads and generally smoothing the path of international traffic, certainly marked it as a product of its time. Several governments made it part of their national job-creation efforts. Setting such measures in place on a European scale had been the logic behind the efforts of the League of Nations to set up a European road plan. Beyond such direct means of combating the economic crisis, discussions of the road reflected assumptions that increasing the traffic between nations would boost their prosperity.

On paper, many of the road’s planners also professed dreams of mass motorisation. In particular, the binding of rural regions into wider networks, it was argued, would enable farmers to sell their produce in broader markets. In his epilogue to the promotional brochure Bradley reproduced the narrative of rural improvement as an argument for the transcontinental highway:

Nations do not build them because they are wealthy; the roads tend to make them so. Construct an improved highway and the farmer immediately realizes that his slow ox wagon is out of date. He uses a couple of horses; then he finds one horse is sufficient. The final step is to buy a car and carry his oxen to market, instead of being drawn by them.

In keeping with this narrative, the 1935 guidelines for the road stated explicitly that the road should also be built for freight traffic. This hope of the modernisation of nations is belied by one of the pictures a few pages previously, where the car is pictured speeding past happy peasants in Bulgaria drawing their ox cart along the road through picturesque scenery (Figure 2). Bradley waxes romantic:

It is early morning. In waggons drawn by jet-black Asiatic oxen entire families are proceeding to their work in the fields. The white-bloused men are sturdy; the women in their gaily coloured dresses are handsome; when the fields are reached a hammock is slung and a shade erected for the baby, creating a pastorale which we, in Western Europe, consider too idealistic to be real.

Noteworthy here is the inherent contradiction between the stated aims of the road as a means of modernisation, mass motorisation and heavy traffic and its specific immediate purpose as a conduit for the desires and fantasies of a specific class of tourist. It also highlights the classic dilemma of tourism: the modernisation and threatened destruction of the pre-modern realms and people upon which the tourist wishes to gaze.
In a 1935 article the Dutch touring club ANWB’s journal *Autokampioen* spoke directly to this contradiction, admitting that the plans provided ‘one of the best examples of how tourism more or less comes into conflict with the notion of fast traffic. . . . If a highway wants to reach its end—thus be a highway—then ideas of a picturesque nature take second place. If the road is to serve tourism, then we should look to its surroundings, its route, etc’.\(^{40}\)

The article goes on to assert that the AIT plans are entirely for tourism, and so the improvement of existing roads would be more than satisfactory. Rather than resolving the contradiction between the road’s various potential purposes, the article simply left them standing. As I show in greater detail below, the AIT took a similar approach, stressing the road’s point-to-point speed but mostly thinking in terms of international tourists. As it turned out, existing international transit laws presented a *de facto* solution to the question of the road’s immediate use. Whereas a uniform convention for the passage of private automobiles across borders was in place by 1937, the AIT had not been able to negotiate any such agreement for merchandise,\(^{41}\) which meant that the road would be mostly for bringing people—primarily tourists—over borders.

**A rational (European) standard?**

While they relied entirely on national governments to design and build the road sections, the road nevertheless gave the AIT increased leverage in lobbying states to adopt international conventions and standards for road signage, customs duties and border checks. Each planning meeting featured a progress report on which member states had signed up to international standards. In addition, a special series of signs, in keeping with the interna-
tional road sign convention of 1931, were designed for the route, although in 1939 none had been placed.42

Such signs, as well as the planned maps for the route, would have been by far the most ‘standardised’ part of the road, as the road surfaces varied widely from country to country. To read both the 1933 and the 1935 road surveys, in addition to later reports on the route, is to wonder whether it can actually be called a single road at all. A brochure put out by the Western India Automobile Association hailed the road’s heterogeneity as a virtue:

A straight road 50 or 100 feet wide stretching undeviatingly from Bombay to Turkey, from Turkey to Great Britain, would be a monotonous, wearisome, and soul-killing object, even though it might be a wonder of engineering skill. And so standardisation is neither sought nor greatly encouraged: every country is to engineer its own portion distinctively and in accordance with its own traditions, taking advantage of every possible beauty of scenery, the only condition applying to the entire route being that it should be based upon a common minimum standard specification and on sound engineering principles. All the countries concerned agree to comply with this minimum and in every other possible respect they are absolutely free—there is no such thing as international control.43

Although varying financial means rather than national aesthetics seem to have been the deciding design factors, motorway builders such as those in Germany and Austria also saw motorway design as an opportunity to create specific views of ‘authentic’ national landscapes. Above all, gentle curves and grades in roads were seen as essential parts of road planning for both safety as well as aesthetic reasons.44 The Austrian engineer Leopold Örley saw in the London–Istanbul road a unique opportunity to build a faster and more aesthetically pleasing route between the German border and Vienna so that tourists passing through could see that ‘the Danube Valley . . . is in no way inferior to the much sung Rhine valley’.45 Such ideas were by no means incompatible with ideas of speed and rationality, but they did direct attention away from the ends of the road (both in the sense of its destination and the alternative use of the Autobahn for military purposes) to the scenery that surrounded it.

While almost any national variation on road building seemed allowable, the planners held to one standard quite strictly: ‘In principle, the route of the road between the large centres which have been marked out should be as direct as possible.’46 This principle can be seen reflected in most of the stylised maps of the route, where straight lines cut across mostly featureless maps, connecting major (mostly capital) city with major city. Though seldom referred to explicitly, the focus on directness and speed in planning the road reflects an overall view prevalent at the time that increased rationality and efficiency would necessarily bring greater prosperity to the places on the route.47 In otherwise cordial discussions, one of the few exchanges in the 1937 London–Istanbul conference that one might call ‘heated’ was over the principle of rationality. When reporting their progress on the route, the
German representative pointed out that the ‘direct’ route between Cologne and Vienna, which went via Nuremberg, Passau and Schärding, would not be ready until 1940 but that, temporarily, drivers could take an alternative route via Stuttgart and Munich. This news sparked protest from the British delegate, who pointed out that for a transnational route only a direct path was permissible. What is noteworthy here is that the logic of the straight line was a hard-and-fast principle that could be readily invoked and brooked no contradiction.

The exchange further points to a mental geography, long since institutionalised by train travel, of cities as active places of motion and the intervening spaces as static realms, there for the traveller to view. Especially, by passing through the capital cities of each country it traversed, the road also played into specific senses of national geography, which were further supported by the tourist enterprise. The route would allow travellers to gaze on each nation’s ‘modern’ capital as well as its ‘authentic’ and unique natural landscapes. In this light, the debate about the road’s route through Germany can also be seen as a response to its not passing through the national capital, Berlin. The German alternative was to connect the road to the regional capitals of Stuttgart and Munich, which stood out in German geographical consciousness as ‘modern’ cities authenticated by surrounding ethnic regions. Though each section of the road varied vastly, the ultimate criterion of each nation’s participation in the road was whether it completed the required number of road-kilometres per country. These abstract figures, presented fastidiously in reports on the road and cited proudly as sections were finished, smoothed over differences between both road surface and nations themselves to present the road as an example of co-operation among equals.

**Europe-oriented: reinscribing East and West on the map**

The London to Istanbul road was portrayed both as part of a unified, uniform Europe, next to the colonised continents of Africa and Asia, and as a line of standardised, authentic nations. Besides such national narratives, the road also spoke to some fundamental assumptions about European geography, in particular ideas of ‘East’ and ‘West’. Central to many ideas of Europe in the inter-war period (as well as in every era since) was the division between East and West, or between Orient and Occident. Particularly since the Enlightenment, the East has been one of the most consistent ‘others’ in European identity formation. While the West appeared as a place of rationality, enlightenment and modernity, the East was a place that was backward and unmodern. Such ideas were inscribed into the transcontinental highway at several levels.

Though the road as planned travelled several degrees of longitude as well, we may search in vain for any mention of the fact. The east–west trajectory, on the other hand, was referred to constantly. Such views were reflected in the map of the route produced by the AA in 1935 (Figure 3). While also
resembling maps of transnational auto races, with their emphasis on the route rather than the outlines of larger geographical spaces, this particular map actually shifted the route’s alignment by several degrees. Europe appears not so much dis-oriented as hyper-oriented, with the road flowing naturally like a river from one end to the other.

The actual state of the roads and development, particularly in the Balkans, fed further into the perceived geographical distinctions between East and West. These conditions were amplified by the accounts of such journeys. In the brochure documenting the 1933 survey trip, for example, the illustrations portray increasingly primitive conditions as the car moves east. As the car enters Hungary it is surrounded by a group of peasants in exotic native costumes who appear never to have seen a car before. Such a scene is repeated to illustrate Bulgaria (Figure 4). After Budapest, even though the drivers passed through Belgrade and Sofia, there are no illustrations of urban scenes at all until the car reaches Istanbul, which is seen as an outline in the distance, dominated by the spires of Hagia Sofia. Whereas the brochure notes national distinctions until one arrives in Hungary, the Hungarian countryside and the Balkans appear as a largely uniform place of primitive conditions and colourful, exotic natives.

In the minds of many European politicians, particularly in France and Britain, labelling nations as Eastern served as a means of distancing them. ‘For them, the end of real Europe, “Europe as subject,” was found at the Eastern borders of Germany and Italy.’ While the rhetoric surrounding the road was about bridging and linking nations across the divide, these visions of Eastern nations as Western Europe’s pre-modern ‘Other’ actually served to emphasise the sense of distance between them. In addition to inscribing nationally based centre–periphery geographies into Europe the

Figure 4  Motoring in the Balkans: the ‘natives’ encounter the modern world. Source W. F. Bradley’s AA brochure London–Istanbul (1933), p. 15, reproduced by courtesy of the Automobile Association, London
London to Istanbul route also projected such geographies on to the continent as a whole. The farther one got from the West the more one journeyed into a uniform realm of Europe’s past, which was to be gazed upon, ideally, from a fast modern road.

In nations on the eastern stretch of the route the road was not so much a path to allow Western tourists to gaze upon primitive conditions as a path to modernisation. Weekly articles throughout the 1930s in a Belgrade newspaper boasted of ‘our tourism’. Motorway building itself was touted by Yugoslav officials as an area where the nations of the Balkans were on potentially equal footing with the rest of Europe. In spite of the dreams of equal modernity, which theoretically should have meant tourism in both directions, the road was almost always ‘read’ from west to east. Quite apart from the routine way of referring to the road as ‘London to Istanbul’, the recitation of the journey from west to east was even written into the planning procedures. The order of countries holding the permanent committee’s rotating presidency, as well as the order of national reports presented at meetings, followed ‘the geographical order of the road’, from west to east. This clash of visions became visible occasionally in the planning conferences. At the 1935 meeting Paul Duchaine, president of the Belgian touring club and secretary-general of the AIT, stated majestically:

> It is not the AIT, it is geography, it is the sun, which has chosen the path of the road that unites London and Stamboul. This path was once the route of warlike invasion, the route of the peoples of Asia, coming to invade Europe. From henceforth it will be the great artery of commerce and industry, the beautiful road of the future, joining Europe peacefully to Asia.

Though he spoke of London and Istanbul being ‘united’, Duchaine actually highlighted the perceived distance between them, where Eastern Europe is an ‘other’ place that was ‘invaded’ from Asia. Joining the two continents peacefully was portrayed as reversing that flow, bringing Western wealth and enlightenment to the East. The choice of Budapest to host the meeting was praised by many of the speakers as being the centre point between West and East, though always in the East. Rechid Safvet Atabinen of Turkey also praised the venue of Budapest for similar reasons:

> The Turks, who traditionally have experience of Hungarian hospitality, thus consider that our meeting in this city has much to recommend it. It is not merely situated at the geographical centre of the route, but the path of the Asiatic invasions, which brought the Huns, the Magyars and the Kumans to this region, will henceforth be a route of interpenetration of the interests and cultures of Europe and Asia.

Both speakers invoked the same history, as well as Budapest’s symbolic and physical position in an Eastern, ‘other’ Europe. In speaking of ‘interpenetration’, however, Atabinen’s apparently florid speech effectively read the road
backwards, and thus actually offered strongly worded resistance to the dominant vision of it. Drawing on the appearance of the road’s potential flow in two directions, he asserted not only Turkey’s equal history but also its equal modernity.

Conclusion: are we there yet?

The signs of impending war did not make any major incursion into plans for the route until the middle of 1939. Indeed, the last pre-war general assembly of the AIT was held in Berlin, and helped the National Socialists to portray themselves as European internationalists in spite of the almost daily crises on the German–Czech border. The next planned survey of the route, set for the summer of 1939, was postponed indefinitely. Nevertheless, especially in the initial years of the war, the activities of the AIT, as well as construction of the road, continued. Indeed, officers of the Dutch and Hungarian touring clubs consoled themselves that ‘the international route London–Stamboul will be of great importance, however the war ends’. As the war progressed and Germany expanded over most of the road’s route, petrol shortages and restrictions on travel meant that roads became almost solely the domain of military vehicles. While individual sections were still improved during the war, the larger plan was seldom mentioned. Even as hostilities drew to a close the idea of the plan remained alive, however. An educational British newsreel on roads from 1944 reminded cinemagoers that ‘the most ambitious road plan of all was conceived by a Briton’ and showed a graphic of the road plan, drawing in part on the planning map above. Interestingly, the road was mentioned in the present tense, as if it had been finished. The interest the League of Nations had shown in the plan before the war was echoed by its successor after it. In 1948 a plan to re-establish the London–Istanbul road committee was put forward at the United Nations, which then approached the AIT to oversee it. The response was initially cautious. At the AIT’s 1949 general assembly the Turkish delegate explained that with Turkey’s section the European part of the road would be nearly complete.

Eventually the plan was absorbed into a new post-war project to create a pan-European motorway network, the E-road system, built largely with the particular aim of attracting American motor tourists. Significantly, the construction of the E-road network followed a similar pattern to planning for the London–Istanbul road, conceived in terms not of roads but of routes. The best existing roads along a given trajectory were given the E-road designation, which would then change when a better road was built. With some modifications, the London–Istanbul road became route E-5.

In public discourse the road’s individual identity also maintained an ongoing, if somewhat shadowy, existence. One British tourist guide of the early 1950s mentioned the ‘excellent’ Ostend–Ghent motorway as some day being a part of the road, and the 1952 edition of Hallwag’s motoring guide *Europa Touring* mentions it in the sections on Hungary and Bulgaria, but
Significantly, the guides refer to the road only in national segments, and emphasise a nation’s modernity rather than genuine international travel. On one level, national legends of the road still exist to this day. I was recently told by one Belgian acquaintance that his grandparents still refer to the Ostend–Brussels motorway as ‘the road to Istanbul’.

This ‘transcontinental motorway’ can be considered a success only in relation to the numerous plans for Europe-wide motor roads that never got beyond the drawing board. Neither the London–Istanbul road nor its broader colonial branches came into being in anything resembling the form they were planned in the inter-war period. Still, it is safe to say that thousands of people drove on the London to Istanbul road: in Belgium, in Hungary, in Yugoslavia—but never from London to Istanbul. Because the road was built almost entirely over existing roads the highway could appear at once as a (nearly) completed path and a shining hope of the future. If this is true of the physical structure, the same may also be said of its figurative meaning. As I have shown here, the symbolic paths that were traced by the road plan were already well travelled. The road appeared not so much to break new ground as to entrench and smooth established paths of meaning and expectation, both of a specific form of automobilism as well as of individual nations and indeed Europe. As much as motorway planning in Europe has bypassed these specific roads, the language of speed and modernisation as the key to peace and prosperity, not to mention the east–west division of the continent, with the east as the perpetually ‘slow’ other, are familiar paths in discussing Europe. To assert that the interests, visions and orientalist fantasies of an elite group of relatively wealthy white men were reflected in any particular project of the period breaks no new paths in scholarship. What I have shown here, however, is that such common interests, visions and fantasies, operating through a number of national and transnational discourses, smoothed the path of the road’s construction. Furthermore, while the physical technologies that went into the road were neither uniform nor novel, the technologies of symbolic construction and international cooperation did leave a lasting mark on European road planning for decades to come.

Gijs Mom has expressed doubt as to how effective such plans for long-distance roads such as the London–Istanbul road, or other Continental motorway networks, may actually have been in the end. By failing to integrate into smaller networks, he argues, such plans never would have made it past regional planners. The building and maintenance of the London–Istanbul road were indeed at the whim of national governments and their priorities, as the example of the section through Germany demonstrated. Furthermore, given the simultaneous insistence on swift and direct travel between major or capital cities and the images of the meandering tourist, it often seems unclear in retrospect precisely whom or what the road would eventually have served. Paradoxically, these visible tensions in the processes and narratives of the road point as much to the reasons for its near success as its eventual failure. By incorporating, bypassing or ignoring
its many tensions the AIT plan appeared as many things at once, and thus was a path of least resistance among the actors that constructed it at various levels.

At the outset of this article I described a number of arenas in which national meanings of automobiles were articulated through a number of international encounters. The London–Istanbul road can be described as precisely the opposite: a series of mostly national undertakings which acquired an aura of international significance through their symbolic construction. In describing how the Swiss railway authorities designed international services David Gugerli has spoken of their ‘effective fictions of internationality’. These are specific luxuries and services that evoke in the traveller the sensation of being in a smooth, international environment, even if that environment is built upon often clumsy international agreements.63 Appropriately enough, the same may be said of the road that followed the route of the most famous international train service. The physical surfaces that presented themselves in successive countries were the least significant element in the construction of the road, after the maps, stories, hopes and beliefs amassed around it. Fictions are not of themselves real or unreal; their reality depends upon the contexts in which they are set. When the larger contexts of internationality upon which it was based broke down, the road’s national stories grew dominant and the international fiction moved quickly from reality into memory and dream.

Notes
2 ‘La route internationale Belgrade–Subotica’, Echo de Belgrade, 30 November 1939, p. 4.
8 Christoph Maria Merki, Der holprige Siegeszug des Automobils 1895–1930. Zur Motorisierung des Strassenverkehrs in Frankreich, Deutschland und der Schweiz (Vienna, 2002).


14 Rudy Koshar, ‘Cars and nations’, p. 123.


16 Merki, Der holprige Siegeszug; Koshar, ‘Cars and nations’.

17 This account will draw largely on the records of the AIT and the meetings of the London–Istanbul road committee, which are available in the archive of the Dutch touring club, the ANWB, in the Hague. Following this process through the lens of such a transnational organisation is to run the risk of overlooking the strong intranational and international tensions that existed at the same time. On the other hand, such a focus enables us to shed new light on the limits and possibilities of such transnational actors in the unique climate of the inter-war period.

18 See AIT, 100 Years of Mobility, 1898–1998 (Milan, 1998) for an official history of the organisation, that glosses over somewhat the problems of the reorganisation after the Second World War.

19 The Conseil central du tourisme international, a group with close ties to the AIT, explicitly advocated a return to the pre-1914 passport regulations.


22 See, for example, David Arnold, ‘Europe, technology and colonialism in the twentieth century’, History and Technology 21, 1 (2005), 85–106, at 91. See also assorted historical timetables on line at http://www.timetableimages.com/ttimages/list.htm#I (accessed 7 March 2007).


25 This was an era when the British were particularly concerned about their national auto industry. See Koshar, ‘Cars and nations’; Tim Edensor, ‘Automobility and national identity: representation, geography and driving practice’, Theory, Culture and Society 21, 4–5 (2004), 104. See also Bradley’s account in the AA journal, ‘Adventure, 1933: London to Istanbul, AA survey part 1’ (and four subsequent parts in each of the following weeks), Autocar, 21 July 1933, pp. 90–2, in which emphasis on the British auto is even more pronounced.

26 One precedent was a three-man British expedition led by Major Forbes-Leith to drive from Leeds to Quetta via Istanbul, documented in the Pathé film reel The Lure of the East: a Record of the Forbes-Leith Expedition by Car from England to India (1924). Such journeys were also a frequent feature of British motoring magazines such as The Autocar throughout the 1930s.

27 See Procès-verbaux de la Conférence internationale route Londres–Stamboul, Budapest, 10–15 September 1935 (hereafter Budapest 1935) and Procès-verbaux de la réunion consti-
Touring between war and peace


28 For the route as of 1933 see Bradley, London–Istanbul; for the make-up of the permanent committee see Budapest 1935.


30 Budapest 1935, p. 10.

31 Budapest 1935, p. 118.


33 This was also the approach that the AA favoured in Britain as well in the 1930s.

34 See Mom, ‘Roads’, 761–2; Frank Schipper, ‘The drive for peace? Road planning and the European project during the interbellum’ (November 2005), on line at www.tie-project.nl as TIE project working document No. 12 (consulted 2 February 2006).

35 Such arguments were also quite common throughout Europe as part of national campaigns for car ownership; see, for example, Harp, Marketing Michelin, pp. 209–12.


37 Budapest 1935, p. 118.


39 Urry, Tourist Gaze, pp. 110 ff.

40 ‘De Noordel. IJszee per auto bereikbaar!’ Autokampioen, 4 May 1935, p. 613.

41 Budapest 1937, p. 65.


44 See Zeller, Strasse, Bahn, Panorama, pp. 142–58.

45 Leopold Örley, Das Fernstrassenproblem Europas und seiner Lösung (Vienna, 1936), p. 49.

46 Budapest 1935, p. 96.


48 Budapest 1937, pp. 25 ff.


51 Peter Bugge, ‘Shatter zones: the creation and re-creation of Europe’s “East”’, in Michael Wintle and Menno Spiering (eds), Ideas of Europe since 1914: the Legacy of the First World War (New York, 2002), pp. 47–68, at p. 57.

52 ‘Le discours du ministre Stôšović’, Echo de Belgrade, 8 June 1938, p. 1.

53 Budapest 1935, p. 11.

54 Ibid., p. 16.

55 Kirchknopf to van Meeteren, 15 February 1941; van Meeteren’s reply of 11 March 1941 (ANWB archives, box 302, folder ‘Samenwerking Zusterverenigingen 1940 t/m 49’).

56 A Dutch newspaper article from January 1941 mentions the revival of a ‘years-old plan’ to modernise the road between Ostend and Brussels but without any reference to the London–Istanbul road. Het Vaderland, 24 January 1941, p. 1.


58 Minutes of the AIT Comité Directeur meeting, 25 August 1948, p. 8.


60 See Mom, ‘Roads without rails’, p. 765; Frank Schipper, ‘Changing the face of Europe: European road transport during the Marshall Plan years’, Journal of Transport History 28, 2 (this issue); Pär Blomqvist, ‘Roads for Peace! Lobbying for a European highway system’, in Erik van der Vleuten and Arne Kaijser (eds), Networking Europe: Transnational...


Acknowledgements

Thanks to Frank Schipper, Gijs Mom and three anonymous referees for their helpful comments in putting this article together, as well as to Kathryn Steen and participants in a panel at the SHOT conference in November 2005 for comments on an earlier version. Many thanks to Peter Staal and staff of the ANWB archive in the Hague, and to the AA for permission to use the images here. This article was produced as part of the Transnational Infrastructures and the Rise of Contemporary Europe project at the Eindhoven University of Technology. I gratefully acknowledge support by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO).

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