

Porsche and Volkswagen's Nazi Roots

By Dietmar Hawranek

Both Volkswagen and Porsche had close connections with the Third Reich. It was Ferdinand Porsche who designed the "people's car," the legendary VW Beetle, in 1934. Adolf Hitler was so taken with the engineer he declared him "brilliant."

Without Ferdinand Porsche, neither automotive giant Volkswagen nor **luxury marque Porsche** would exist today. The man who would have a huge influence on German car-making was born in Bohemia in 1875 and completed his apprenticeship in his father's mechanical shop.

While working for the Viennese coach-building firm Lohner, which produced coaches for the court of Emperor Franz Josef I of Austria, Porsche developed an engine that many engineers are once again working on today: the electric motor. A vehicle equipped with the motor was an attraction at the Paris World's Fair in 1900.

Even at a young age, Porsche enjoyed such a strong reputation that two dictators vied for his favor and service: Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin. But that never seemed to trouble Porsche: He was an inventor and a developer who was interested solely in his designs. In the end, who he worked for was as unimportant to him as the question of whether the projects were of a civilian or military nature. Solving the problem at hand was what mattered to him, not who was paying him.

In World War I, he designed aircraft engines for the army of the Austrian emperor and tractors for heavy artillery. Later on, Porsche developed sports cars for Daimler in Stuttgart, before founding an engineering firm with his son Ferry in Stuttgart, which developed cars for two German car and motorcycle makers, Zündapp and NSU.

In 1932, a delegation from Moscow visited Porsche in his Stuttgart office. Shortly thereafter, Stalin invited him to the Soviet Union for an informational visit. "At first we thought the invitation was so improbable that we had trouble taking it seriously," Ferry Porsche later wrote in his autobiography. "But soon it was made very clear to us that everything was perfectly serious."

Stalin wanted to advance industrial development in the Soviet Union with the help of experts from capitalist countries. He had Porsche taken on tours of aircraft and automobile factories and, in the end, made him an offer to become general director of the development of the Soviet auto industry.

Stalin promised Porsche many privileges and powers. But the German engineer turned down Stalin's offer "after much consideration," Ferry Porsche wrote.

'The Brilliant Design Engineer'

It was not the communist dictatorship that had deterred the senior Porsche as much as the language barrier. How could he manage such a gargantuan task, he reasoned, if he couldn't even communicate in his native tongue?

Stalin's offer "could have had a very decisive influence on my subsequent life," Ferry Porsche wrote. His life would not have been the only one affected.

If Porsche had accepted, the VW Beetle might have become the Soviet Union's "people's car." And instead of becoming a symbol of West Germany's post-war "economic miracle," perhaps it would have become an icon of Russian backwardness -- as the Lada did, years later.

When Hitler asked the German automobile industry to develop a "suitable small car" in 1934, Porsche submitted the best design -- and was awarded the contract. At the 1935 German auto show, Hitler was full of praise for Porsche. He said that he was pleased that, thanks to "the abilities of the brilliant design engineer Porsche," it had been possible to "complete the preliminary designs for the German *Volkswagen* (people's car)."

A new factory had to be built to produce the car, as well as a new town surrounding the factory to house the workers. "Hitler proposed building the factory in central Germany," Ferry Porsche recalled.

The search for the site proceeded from the air. It was to be located near a railway line, canals and autobahn. The site that was eventually chosen was near a medieval castle, the Wolfsburg, after which the city was later named.

Hitler wanted to call the factory the "Porsche Plant," but Ferdinand Porsche was opposed to the idea. Instead, it became the Volkswagen Plant.

An Automobile for the Masses

Much of the money to build the plant came from trade union assets. To this day, the IG Metall metalworkers' union has a right to an expanded role in the management of the VW Group on the basis of this early use of union money. As a result, VW management cannot move production to a different plant without the consent of labor representatives on its supervisory board.

Berthold Huber, the current head of IG Metall, accused Porsche CEO Wendelin Wiedeking of being "ignorant of history" when Wiedeking planned to acquire Volkswagen and transform the group into what he called a "normal" company.

After 1933, the Nazis occupied and later confiscated union offices and printing presses, turning them over to the German Labor Front (DAF), the Nazis' trade union organization. The DAF was eventually required to provide the original capital of 50 million Reichsmark to establish the company known as the Gesellschaft zur Vorbereitung des Deutschen Volkswagens mbH (Company to Develop the German People's Car).

But a true automobile for the masses was not produced in Wolfsburg during the war. Only 630 Beetles were made there during World War II -- and distributed to the privileged.

Instead, the factories were used in weapons production, to manufacture tank chains, mines and an all-terrain vehicle that came to be known as the Kübelwagen ("bucket-seat car"). Thousands of forced laborers were later used, including Jews from concentration camps and prisoners of war, mostly from the Soviet Union and Poland.

'Cheap Eastern Workers'

Porsche's son-in-law, Anton Piëch, began managing the plant in 1941. In his study "The Volkswagen Plant and Its Workers in the Third Reich," the German historian Hans Mommsen writes: "In the summer of 1943, Anton Piëch bluntly declared that he had to use cheap Eastern workers in order to fulfill the Führer's wish that the Volkswagen be produced for 990 Reichsmark."

In the early 1990s, this part of the history of the VW Group caught up with Ferdinand Piëch, the son of the former plant director Anton Piëch. Ferdinand Piëch, the head of Audi, was trying to rise to the top of the Volkswagen Group.

Piëch, who had pushed aside a number of executives along his career path, had his share of enemies. Some of them spread the rumor that Piëch was incapable of being the head of VW, hinting at the headlines it would produce in the important US market if the son of the former Wolfsburg plant director, who had used forced laborers, became the head of the modern-day VW Group.

Ferdinand Porsche himself served Hitler during the war as the head of his tank commission. He supported Hitler's power and profited from the regime. Nevertheless, Mommsen believes that "the question as to the extent to which Porsche understood the criminal character of the regime he served must remain open."

For Mommsen, Ferdinand Porsche is "the prototype of the expert interested solely in technological matters." An Allied investigative commission later declined to file charges against Porsche, although he, his son Ferry and his son-in-law Anton were imprisoned in France for several months.

When Ferdinand Porsche died on Jan. 30, 1951, he left behind an estate distributed across two businesses: the design engineering firm in the Stuttgart suburb of Zuffenhausen, which would later develop into the Porsche sports car company, and the Porsche dealership in Salzburg, Austria, which would become Europe's largest car dealership.

Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan

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