



The People's Car: A Global History of the Volkswagen Beetle

By Bernhard Rieger

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At the Berlin Auto Show in 1938, Adolf Hitler presented the prototype for a small, oddly shaped, inexpensive family car that all good Aryans could enjoy. Decades later, that automobile—the Volkswagen Beetle—was one of the most beloved in the world. Bernhard Rieger examines culture and technology, politics and economics, and industrial design and advertising genius to reveal how a car commissioned by Hitler and designed by Ferdinand Porsche became an exceptional global commodity on a par with Coca-Cola.

Beyond its quality and low cost, the Beetle's success hinged on its uncanny ability to capture the imaginations of people across nations and cultures. In West Germany, it came to stand for the postwar "economic miracle" and helped propel Europe into the age of mass motorization. In the United States, it was embraced in the suburbs, and then prized by the hippie counterculture as an antidote to suburban conformity. As its popularity waned in the First World, the Beetle crawled across Mexico and Latin America, where it symbolized a sturdy toughness necessary to thrive amid economic instability.

Drawing from a wealth of sources in multiple languages, *The People's Car* presents an international cast of characters—executives and engineers, journalists and advertisers, assembly line workers and car collectors, and everyday drivers—who made the Beetle into a global icon. The Beetle's improbable story as a failed prestige project of the Third Reich which became a world-renowned brand illuminates the multiple origins, creative adaptations, and persisting inequalities that characterized twentieth-century globalization.

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Editorial Review

Review

Bernhard Rieger's *The People's Car* conveys how inextricably 20th-century politics, culture and economics are linked...The story of 'the people's car' is, of course, interesting in its own right--its commission, design, post-war production and worldwide success. But what is most intriguing is how a consumer commodity became an icon that, over decades, represented something different for a variety of countries and generations. Rieger shows this to informative and illuminating effect. (Ulrike Zitzsperger *Times Higher Education* 2013-04-18)

An engaging history of how a failed Nazi prestige project became a national icon in three different countries...A provocative look at one product's unlikely journey through authoritarianism and globalization. (Joshua Keating *Foreign Policy online* 2013-04-01)

The People's Car: A Global History of the Volkswagen Beetle is a thorough and compelling new chronicle of the distinctive Bug. (Jessica Grose *Fast Company online* 2013-04-03)

A fascinating book! **Rieger** takes readers on the Volkswagen Beetle's global journey, showing the many meanings of this iconic product in different times and places. His history illuminates the worldwide allure of commodity culture, the spread of socioeconomic inequalities, and the protean meanings of purchased goods. (Emily S. Rosenberg, editor of *A World Connecting, 1870-1945*)

Rieger has succeeded in presenting the first comprehensive account of the truly amazing story of the Volkswagen Beetle. Starting with Hitler's plans to provide a mass-produced people's car for his projected 'Aryan' society, he shows how this 'ugly duckling' became an icon of postwar mass motorization around the world. A compelling read. (V. R. Berghahn, Columbia University)

With great richness and imagination, **Rieger** joins economics and social desire, advertising and politics, technology and culture, to track a distinctive German history through a truly transnational arena. (Geoff Eley, author of *Nazism as Fascism: Violence, Ideology, and the Ground of Consent in Germany, 1930-1945*)

Rieger extracts from the history of the Volkswagen not just the story of a product--iconic though it was--but also its significance for Germany's national image since the 1930s. Deeply researched, this history makes a cracking good read. (Jane Caplan, co-editor of *Concentration Camps in Germany: The New Histories*)

The Beetle had a stupendous run, which...**Bernhard Rieger** traces in his absorbing account...Rieger has written a fascinating book that will inevitably find resonance among those who were themselves touched by the magic of an object made of steel, glass, and plastic that was designed in the heart of Hitler's Reich. (Paul Hockenos *The National* 2013-05-09)

From its original design by Ferdinand Porsche, commissioned by Hitler in the 1930s, to its role as a symbol of a new, post-World War II Germany, the Beetle became second only to Ford's Model T as a car for the masses and, eventually, a feature of the emergence of the middle class...This overview of the car's journey from its Third Reich conception to lovable international representation of a renewed Germany is sure to interest die-hard Beetle lovers as well as automobile history buffs. (Maria Bagshaw *Library Journal (starred review)* 2013-07-01)

The People's Car by **Bernhard Rieger** chronicles the life of the iconic Volkswagen Beetle, from its 1930s origin as a propaganda tool for Germany's Third Reich through to the modern day, a run of popularity spanning a remarkable nine decades. Rieger's research details the car maker's obsessive pursuit for high-quality, low-maintenance and utterly dependable motoring, which were the treasured hallmarks of the Beetle through the middle part of the 20th century...While the meteoric postwar rise of the Beetle presents a chance to marvel at the model's simple appeal and outstanding longevity, the years before its manufacture began present the most fascinating reading...*The People's Car* is an exhaustive...and fascinating glimpse at a car that stood the test of time and of changing consumer tastes.

(Steve Colquhoun *Sydney Morning Herald* 2013-07-06)

[An] illuminating and elegantly written history...**Rieger** is particularly good on the gendered nature of Beetle ownership. At a time when fewer than 20 percent of driving licenses in West Germany were held by women, the Beetle became a vehicle for what he calls 'automotive misogyny.' ...He is very good...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...It even became an icon of the counterculture.

(Richard J. Evans *London Review of Books* 2013-09-12)

Bernhard Rieger tells the story of the Beetle and he does so with wit and ease...A German chronicle that always keeps an eye on international entanglements. [Rieger's] cultural history with a transnational reach is...the intelligent alternative to traditional national historiography.

(Hedwig Richter *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 2013-05-05)

The story of the Volkswagen Beetle is complex, interesting, international, unlikely, and utterly fascinating. **Rieger** does an excellent job of bringing together the history, events, and people that produced an iconic automobile that beat all the odds. (C. J. Myers *Choice* 2013-10-01)

About the Author

Bernhard Rieger teaches modern and contemporary history at University College London.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Gerald Magee:

The book *The People's Car: A Global History of the Volkswagen Beetle* will bring you to definitely the new experience of reading the book. The author style to explain the idea is very unique. In case you try to find new book to read, this book very acceptable to you. The book *The People's Car: A Global History of the Volkswagen Beetle* is much recommended to you to read. You can also get the e-book through the official web site, so you can easier to read the book.

Peggy Elmore:

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Caitlin Cruz:

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