

The “People’s Car” on New Paths (January 29, 1948)

Abstract

In 1938, the National Socialists began building a large car manufacturing plant near Wolfsburg. The factory was supposed to produce the affordable “Volkswagen,” or “People’s Car,” for the masses. After the factory was built, however, the National Socialists decided to use it for armaments production. At the end of the war, the British military government took over the administration of the factory, and, in 1946, it began producing the “VW Käfer,” or “VW Beetle,” for its own needs. This report by *Zeit* editor Josef Müller-Marein (who used the penname Jan Molitor) commemorated the production of the twenty-thousandth Volkswagen in January 1948. The article illuminated, above all, the workers’ aloof attitude toward both their factory’s checkered past and their current work.

Source

The “People’s Car” on New Paths

A celebratory visit? Of course, the twenty-thousandth Volkswagen produced since the end of the war was on its way. Reason enough to pay some attention to the event! And so the twenty-thousandth car, black as coal, was polished to a fine shine. This made the little car look much statelier than its peers, which, in their greenish-gray uniforms, stood in front of it and behind it on the “conveyor belt” in the huge assembly hall.

The “assembly belt” does what it is supposed to do: it assembles. On the rear wall of the hall, where it begins, the car’s steel frame is placed on the belt: it then paddles away at a snail’s pace. “A stream flowed by and carried me along,” the frame could say. But it would be an exercise in empty wordplay to pretend this image sprang from a fairy tale, and to get carried away, perhaps to the point of comparing the men who are standing on the right and the left to fisherman on the bank of the stream. They are workers, hunched-over, rushed, hungry workers. They have wrenches and hammers in their hands and are putting wheels on the steel frame. And the assembly belt moves.

Now the engine is mounted. (The engines – hung like hams at the butcher’s shop in peace time – come swaying along at head level, fastened to a running streamlet that flows into the stream.) Soon the moment arrives when the body – the one polished to a shine – is clapped on. Bundles of cable are pulled. And the assembly belt moves. Even to laymen’s eyes, the celebrated object is already recognizable as a car. Its engine takes a deep breath inside the body and begins to shift into neutral.

Just listen: the spiffy child can already honk – the first cry! But the giant hall is not a spirited maternity ward. These births are all carried out with pliers, hammer, and screws. And there is so much noise that one can barely hear the voice of the man who is giving a celebratory speech at the end of the “conveyor belt” at the very moment when the polished black car is supposed to take its first steps. Incidentally, a triumphal arch has been set up at the end of the assembly belt. Its inscription makes clear that this is the twenty-thousandth. Hail to thee!

Now the man at the foot of the arch – what should he say? The usual, of course, the usual. But when he gets to the point where he thanks everyone who “has made this great factory [*Werk*] possible” (that’s more or less what he said), you see the workers nudging and winking at each other. That’s because it’s not that easy to give a speech at the Volkswagen plant near Fallersleben, where countless hollow phrases once resounded! Who made this factory possible? You automatically think that it was the same person

who made the rubble in all the cities possible as well. (And the Volkswagen plant, too, is about half destroyed on the inside, despite the fact that its kilometer-long façade along Mittelland Canal is splendidly preserved.) Or you wonder if this word *Werk* [1] simply refers to this black car and its greenish-gray predecessors? It was all made possible by the occupation authorities, who also kept all of the cars produced at the factory for themselves, with few exceptions. But thanks?

Alas, there was not much of a party atmosphere to be felt here. A few workers – though they had been told that something was about to happen – did not take a single step toward the arch. They said: “Not a step! There’s no flower pot to be won, and it doesn’t exactly smell like a holiday roast, either!” They used the brief break, which was intended to be festive, to fold their arms a little. And since they were not listening, they did not hear the speaker say: Until now, the colleagues in the Volkswagen plant had been quiet and had done their duty, but given the food situation, they wouldn’t be quiet much longer and keep working calmly as before . . . Then the celebrated car with the number “20,000” on its license plate rolled off the assembly line. The crowd at the arch dissolved. The machines screeched, hammered, hissed – utterly determined to get to the next 20,000 Volkswagens. No trumpet blared, no fanfare resounded.

“Better that way,” said the workers, “without much fuss.” There were still a few [workers] who had participated in the great celebration in May 1938, when the foundation stone had been laid for this, Europe’s largest automobile factory. They remembered how back then there was much more pomp, much more sounding off, giving of orders, lying. For he, the “Führer,” had come in person, the man who promised each worker a car of his own. The workers were a “community marching in close formation,” and indeed: when the time came when it pleased the “Führer” to attack Poland, they were allowed to march in close formation to war. And when the time came for the People’s Car, it followed behind. Do you still remember, comrades of the fist and the rifle? And many workers had paid a thousand marks [in advance for the car]. There were 280,000 savers, who were separated into “fast” and “slow savers,” and they accumulated 280,000,000 marks in the account of the “Bank of German Labor” – a sum that is still there today, but has been confiscated in accordance with Law 52. “The money?,” the workers said. “Gone! Devalued! You bet! What’s left will be utterly destroyed during the currency reform. Don’t you think?” – “The Volkswagen?,” say the workers. “The car is driving and the people are watching. . .”

“But the car is good, isn’t it...?”

“The car is excellent! Powerful, despite only 25 hp! Comfortable, yet so small! Economical at eight lighters of fuel per hundred kilometers, and comfortable, and it even has warm air heating, yet is so fast and cheap!” – But I must correct myself: he did not say “comfortable,” he said “*bonfortionös*.” For even when the worker is giving praise, it sounds ironic, and the man who could still describe the laying of the foundation stone in 1938 eagerly recounted one particular episode [from this event] in humorous-derisive form. He mentioned the twenty-eight farmers, who, together with their farms, horses, oxen, and cows, had to make way for the Volkswagen plant, and he described how these angry and tearful farmers had appeared as guests of honor and had feigned rapt enthusiasm. . . Indeed, this has always been a site for loud orders and silent obedience, lots of lying and little believing. In short, the Volkswagen plant, as far as emotions are concerned, is heavily burdened.

But a new general director has arrived. A straight-talking, honest, matter-of-fact man; he says that the factory is still highly modern, and that great achievements would be possible, were it not for the fact that the bureaucracy raging in Germany also has this plant in a stranglehold. Eight thousand workers and employees – that is rather too many than too few; but at least there is no shortage of workers, and there are also plenty of machines. The plant produces a thousand cars a month. But the factory could deliver nearly twice the number of cars, if, instead of an impenetrable thicket of paper regulations in which an anonymous bureaucracy triumphs, there were more opportunities to develop personal initiative.

Fewer regulations and a better supply of materials – this, in the view of the general director, would be the solution to all the problems. He is a fairly young general director – that is true. But the fact that the old workers agree with his view confirms its correctness. In this regard, they all want the same thing: more initiative, fewer regulations, more materials!

The plant also has an English *controller*, as is customary today in many places. And from his words, one could infer that the “People’s Car,” as the Volkswagen is called in English, is on new paths. For the occupation authorities no longer wish to lay claim to the entire output of the factory, as they have done so far. Cars will finally be made available to the Germans as well, first and foremost for export. All of this will go something like this: this month, 1,100 People’s Cars will be born. Four hundred will go to the British authorities. Three hundred will be exported (it looks like people abroad, especially in Holland, are eager to drive a small car that uses only nine liters of fuel per hundred kilometers.) Three hundred cars will be allocated to German agencies; note: to “agencies.” But if one asks: “And what about the individual civilian with a driver’s license – when will it be his turn?,” a smile goes through the entire plant, a smile that is bewildered smile by such a naive question. “Buy it illegally!”

“What? Buy it illegally? From the factory?”

“Out of the question! We have always delivered to English agencies. Completely above board! At most, we have lost replacement parts, but never entire cars.”

“And where am I supposed to buy the Volkswagen illegally?”

“Not a Volkswagen, but a People’s Car, also called a Beetle! We know reliably that you can occasionally get them in Hamburg. 30,000 to 40,000 marks a piece . . .”

The guest, who just now was driving – “*bonfortionös*” – the brand-spanking new (albeit greenish-gray) Beetle across the factory site that stretches for a kilometer, is seized by displeasure, since he is forced to conclude, after all is said and done, that cars – even the cheapest – are used not only for driving, but also for representation. And while he thinks that the misleading name “Volkswagen” should disappear, he is not sure which new name to propose, assuming that is even allowed – “Office Car” or “Behörden-Wagen.” Well, the future will tell us what to do! And as far as renaming is concerned – the “city of the Volkswagen,” this un-German . . . robot-like name has already disappeared. “Wolfsburg” is now the name of the settlement on the other bank of the Canal – the city that, as was once heralded, would become the “most beautiful, the most modern city in the world.” Wrong! Potemkin could be the patron saint of this place, were it not for the fact that the rain long since washed away the cheap, hasty luster.

And the new confused order of things means that the city of the Volkswagen no longer has a direct relationship with the factory of the Volkswagen. That means: if the factory, for whose benefit the settlement was once erected, wants to procure housing for someone who is important to the plant, it cannot be sure that it will be able to do so. Incidentally, it is a city where no one owns a house. A city of renters. And if it is true that home ownership ruins people, it is also true that not owning them ruins homes. There is only one hopeful sign: a few Volkswagens are driving through the streets, albeit with license plates reading “test drive”! And is there a hope-filled fledgling undertaking in Germany today to which one could not affix this sign?

NOTES

[1] In addition to factory, *Werk* can also mean work or achievement – trans.

Source: Jan Molitor [Josef Müller-Marein], “‘People’s Car’ auf neuen Wegen,” *Die Zeit*, January 29,

1948.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

Recommended Citation: The “People’s Car” on New Paths (January 29, 1948), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/occupation-and-the-emergence-of-two-states-1945-1961/ghdi:document-4124>> [February 07, 2025].