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Autoerotisch

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THE PEOPLE'S CAR: A GLOBAL HISTORY OF THE VOLKSWAGEN BEETLE
by Bernhard Rieger. Harvard, 406 pp., £20

When I first went to Germany, in the early 1970s, the roads were swarming with squat, misshapen little beasts, bustling about the city streets or rattling along the autobahns with noisy, air-cooled engines, curved roofs tapering down to the rear bumper and, in older models, tiny oval back windows, so small that I wondered how the driver could see anything at all in his rear-view mirror. Their ugliness, however, was as nothing compared with the horror of a ride in one: sitting in the back seat, as I often had to when being driven around with a group of friends, I became claustrophobic from the low roof, while the loud rattling and whirring of the engine behind me quickly brought on a headache, made worse during the winter months by the repulsive smell of the heating system. Taking corners at speed – or such speed as the vehicle could muster – was a nightmare, as the car rocked and rolled and churned up my stomach.

I much preferred my father's pale blue Morris Minor, with its upright design, roomy interior and quiet, front-mounted engine. With the British car there was the additional charm of the quaint semaphore-style left and right indicators, which stuck out horizontally from the bodywork like tiny, glowing amber arms (though you sometimes risked breaking them off when you opened the front door). Given the alternative of this practical and yet somehow graceful vehicle, who would want to buy a Volkswagen Beetle? Yet the Beetle was the most successful car of its time, selling more than any other model, as Bernhard Rieger notes in his illuminating and elegantly written history. While more than 1.3 million Morris Minors were sold over the decades, Beetle sales exceeded a million a year in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when one car in three on West German roads was a Volkswagen. In 1972, the Beetle's total sales passed those of what had been the most popular passenger car of the century, Henry Ford's Model T. Like other popular small cars, the Morris Minor was exported and manufactured under licence abroad, but it was so emphatically English in style and conception that its popularity was mostly confined to countries of the Empire and Commonwealth. The Beetle, by contrast, achieved large sales in the United States and was still being manufactured in Mexico after the turn of the century.

Though most people chose to ignore the fact after the war, the Beetle was a Nazi car. Hitler was determined to bring Germany up to what he saw as the level of modernity of advanced economies like Britain and America (Rieger's account is another nail in the coffin of the old interpretation of Nazism as a backward-looking, atavistic sociopolitical force). Relatively few people owned a radio, for example, so Hitler's propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, introduced the People's Receiver (*Volksempfänger*), a cheap and cheerful little wireless, with no shortwave so that listeners couldn't tune in to foreign broadcasts. Fridges were even rarer, so the government introduced the People's Refrigerator (*Volkskühlschrank*). Soon there were many other products. The People's Car (*Volkswagen*) belonged to this series, though its official title was the Strength

through Joy Car (*KdF-Wagen*), named after *Kraft durch Freude*, the leisure programme of the Labour Front, the Nazi successor to the trade unions (though to anyone who's ever been in a Beetle, strength and joy don't seem the appropriate terms).
Above all, Hitler was determined to modernise the roads. In the early 1930s, Germany was one of western Europe's least motorised societies. This was partly because its public transport system even then was second to none – smoothly efficient, quick, all-encompassing. Most Germans didn't feel they really needed a car. And had they wanted one, they couldn't have afforded it: the economic disasters of the Weimar Republic had depressed domestic demand. German roads were so empty that Berlin did not find it necessary to install traffic lights until 1925. Three-quarters of the population were labourers, artisans, farmworkers and the like, who couldn't afford the expensive products of Daimler-Benz or any of the country's 27 other car manufacturers, whose inefficient production methods and small output meant they produced models available only to the intermittently affluent bourgeoisie. To reach American levels of car ownership, Hitler told the automobile show in Berlin in 1934, Germany needed to increase the number of cars on its roads from half a million to 12 million. Car ownership in Britain was six times higher than in Germany relative to population. To the further dismay of German nationalists, the country's most successful mass vehicle manufacturers were both foreign: Ford, which opened a factory in Cologne in 1931, and General Motors, which operated the Opel factory at Rüsselsheim. By the early 1930s, Opel cars were dominating the market, with 40 per cent of annual sales.

Hitler pursued his motorisation project by building the famous motorways, the *Autobahnen*, though the benefits they brought to the level of employment were grossly exaggerated by Goebbels's propaganda machine. He also promoted motor racing: hefty government subsidies helped the speedsters built by Daimler-Benz and Auto-Union to victory in 19 of the 23 Grand Prix races held between 1934 and 1937. Ideology played an important role here. Pursuing its stated goal of national unity, the government replaced local regulations with a Reich-wide Highway Code in 1934. Far from imposing a straitjacket of regulation on drivers, the code placed its trust in the Aryan's voluntary subordination to the interests of the community. Owners of expensive cars had to put 'discipline' and 'chivalry' first, abandoning outmoded class antagonisms. In the eyes of the Nazis, the Jews, of course, couldn't be trusted to do this, so they were banned from driving or owning cars from 1938 onwards.
The automobile, Hitler declared, responded to the individual will, unlike the railway, which had brought 'individual liberty in transport to an end'. So the new Highway Code abolished all speed restrictions on German roads. The results were catastrophic. In the first six years of the Third Reich the annual number of deaths on the roads rose to nearly eight thousand, with as many as forty thousand seriously injured each year. These were the worst accident rates in Europe, worse even than those in Britain, where speed limits had been abolished in 1930 in the belief that Britons would drive like gentlemen. They didn't, of course, and speed limits were quickly reintroduced, just as the Germans were abolishing them. In May 1939, the Nazi regime finally admitted defeat, and reimposed speed restrictions on all roads except motorways, which continue to be without them and are the most terrifying roads in Europe.

Cars, Hitler proclaimed, had to lose their 'class-based and, as a sad consequence, class-dividing character'. They had to be available to everyone. He commissioned an Austrian engineer called Ferdinand Porsche to design an affordable car (in a typically Nazi

addendum, he was required to ensure that a machine gun could be mounted on the bonnet if necessary). Ambitious and politically skilled, Porsche secured Hitler's backing for a huge new factory built along the most modern lines to reduce costs by streamlining production. The Labour Front put its vast funds at Porsche's disposal and sent him on an inspection tour of US car factories, where he hired a number of engineers of German extraction to work on the new car. Hitler opened the Volkswagen factory near Fallersleben, in what is now Lower Saxony, in 1938. Construction of a new town to accommodate the workers began, and all seemed set to go.

The Labour Front launched a vigorous propaganda campaign to get people to join a savings scheme so they could buy the new car. *The People's Car* includes an illustration of the official savings book, in which savers stuck red stamps worth five Reichsmarks until they reached 990 Reichsmarks, the cost of a Volkswagen. More than a quarter of a million people enrolled in the scheme in 18 months. Impressive though this total seems, it fell far short of the millions envisaged by the regime. At this level of enrolment, the scheme would come nowhere near meeting production costs. Most of the savers were middle-class, and a third of them owned a car already; the masses simply couldn't afford to save that much. Moreover, as Rieger points out, abstention from the scheme reflected a widespread anxiety about the future generated by the Nazis' increasingly bellicose foreign policy. Rather than invest their hard-earned cash in what was still a relatively expensive car, the working classes preferred the much cheaper motorbike, whose annual sales soared from 894,000 in 1934 to 1,582,872 in 1939. This was the true people's vehicle, even if its popularity was dwarfed by that of the bicycle. There were twenty million bikes in Germany on the eve of the war, underlining yet again that most Germans cycled or took public transport to work and thought of the motor car, if they thought of it at all, as a leisure vehicle.

Ordinary Germans were right to be sceptical about the savings scheme. Not one saver got a Volkswagen: the money all went into arms production. So did the factory. Only 630 production models of the Beetle were made before the war and most were snapped up by Nazi officials. In 1939, as the workers in the Volkswagen factory were whisked off to labour on the Reich's western fortifications, the regime was able to keep production going only by importing six thousand workers from Italy. They were housed in wooden barracks, since only 10 per cent of the planned accommodation in the new factory town had been completed when the war began. They worked on a military version of the Beetle, with the chassis used as the base for a version of the jeep known as the Bucket Vehicle or *Kübelwagen*.

The Volkswagen factory was not at the top of Bomber Command's list of military facilities to be destroyed. At the end of the war, Ivan Hirst, a major in the engineers, arrived to inspect it. He found that 70 per cent of its buildings and 90 per cent of its machinery were still intact. The British Zone of Occupation had to cater for the transportation needs of 22 million inhabitants who possessed only 61,000 cars between them, some two-thirds of which were described as 'worn out'. Railway tracks and rolling stock, which had been on Bomber Command's list, were in ruins. So Hirst was told to restart production of the Beetle. Applying ideas and methods of 'trusteeship' derived from colonial experience in Africa, he set to work using existing staff. More than

two hundred senior managers and technical experts were dismissed by denazification tribunals, but Hirst found substitutes or had the verdicts overturned, in a triumph of necessity over legality and morality typical of occupied Germany in the late 1940s. He also managed to recruit six thousand new workers by the end of 1946. But Volkswagen's resurrection had been too hasty: the cars were dogged by mechanical and other problems. British engineers who visited the factory concluded that the noisy, smelly and underpowered Beetle had no future. The idea of relocating the vast factory to Britain was deemed impracticable, so it was handed over to the Germans.
The situation was rescued by Heinrich Nordhoff, an Opel engineer in close contact with General Motors, the company's American owners. Although he was not a member of the Nazi Party, Nordhoff had contributed to the war economy by running the Opel truck factory, the largest in Europe, and was banned from employment in the American sector because of the factory's extensive use of forced foreign labour. The British had no such scruples. Nordhoff threw himself into his new job with manic intensity, working 14 hours a day to streamline the production process, eliminate the car's technical deficiencies, expand the dealership network and establish an effective management structure at the plant. The car was offered for sale in new colours, or, as Nordhoff put it, given a 'paint job absolutely characteristic of peacetime'. Production figures began to climb, and sales to improve.

But it wasn't so easy to shake off the Volkswagen's Nazi past. The factory town was renamed Wolfsburg after a nearby castle (some may have recalled that 'Wolf' was Hitler's nickname among his cronies, so the name could be translated as 'Hitler's fortress'), and as construction got underway, refugees and expellees from the East crowded in – some of the 11 million ethnic Germans thrown out of Poland, Czechoslovakia and other Eastern European countries at the end of the war. Burning with resentment, they proved easy prey for ultra-nationalist agitators, and by 1948 the neo-Nazi German Justice Party was winning nearly two-thirds of the local vote, the factory walls were repeatedly daubed with swastikas and many ballot papers were marked with the words 'we want Adolf Hitler.' As a new town, Wolfsburg lacked politicians with the experience to counter this extremist nostalgia and only gradually did the established political parties manage to push the neo-Nazis back into the shadows.

They were aided in this by Nordhoff, who insisted that Germans' travails in the late 1940s were the result of 'a war that we started and that we lost'. This unusual frankness had its limits: he did not mention the mass murder of the Jews or any of the Nazis' other crimes. He even, no doubt unconsciously, echoed Nazi language in urging workers to overcome the difficulties that faced them and focus on 'achievement' (*Leistung*), just as Hitler in 1942 had urged 'a battle of achievement for German enterprises' in war production. Whatever the resonance of the rhetoric, the workers certainly did achieve. While Opel and Ford, whose factories had been badly damaged, were struggling to get production underway again, the Volkswagen plant was already turning out Beetles in large numbers. Its efficiency improved steadily during the 1950s as Nordhoff introduced the full automation pioneered in Detroit. In August 1955, the millionth Beetle rolled off the production line before an audience of a hundred thousand: it was painted gold and its bumper was encrusted with rhinestones. Twelve marching bands played tunes by Johann Strauss, a troupe from the Moulin Rouge danced the cancan, a black South African choir sang spirituals and 32 Scottish dancers performed the

Highland fling to the accompaniment of bagpipes. Reporters were lavishly entertained, and the event was brought to public notice in a 75-minute movie.
The Beetle, Rieger plausibly argues, achieved iconic status in West Germany in the 1950s by being a typical product of the 'economic miracle': not flashy or glamorous, but solid, functional, dependable, inexpensive to acquire, cheap to run and easy to maintain – everything the Third Reich was not. It was so lacking in frills that it didn't even have a fuel gauge: drivers had to keep a record of their mileage or risk running out of petrol. In the 1950s and 1960s modifications were introduced, including hydraulic brakes, a fully synchronised gearbox and a larger and more powerful engine, but the car's basic appeal remained. While Nordhoff continued obsessively to root out and solve minor technical problems, he also established a network of dealerships and service stations where the cars could be quickly fixed if anything went wrong. As West Germany became what Rieger, following Helmut Schelsky, calls a 'levelled middle-class society', the Beetle became the levelled middle class's car of choice.

Lacking obvious symbols of national identification, West Germany fixed on the Beetle. The growth in car ownership was one example of German society's retreat into private life in reaction to the overheated and over-politicised public sphere of the Nazi era. The liberty to drive anywhere, when you chose to, was celebrated by politicians as a key aspect of Western freedom during the Cold War. It was at this point that the Beetle's Nazi associations were forgotten in what Rieger calls a 'historical carwash' that ascribed its origins to the individual genius of Ferdinand Porsche. War veterans liked it because they fondly remembered driving the *Kübelwagen* on campaign. Younger Germans liked it for its utilitarian sobriety.

Before long, however, car owners were personalising their Beetles by sticking on chromium strips, respraying the exterior in garish colours, or adding so many decorations that the car looked like 'a rolling Christmas tree', as one critic put it. Small flower vases were particularly popular. One journalist noted with amusement that the typical Beetle owner washed his car with 'a degree of love and care that [could] lead detached observers to believe he was flirting with a new lover'. Rieger is particularly good on the gendered nature of Beetle ownership. At a time when fewer than 20 per cent of driving licences in West Germany were held by women, the Beetle became a vehicle for what he calls 'automotive misogyny'. Advertising campaigns underscored the male-dominated nature of car ownership by portraying the left half of a man's face merged with the right half of the front of a Beetle under the slogan: 'His Better Half'. Gradually, during the 1960s, women began to assert themselves, but it could be argued that the Beetle remained largely an object of masculine desire.

Young couples used the cars as a 'zone of privacy', away from overcrowded apartments and disapproving adults. *Mit dem Auto auf du*, a car ownership manual, solemnly pointed out that sex in a Beetle did not qualify as indecency in the eyes of the law so long as the car was not parked in a prominent location. Thirty years after having

sex with his girlfriend in the back of a Beetle, a journalist from Bremen told Rieger that he was still overcome by a 'strangely fascinating weakness in the groin' whenever he saw one of the cars in the street. It was left to the Mexicans, however, to discover the full erotic potential of the Beetle (known there as a *vochito*). 'It is not just that many *vochitos* were made in Mexico,' one owner said: 'Many Mexicans were also made in *vochitos*.' It's hard to imagine: their parents must all have been contortionists.
The car started to be manufactured under licence in Mexico in 1967, with the millionth vehicle coming off the production line in 1980. Like its West German counterpart, the expanding Mexican middle class found the Beetle cheap, reliable and an attractive alternative to imported American gas-guzzlers. When economic crisis hit the country in the 1980s, the manufacturers cut the price of the car by 20 per cent, opening it up to a new market. It became the vehicle of choice for taxi-drivers. The *vochito* appealed not only to petit-bourgeois ideals of reliability and sobriety but also to Mexican national pride: manufactured in Mexico by Mexicans, it needed very little to keep it going and it survived in rough conditions. As one fan said, the *vochito* was like a 'small tank'.
Beetles were also manufactured in Brazil, and it is a pity that Rieger does not say anything about the car's image and popularity in South America's largest country. He is very good, however, on its appeal in the United States, where it became a popular second car for many families in the expanding suburbs of the 1950s and 1960s, as American car manufacturers were unable to keep pace with rapidly rising demand. By 1968, Volkswagen was shipping more than half a million Beetles across the Atlantic every year, accounting for 40 per cent of its total production. Altogether the car was sold to five million Americans. In sharp contrast to the situation in Germany, in America the Beetle was overwhelmingly driven by women, and used for practical purposes such as shopping rather than weekend outings. It even became an icon of the counterculture, with John Muir's *How to Keep Your Volkswagen Alive* selling more than two million copies. Muir encouraged readers to 'feel with your car'; its 'karma', he wrote, 'depends on your desire to make it and keep it – ALIVE'. The high point of this anthropomorphisation was the 1969 Disney movie *The Love Bug*, in which a Beetle called Herbie rewards his owner, an unsuccessful racing driver, with success and, by the end, love.

All of this illustrated the Beetle's capacity to adapt to whatever environment it happened to find itself in. Foreign sales kept the company going even as the oil crisis of 1973-74, changing fashions, tough new safety regulations and a failure to keep up the pace of factory automation caused domestic sales to slump. With the end of the economic miracle came the end of the Beetle. West Germans began to demand cars that were faster, more spacious, more comfortable, more elegant. The new Golf fitted the bill, along with the smaller, cheaper Polo. In 1978, Wolfsburg stopped manufacturing the Beetle. In 1998, Volkswagen introduced the New Beetle, appealing to the American fashion for retro-chic but also making it clear that this was a vehicle that met the demands of modern motorists ('Less Flower – More Power' as one advertisement put it). It was made in Mexico, and the models for sale in Germany were brought across the Atlantic. 'It was as if a movie was running backwards,' one journalist remarked on seeing the cars being unloaded at the very quayside from which so many Beetles had been exported in the past.

The curving silhouette of the New Beetle was designed to echo that of the original model. Yet owners of the old Beetle know it's not the same. They now gather at rallies

where they can indulge in nostalgic admiration of historic models and imaginative customisations. One such meeting has been held every year since the 1980s at the site of the Nuremberg rallies, in front of the grandstand from which Hitler delivered his speeches. Nobody seems to notice.

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