

Transalpine Transport Systems Near Collapse

by Claudio Celani

An airplane accident in which all 118 passengers are killed, is no longer big news, after the events of Sept. 11. And yet, the collision of an SAS passenger plane with a private Cessna on the runway of Milan's Linate Airport on Oct. 8, is one of the largest civilian airplane accidents in recent times. Less serious, in terms of the number of victims, but more important in terms of implications for the whole Central European transport system, was the accident that, two weeks later, on Oct. 24, caused the closure of the Gotthard Tunnel, the main north-south transalpine connection through Switzerland.

Both accidents were the result of the lack of infrastructural investments over the last 20 years: In Linate, it was the absence of a simple ground radar; in Gotthard, it was the decision not to build the second tunnel, which was part of the original project design.

Nature is now presenting its bill all at once: With the Mont Blanc tunnel between France and Italy still closed after an accident in 1999, and a problematic situation in the Austrian-Italian connections because of the closure of the Tauern tunnel, the entire transalpine transport network is near collapse. In addition, the consequences of the Linate accident on the Italian air transport system threaten to virtually cut off Italy from major east-west and north-south routes.

Six Years To Replace A Radar

The investigation into the Linate accident has established that a private Cessna Citation jet was crossing the runway in the wrong place, just as a Scandinavian Airlines MD87 was taking off. Because of the thick fog, the SAS pilot saw the Cessna only two seconds before the crash; despite the pilot's attempt to get the jet airborne, it rammed the Cessna at 300 kilometers per hour, disintegrating the small plane and killing the four persons on board. The severely damaged SAS jet then crashed into a nearby luggage depot, killing all its passengers and four workers who were in the depot, in a giant fire. A larger tragedy would have occurred if the SAS jet had crashed into the terminal building a hundred meters away.

Despite the fog, the fact that the Cessna was in the wrong position should have been detected by the control tower, through ground radar. But the old ground radar was retired in 1995, and a new ground radar, delivered by a Norwegian company, has never been made operational because of "bu-

reaucratic, technical" reasons. Also, there is the responsibility of the airport company, SEA, and of the National Air Assistance Agency (ENAV). SEA was privatized a few years ago. ENAV is still state owned, but it is operated according to market principles. It seems that ENAV closed one eye (or both) to the serious security risk, not to "interfere" in the cost/benefit-based decisions of SEA.

In a statement, the vice president of the European Transport [Union] Federation, Iacopo Prissinotti, said: "The radar was not working because of the commercial decision of ENAV. We have long argued that the trend of commercialization in Europe is undermining safety. We hope that this tragic accident will force politicians and Air Navigation Service providers to put safety at the heart of the ATM [air traffic management] system."

Last August, ENAV employee Mauro Iannucci, a trade unionist, had publicly denounced the dangerous situation in Linate, and had been threatened with layoff.

In the meantime, the Italian government ordered ENAV to make the ground radar in Linate operational by the end of the year, and to run checks in all other Italian airports by the end of October. It has been reported, for example, that Malpensa, the new intercontinental hub west of Milan inaugurated last year, has no operational ground radar either. The device is there, but it does not yet work "because of software adjustment problems." Malpensa, like Linate, is owned by SEA. Malpensa and Linate suffer from heavy fog more than 80 days per year.

Under pressure from the government and in order to avoid further responsibility, ENAV decided to down-rate six major Italian airports (Milan-Linate, Milan-Malpensa, Rome-Fiumicino, Bologna, Bergamo, and Trieste) from the third category, which allows plane movement down to 75 meters visibility, to the first category, which forbids movements with visibility less than 550 meters. This almost provoked paralysis, with 169 flights cancelled and 17,000 passengers grounded in one day, Oct. 31, when the procedure was applied to the letter. Airline companies, which are faced with unbearable costs, are threatening to close their operations in Linate and Malpensa if normality is not restored.

An Anticipated Disaster

That there were "only" 11 deaths in the Gotthard tunnel accident and fireball which developed on Oct. 24, is owed to the fact that the 17 km highway tunnel has two rescue tunnels, one on the left and one on the right, through which people could escape. In this sense, modern techniques have proven to be life-savers. However, the possibility that such an accident, a head-on collision between two vehicles, would occur, was very high. The Gotthard tunnel constructor, Giovanni Lombardi, had warned in the Summer of last year that it was only a question of time before a "catastrophe" occurred.

The Gotthard tunnel is a single "tube," with one lane in each direction. It was not planned so; however, the Green



The approach to the Gotthard tunnel in the Swiss Alps.

opposition, together with the budget-cutting ideologues, succeeded over the last 20 years in stopping construction of the planned second tunnel.

Had the second tunnel been built, an accident such as the one on Oct. 24 would have never happened. According to reconstructions of how the accident occurred, a truck lost control because a tire blew, and crashed into another truck coming in the opposite direction. A toxic fire developed, involving a load of tires on the second truck. Temperatures rose to more than 1,000°C, melting the roof of the structure, which collapsed along a 100 meter track. For two days, firemen could not reach the center of the accident because of the high temperatures. Unfortunately, the rescue tunnels are not large enough to let a firetruck through. If a second tunnel had been there, fire trucks could have reached “ground zero” in a few minutes, and quickly extinguished the fire.

As a result of the accident, the Gotthard tunnel will be closed until next spring.

This is a tremendous blow to north-south freight and passenger connections, of which the Gotthard is one of the main axes. The other axis is the Brenner pass, which goes through Austria. Because the Mont Blanc tunnel, which connects France and Italy, had been closed earlier, the Gotthard was already under stress, with 18,700 vehicles daily, 4,000 of which are trucks. Switzerland has no practical alternatives, and now the Brenner pass is threatened with total congestion. Since the Mont Blanc tunnel will not be reopened before Dec. 15, and only for cars, commercial transport from northern Central Europe to Italy, and from east to west within Southern Europe, will suffer a tremendous blow. For Italy, the road bottlenecks are adding to the airways crisis, threatening to virtually isolate the country. In Switzerland, the economy of an entire region, the Canton Ticino, is already on its knees.

The long-term solution is a shift of commercial traffic from road to railway, but this cannot be improvised from one day to the next.

A ‘Pearl Harbor’ Effect

Moreno Bernasconi, editor of the Ticino-based *Giornale del Popolo*, characterized the Gotthard accident, together with other shocks that hit the Swiss nation in recent weeks —

including a murderer who ran amok in the Zug regional Parliament, and the bankruptcy of the national air company, Swissair — as a “Pearl Harbor” kind of shock in the population, with several immediate effects. Speaking with this author, Bernasconi predicted that an entire political class which over the last 20 years has carried out an “isolationist” policy — in disregard for what happened outside Switzerland, cultivating bucolic and consumerist utopias — is going to be swept away. This political class has allowed progress in modernizing Swiss infrastructure in the context of European and Eurasian perspectives, to come to a complete stop. “Switzerland will return to be what it has been over the centuries: the guardian of the Alps, the crossroads of Europe, as reflected in the cross on our flag,” said Bernasconi.

Of course, as concerns the Gotthard, the second tunnel will now be built, but this has to follow procedures, which means a referendum whose date will be established by the National Assembly. Predictably, in the national elections scheduled two years from now, the government parties will pay the bill, in favor of opposition populist Christof Blocher.

In Italy, a small sea-change in the popular attitude had already occurred last Spring, with the electoral victory of Silvio Berlusconi, the current Prime Minister. The central issue of Berlusconi’s campaign was infrastructure modernization. And indeed, in the first 100 days of his government, Berlusconi has worked hard to implement what he promised, starting from the so-called “*legge obiettivo*,” a bill which cuts red tape for infrastructure projects considered of national strategic interest. Unfortunately, the bill was supposed to be finally approved by Parliament by the beginning of October, but it was sabotaged by the fact that more than 100 majority members were not in the room during the vote — most of them were drinking cappuccino at the Senate bar. Reportedly, Berlusconi, who at each government meeting asks Infrastructure Minister Pietro Lunardi when the great projects are going to start, was furious, but could not avoid the fact that the bill will now have to be presented again, which means at least a one-month delay.

The government commitment to infrastructure development was confirmed by Infrastructure Minister Lunardi in Parliament on Oct. 24, when he announced accelerated procedures for building the Messina Bridge. However, this means that the first stone could be laid no earlier than 36 months from now. “These deadlines,” Lunardi said, “might seem long, but in reality are very short, if one considers the dimensions of the work and the considerable amount of financial resources being mobilized.”

Yet, as the transalpine bottleneck and the airport crisis show, and as the international depression becomes more serious, the government is facing an emergency of far greater dimensions than it ever imagined. Such an emergency can be faced only by instituting a New Bretton Woods system to replace the unsalvageable global financial system, combined with a Eurasian Land-Bridge development program, as proposed by Lyndon LaRouche.