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UNLEASHING THE BUGS

Volkswagen's Representation and Place In Cultural Consumerism in 1930s and 1940s Germany and 1950s and 1960s America

By 1972, Volkswagen had produced its 15,007,034th Beetle, a number making it, at that time, the most successful automobile ever.[1] This startling claim of popularity is attributed to production and not sales, but it still gives good indication as to the proliferation of the car. In fact, it owes such success to a breakthrough into the American automotive market in the late 1950s and 1960s. This exportation, from its manufacturing home in Wolfsburg, Germany, was not made easy. The car's very roots lay in one of America's most despised enemy and hated name. Certainly, few Americans would directly purchase a car knowing that the car had begun with an interest from Adolf Hitler and was nursed to life by the former Nazi leader himself. Yet, this is the history of the Volkswagen. So how did this company, the parent of the famous Beetle, turn itself around and drop the Hitler connection to sell so well? The answer is a history of rebranding done by the corporation.

As a project of Adolf Hitler, Volkswagen was subject to some of the highest forms of socialist propaganda in 20th century Germany. This paper will examine first what the Nazi party believed the Volkswagen could accomplish and then how they chose to represent their endeavor. By doing this, this article can contrast both how the car fit into a later American consumer context and how its representation during the 1950s and 1960s complimented it. In these two different

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[1] Phil Patton, *Bug: The Strange Mutations of the World's Most Famous Automobile* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002] 121

settings of both time and geography, the journey of the small "bug" will allow the reader to understand how a company is capable of redefining itself and its history. This redefinition is a marketing technique called rebranding and is done in order to manipulate a buyer into understanding a new product message. Here, that message was a capitalistically-driven idea of originality, something almost entirely new in the 1950s American auto market. As the world's most successful automobile, the Volkswagen Beetle tells the story of how ideas of consumerism produce a certain representation, and how a government and a free-market corporation coped with these trends.

It is written that, during his prison sentence, two things occupied most of Adolf Hitler's time. The first was creating *Mein Kampf*, and the second was reading Henry Ford's autobiography.[2] For Hitler, Ford was probably the greatest American to have lived, and the accomplishments of the auto maker struck Hitler as a way to reach success in Germany. If he could mass produce a car the way Ford did in America, it would be possible for the German workers, who had never had the opportunity to own an automobile, to buy one on a modest salary. When he became Chancellor, Hitler's first missions were upgrades to the German highway system as well as the automobile industry. In fact, the first official speech he gave after having taken the Chancellorship was at the 1933 Berlin Auto Show,[3] an event that he would come to speak at annually[4]. For Hitler, the success of his nation's auto industry was vital to his success as a leader. If, for example, a significantly greater percentage of the population could afford a car, he had done well by socialist measure. As the provider of economic stability, a socialist government

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[2] Walter Nelson, *Small Wonder* [Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1965] pp 30
[3] Patton, *Bug*, pp. 7
[4] Ibid. 13

must dictate a country's financial success; much unlike the free market does in a capitalist nation.

Ravaged by World War I, Germany had made progress during the 1920s to rebuild their nation. Adolf Hitler, however, promised new, more rapid, changes to industry and an upgrade of the German standard of living. These promises were laid out in *Mein Kampf*[5], and became the very promises that secured his figurehead status in the Nazi party by the early 1930s. For him to kick-start an entire new automobile endeavor represented a larger promise to the German people and said something about his potential as a new leader. The car became a symbol of a new Germany, a post-war state that could compete internationally with powers of the world in industry and commerce. But most importantly, it could raise the national standard of living, an ultimate and important goal of Hitler's, to equal the modernized nations of the world, namely, though, to America.

So, when Hitler came into contact with Ferdinand Porsche's design for a small, easily producible car in 1932, he decided to fund the endeavor. Hitler introduced it as part of his KdF program ("Kraft durch Freude" which translates to "Strength through Joy"), a multi-tasked project, centering around the automobile, that included opening German resources such as roads, forests and vacation spots.[6] The car's prototypes were called KdF Wagons until it was officially changed to Volkswagen in 1938.[7]

The KdF program had grown out of a larger movement growing in Germany called the *Volkisch* movement (Volk being the German equivalent of the English "folk"). Such European thinkers as

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[5] Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, Volume Two: The National Socialist Movement; Chapter II: The State. http://www.hitler.org/writings/Mein_Kampf/mkv2ch02.html. Accessed 1 May 2010
[6] Patton, *Bug*, pp 52
[7] Ibid. pp. 60

Carl Jung and Jakob Wilhem Hauer supported the movement[8], which based itself on an idea of bettering ones community through individual endeavor. As Hitler wrote in *Mein Kampf*, "The first and supreme duty of an organized folk community is to place the inventor in a position where he can be of the greatest benefit to all."[9] KdF was meant to be an extension of the *Volkisch* idea, and Hitler created a *Volksgemeinshaft*[10] or "national community" and idealized the Volkswagen automobile as a prominent part of this. Of course, these movements and ideologies were aimed to the similar end of increasing the standard of living in Germany.

This was the birth of Volkswagen. From the Ford biography, the Detroit automaker had turned into one of Hitler's heroes, as well as one of the German people (the automaker's infamous anti-semitism furthered this front, as well[11]). However, the heroism was not completely based on production achievements. Hitler admired the Ford story because of what it did for the American people. He had seen the country's economic progress in the 1920s and envisioned something similar in Germany when he came to power. Thus, he began his own version of the Ford company with the Volkswagen, hoping for something of a similar end. As German historian Wolfgang Konig writes, "The Volkswagen was promoted as the chief example of a group of 'people's products' being prepared or realized in order to raise consumption."[12] With an automobile as the center of these products, available to the average German, Hitler believed his country's standard of living could be on par with America.

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[8] Petteri Pietikainin, "The Volk and its Unconscious: Jung, Hauer and the 'German Revolution'" [Journal of Contemporary History, Vol. 35, No. 4 (Oct., 2000)], pp. 524
[9] Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, Volume Two: The National Socialist Movement, Chapter IV: Personality and the Conception of the Folkish State
[10] Pietikainen, "The Volk...", pp. 525
[11] Nelson, *Small Wonder,* pp. 30
[12] Wolfgang Konig, "Adolf Hitler vs. Henry Ford: The Volkswagen, the Role of America as a Model, and the Failure of a Nazi Consumer Society" German Studies Review, Vol. 27, No. 2 (May, 2004), pp. 249

As historian Victoria de Grazia writes in her work *Irresistible Empire*, "no commodity such as the automobile had marked Germany's backwardness in consumption with respect to the United States."[13] She also points out that the 1930s served as a time in which Hitler, and much of Western Europe had taken up new plans to revolutionize standards of living and wage cultures. The abstract goals of the Nazi-dominated New Order, as well as France's Popular Front mirror this step. These programs were implemented to try to emulate the wide consumerism and success of American society in the 1920s. In essence, Hitler's standard of living programs were meant to establish a Nazi-bred response to the American standard. But, what was the American standard?

De Grazia describes the richly sociological term as supporting a " proletarian consumer consciousness" in order "to acquire the necessities for a dignified existence." The American Standard symbolized an idea that the American worker was also a consumer, and due to his hard work, he deserved a comfortable lifestyle. Historian Lawrence Glickman defined part of the American standard, in its relation to workers, as "the American standard, in their view, did not refer to a monetary figure bur rather to a type of character that would make American workers insist upon a certain level of consumer comfort; it was a mindset rather than a particular wage level."[14] The mindset was brought on by the availability of comforts and classy products. For Adolf Hitler, who had a certain fixation on this American Standard, few things epitomized this availability and consumption more than the proliferation of Henry Ford's Model T.

An August 11, 1941 *New York Times* op-ed by Anne O'Hara McCormick, shows that Americans were well aware of Hitler's "Fordism" imitation. The article, titled "The First Home Thrust at the American Standard," mocks the Fuhrer for promising German citizens a chance at an automobile

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[13] Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire* [Cambridge; Harvard University Press, 2005] pp. 125
[14] Lawrence Glickman, *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of the Consumer Society* [Ithaca; Cornell University Press, 1997] pp. 82

as a weak attempt to copy American society. [15] Of the Germans, McCormick writes, "no people are more covetous of living 'like Americans'." She describes excited eyes from onlookers at the 1939 Berlin Auto Show when the first model was "enthroned on a great flood-lit stage" and "passionately proclaimed, on that occasion, the symbol of the National Socialist Revolution." The onlookers must have shared Hitler's enthusiasm as they saw the car. It was a vision of the future, the signpost of German industrial and economic success. McCormick highlights these important cultural points in her article. One of these being the task of emulation brought on by Hitler in introducing his automobile as a measure of a new standard of living, one akin to 1920s America. The second is the focus on the German presentation of the car, much different, to be sure than the first archetypes of Ford's Model T. To have a car, a heap of metal formed to look like an insect, enthroned on a gigantic stage and proclaimed as a symbol of a movement made it almost holy. Such was the flair of Nazi propaganda. Importantly, though, this proves that the Volkswagen came to be represented in a way that was uniquely German, much as how Ford's car had become a staple of American "populist consumerism".[16]

This was anything but a new paradigm for the German citizens, however. Starting in the early 1930s, the Nazi's had introduced new systems of rationing and "buy German" propaganda efforts, mostly aimed at housewives. By the time the Nazi government was ready to introduce the Volkswagen, it had already begun to "sensitize German consumers to the nationality of their expenditures."[17] To buy German was proper, just as it was proper to encourage the endeavors of the Nazi government, as radical as they may seem.

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[15] Anne O'Hare McCormick. "The First Home Thrust at the American Standard" *New York Times.* Aug 11, 1941
[16] de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire*, pp. 99
[17] Ibid. pp. 125

The biggest problem that faced Hitler, however, was that the American Standard, one that Glickman describes as positing a direct correlation between character and desires, simply did not exist in Germany. How could he make the Germans want the Volkswagen as badly as Americans had wanted their automobiles? The first was a promise of a low price. Since the German workers' wage situation was not yet on par with Americans, the car would have to be made affordable by German standards. The next was a payment program, in order to ensure affordability. The plan, in which workers could deposit a portion of their paycheck, never really took off. Still, the Nazis staged motor tours and mobile exhibitions throughout the country to increase the popularity and visibility of the new automobile.[18]

The American media, however, never saw the potential of the Volkswagen. From the beginning, "Hitler's car" was improbable, infeasible and a nuisance in comparison to their darling Fords and GMs. By 1937, the *New York Times* was beginning to detail the new plans for Volkswagen production, although, noticeably, many articles deal with, what they saw, as Hitler's inability to follow through on his promise. One *New York Times* article, entitled "Hitler's 'Volkswagen' Remains a Mystery" smugly reports that tests had gone poorly and the cars would not be ready for at least another year. [19] The article paints Hitler as sort of a mad man (pounding his fists and crying out that he will not tolerate failure) and his ambitions as foolish. Whether one wants to count this as Allied prejudice is an individual's decision, but the article certainly reveals that Americans were not necessarily excited about the production of the Nazi car. It also shows that, even across continents, the car was not the work of the German people; it was Hitler's project and his car.

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[18] *Place of Remembrance of the History of Forced Labor for the Volkswagen Factory* [Cambridge; Bentley Publishers] pp. 15

[19] Hitler 'Volkswagen' Remains A Mystery" *New York Times*. May 2, 1937

Hitler tied himself to the new cars. Once they started being produced, he only rode in a Volkswagen. Pictures were published of the Nazi leader riding down the streets of Berlin, his body sticking out the top of his Volkswagen convertible.[20] The idea was that if Hitler was riding in the car, and if it were made available to the average worker, it would be bought on a mass level. After all, who would not want to drive in Hitler's car? The Nazi propaganda marketing technique served the Volkswagen in the way that Hitler wished for it to be represented. The car was not going to be tied with Hitler to say that it was high-class or a novelty. Instead, much in a socialistic vein, the Fuhrer made sure to be pictured with the car because he wanted economic imitation. The intimate tie between leader and automobile became important because it mirrored the tie of a socialist administration to its nation's industry. As a pillar of socialism, the government is responsible for forming the economy, and so any success or failure must be attributed back to the Chancellor. This gives all the more reason for Hitler to be so overly dramatic and serious about the Volkswagen, because a thriving automobile industry would mean a thriving government. Moreover, as Walter Nelson points out, that amongst the Nazi leaders, "there was talk proving that National Socialism could do what free enterprise could never do."[21] Perhaps this was Hitler's way to say that his form of government could be more successful in producing an industry's boom than his hero, Henry Ford.

But, all this came before any cars were even available for purchase. Since no Beetles were made available for the general public before World War II[22], all the propaganda and hype came before the cars were ready. This would be something of a direct contrast to the later years in America,

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[20] Pictured in Nelson, *Small Wonder*
[21] Nelson, *Small Wonder,* pp. 5
[22] Thomas F. Conroy, "German Cars Here In An Export Push" *New York Times*, July 9, 1950

where and when the factory produced an excess of cars and advertised with the hopes of exporting them to the States.

Hitler's reliance on the Volkswagen was no joke; it was undoubtedly his gravest commitment to Nazi automotive industry, and perhaps in German production in general. How the car would be portrayed, then, would need to mirror this powerful commitment.

For Nazi Germany, the way to support a powerful commitment was with powerful propaganda. For the government that life-blooded Joseph Goebbels, the master of 20th century propaganda, a project with such high stakes as Volkswagen, would have to be given its inordinate amount of propaganda marketing. This endeavor came in a form that did not disappoint this necessity; but an examination of the Nazi's propaganda techniques reveals portraits of the then current consumer culture and the direction that Hitler wished to take it.

This same idea is made more apparent when you look at several German propaganda photographs that surfaced from the time. Although only a few hundred Volkswagens were produced before the War[23], scenes in photographs make it seem as though they are abundant. And, moreover, that they are the favorite car of the German people and of their leader. Pictures of a Volkswagen raised high on a platform flanked by long, decorative curtains with swastikas are an example of this[24]. The car, despite its small size, was a project of enormous potential and power. Dr. Robert Ley, head of the German Labor Front under the Nazi regime bragged about the project in 1938, calling it "the greatest social work of all time and all countries." [25] And then, in typical Nazi fashion, he made sure to link it back the Chancellor. "The Volk*sauto* is the

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[23] Melvin J. Lasky, "The Volkswagen: A Success Story" *New York Times*. October 2, 1955
[24] "Unter dem Sonnenrad: Ein Buch von Kraft durch Freude" (Berlin: Verlag der Deutschen Arbeitsfront, 1938), pp. 177-189. Accessed through online German Propaganda Collection. 2006. Found at http://www.bytwerk.com/gpa/vw.htm
[25] Nelson, *Small Wonder*, pp. 59

Fuhrer's very own work. The Fuhrer lives and works with this as his pet idea."[26] Again, we see the Nazis draw Volkswagen back into themselves; making sure to establish the intimacy needed to promote socialistic enterprise.

In a propaganda essay translated from a 1938 government-produced book celebrating the prosperity of KdF, one can see how exceptional the Nazis believed their new car to be.[27] The essay reveals the early history of the automobile, making sure to mention Adolf Hitler's intimate association. "The realization of his dream seemed certain," it reads, "and so everyone can understand it…..by naming the car in his speech 'KdF wagon,' a people's car in the truest sense of the word, A storm of applause erupted as Adolf Hitler took a seat in a test car."[28] For the Nazis, everything Volkswagen-involved had to be aligned to their leaders, in order to establish the car as a true Socialistic endeavor. Thus, since this was the method of representation for the car into the 1930s, we have to see the car's identity as undeniably Nazi. It was state-run, state-advertised, state-funded and, as far as the plan went, no cars would be available for foreign sales. Strictly speaking, the car could not enjoy any success outside of its championing governance.

In order to qualify this uniquely German project, the final lines of the essay read, "Following the will of the Fuhrer, the German Labor Front….."Kraft durch Freude" are accomplishing something only possible in Hitler's Germany."[29] Again the task appears— mold Volkswagen into an identity intrinsically tied to Hitler and the success of one will reflect the other.

This idea is brought up, but not proven, in the formation of the Volkswagen symbol. The standard VW cross that the car bears today was its original logo, and some argue that it is a token

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[26] Ibid. pp. 59
[27] "Unter dem Sonnenrad: Ein Buch von Kraft durch Freude"
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.

to the famous Nazi-used swastika.[30] Phil Patton writes, "the logo echoed the rectilinear energy of the swastika."[31] Surely, it cannot be put past Hitler to use the symbol as a token of Nazi pride and propaganda. For this discussion, however, the Nazi-infused VW symbol shows the close ties of the government and its pet industries. Also, interestingly, is that the company has chosen not to change its symbol, perhaps the one lasting remnant of its Nazi history. Though, one must ask how much this decision to keep the logo is attributed to the simple fact that scholarship is slim in proving the tie of the swastika and Volkswagen emblem.

It would be hard to label the Nazis Volkswagen campaign as anything close to successful. The Volkswagen payment plan that Hitler had envisioned so that the average worker could save up to purchase a car never worked out. By the spring of 1945 (the savings program continued through the war, with the hopes, obviously, of a German victory), had enrolled only 336,000 Germans[32] (of more than 90 million). By the end of the war, only 630 Volkswagen had been produced, and none for retail.[33] Of course, had Hitler not decided to invade the surrounding nations and start what would lead to World War II, the company might have had a better chance to improve the domestic automobile situation. Unfortunately, this was not the fate for the "people's car".

By 1939, the Volkswagen plant in Wolfsburg had been completely turned into a war production facility.[34] Cars were still being made, but not in the design of Porsche and not for the working citizen. The actual history of the factory during World War II is a sad one, in which the poorer citizens of invaded nations were turned into forced labor in Wolfsburg[35]. These prisoners were

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[30] David Kiley. *Getting the Bugs Out: The Rise, Fall and Comeback of Volkswagen in America* [New York; John Wiley & Sons, 2002] pp. 58
[31] Patton, Bug, pp. 62
[32] *Place of Remembrance,* pp. 14
[33] Conroy, *New York Times*
[34] *Place of Remembrance*, pp. 21
[35] Ibid. pp. 25

brought to the old factory and helped to produce the machinery to fight the war. The mistreatment of Polish and Austrian Jews and lower classes was so bad, in fact, that years later the Volkswagen corporation created a long pamphlet-like book entitled *Place of Remembrance of the History of Forced Labor for the Volkswagen Factory*[36] and published it. The book is a sad collection of remnants from the forced labor factory, with many photographs and letters. Now, do we suppose that the company out of the kindest of its soul, decided to publish its miserable history as a means of proper and ethical acknowledgement. Or, can we see this is a technique of rebranding? A technique that essentially says that that company is so different *now*, that it can recognize its own former mistakes and have them feel disconnected enough to not make an impact in current markets.

The question is a dangerous one. If we are, for example, to accept the publication as a money making ploy —in the same way that companies make their charitable contributions all too apparent— then we start to see any function of corporate responsibility as another way to make a buck. However, the question is an absolute necessity in any discussion of rebranding and the evolution of representation. As a company moves to shift or remake their image, we can see tangible steps, as we will see later when the Beetle comes to America. However, there are actions taken that cannot be determined as goodwill or as corporate manipulation. This idea becomes especially important in a capitalistic market, because the individual corporation stands to benefit from its own image, not of its governing state. As it stands, the *Place of Remembrance* book seems to be an act of good faith. By contrast, the work of Volkswagen after World War II was a work of well-managed capitalistic manipulation.

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[36] Ibid.

It's hard to discern the exact impact that war can have on any country, especially one at the losing end of one as large as the Second World War. Certainly, the infrastructure of any significant German industry faced major decimation, and Volkswagen was no different. The factory in Wolfsburg faced heavy bombing during the war, and when the first victorious British troops found the place, they must have wondered what potential it had to be rebuilt and productive. For three years, the factory lay almost forgotten.

Then, in 1948, a man named Heinz Nordhoff took over as President of the company and brought a new commitment and philosophy to Volkswagen. A German-born, American-trained General Motors executive, Nordhoff became blacklisted at the beginning for the war for having once worked for Opel. After the war, he was appointed by British leaders to run the large factory in Wolfsburg. Described as having a life-long interest in the American way of business by the *New York Times,*[37] Nordhoff brought rapid development to the plant. Production quadrupled from 1948 to 1952.

But there was more to the man than just a new work ethic. Nordhoff had a great distaste for the Nazi regime and its failures. He knew the American automotive industry well and saw a great potential for his company. Above all, however, he knew that in order to be successful in an Allied nation, one had to rid Volkswagen of its Nazi blood. "The future begins when you cut ties with the past," he once said.[38] This idea became the essential ontology for the new Volkswagen Corporation.

This was easier said than done. In 1949, Nordhoff flew to Detroit with stacks of pictures in his arms and a business plan to increase production. Not one American distributor took to the design

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[37] Lasky, *New York Times*
[38] Nelson, *Small Wonder,* pp. 163

and Nordhoff, himself, described the trip as an "utter failure".[39] The companies worried heavily about the car's name and Nazi history, especially knowing that its factory been used to produce Axis war machinery. Not only that, but some laughed at its design and declared it out of date. As historian Walter Nelson points out, the irony is that the car proved not to be out of date, but rather ahead of its time.[40] Still, how could one turn the precise symbol of socialist success in 1930s Nazi Germany into an attractive commodity in the (cold-war enlivened) harshly capitalistic 1950s America?

Yet, by the mid 1950s, Volkswagen and Nordhoff were being touted as the premier success story of the West German economy. How had they performed such a transformation? A 1955, four-page, *New York Times* article ran calling the company the "pacemaker in West Germany's industrial recovery"[41] and complimented Nordhoff entirely with the resurrection of the once-dead automobile corporation. By 1955, Volkswagen had become the largest selling foreign car in the United States, although it was still a very small portion in the American car market. The *Times* article focused on Nordhoff's strong business ethic and willingness to clash with top German national leaders. To this end, the article shows Volkswagen pushing itself into a position that would allow it to dispense its uniformly German identity. By Nordhoff rejecting, for example, the advice of West German Economics Minister Erhard, he had begun the slow process to complete rebranding. His wish was not to remain identifiably German — socialism had passed — now was the time for international capitalism.

Before the *Times* article, however, another major American news source had published an article detailing Nordhoff's miracle. In its February 15, 1954 issue, *Time* magazine showed, most likely

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[39] Ibid. pp. 175
[40] Ibid. pp. 75
[41] Lasky, *New York Times*

for the first time, the face of Heinz Nordhoff to many Americans.[42] Flanked by an artistic rendition of a high-flying VW logo, the car executive looked serious and professional and above him a large banner read "Germany: The Fabulous Recovery". Of course, the American media must have been thirsting for these stories about West German recovery, especially if it could compare its success with the communist East Germany. During the intensity of cold war commerce, any report of capitalistic success in Germany was probably highly regarded.

The *Time* magazine cover article functioned in many of the same ways that the *New York Times* feature did. It told the story of Nordhoff's rise and the unique traits he brought to his own heroism.[43] And again, it built upon Nordhoff as a man possessing many traits admirable in a capitalistic market. In reference to the car company, the article read, "Germany's rebirth is the kind of economic miracle Americans can understand." *Time* also painted Nordhoff as almost fiercely anti-Nazi and enormously capitalistic, especially in his innovative, and sometimes risky, systems of production.

Interestingly, the magazine and newspaper articles, although very possibly influenced by a marketer, assisted Nordhoff in his American rebranding. Usually thought to be solely a corporate endeavor — one aimed to increase net profits by issuing new representation — the ultimate success of rebranding is measured by the cultural attitude of external consumers. The articles focus on all the parts of Nordhoff that do not align him with Nazism, Socialism or recent German history. Both detail his history, the sort of rising and falling, riches-to-rags-to-riches story that we consider uniquely American. Both concentrate on the enormous amount of money Nordhoff had brought in, but made sure to remind us that the man is not satisfied and continues to push for

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[42] *Time* Magazine, Cover Image, Feb. 15, 1954
[43] "Business Abroad; Comeback in the West" *Time* Magazine, February 15, 1954. pg 84-88

more profit, something, again, one finds as the essence of the myth of the American corporation. It would be wrong to say that the articles wished Nordhoff to be American, but they certainly idealized him as someone highly interesting and relatable to an American businessman.

Moreover, the articles came during the height of the Cold War, a worldwide battle between the tenets of socialism and capitalism. Clearly, the American media moved toward painting Nordhoff as an extreme capitalist, one who was able to be very lucrative with an individualized drive for success. Of course, this idea of the individual, seen in the articles strict focus on Nordhoff, and not of the Wolfsburg factory at large, played in the United States Cold War culture of the 1950s. As historian Cotton Seiler points out, the decade was laden with thoughts stemming from the modern "crisis of the individual."[44] Indeed, the times had called for a renewal of what was deemed the "American character," one bent on unveiling the potential and force behind the single individual[45]. This was meant to immediately contrast with the statism and collectivism of communist Russia. Volkswagen was successful enough in the 1950s to believe that Nordhoff may not have been quite ready to tap into this new trend, but when it came time for the company to advertise, it became a wealth of possibility.

As historian Lizabeth Cohen points out, the 1950s and 1960s brought a new sense of "standard of living" to Americans. Now that many returning veterans had bought a house and had obtained an education through the G.I. Bill, they expected the sort of availability of commodities that only mass consumerism could support.[46] Thus the era became one of economic boom, especially in regards to the automobile. If the Volkswagen corporation wanted to make a statement of power

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[44] Seiler, *Republic of Drivers*, pp. 74
[45] Ibid. pp. 75
[46] Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* [New York; Alfred A. Knopf, 2003] pp. 127-134

they would have to tap into this growing American consumerism, one, still dominated by domestic production.

Thus, as the decade turned, American magazine readers were soon privy to a new visual representation of the famous Volkswagen Beetle. In July 1959, Heinz Nordhoff went to the American marketing firm of Doyle Dane Bernbach (DDB) and began to organize an extensive ad campaign that would eventually include newspaper spreads and television commercials.[47] It was the first advertising officially done in America by the German automotive corp.[48]

By the end of 1960, DDB had created a template that would be used for Volkswagen ads for the next decade. A large picture would dominate the top half and a quarter of the bottom. Dark, bold text would serve as a headline for the ad, and smaller text would go under that. The VW logo fit into the bottom right corner. The ads were all in black and white. The picture used would almost inevitably be a photograph. As Frank Rowsome, Jr. points out in his book *Think Small: The Story of Those Volkswagen Ads*[49] photos were extremely uncommon in 1959 for auto ads. Agency men did not like them because they could never be happy with the look. "When you take a photograph, you do something to an automobile which makes it look different from the way it looks when you look at it," said Fairfax Cone, the president of ad firm Foote, Cone & Belding.[50] This was not exactly the philosophy of Helmut Schmitz, a young German who became Volkswagen of America's advertising manager. In a speech in 1963, Schmitz described for an advertising group the decision to use photographs in the ads, and also an abstract philosophy of the ads in general. "The very style of our ads gives the impression already of utter simplicity. Of

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[47] Frank Rowsome Jr., Think Small: The story of those Volkswagens ads [Brattleboro, VT: The Stephen Greene Press, 1970] pp. 49
[48] Nelson, *Small Wonder*, pp. 180
[49] Rowsome, *Think Small*, pp.75
[50] Ibid. pp. 75

directness. Of Honesty…..We just show a car. Sometimes with people. But with real people. Sometimes in a situation. But a real situation. So the ads spell honesty right from the start,"[51] he said. The group must have welcomed his speech, as the advertisements had already reaped great success. The number of American registered Volkswagen passenger cars jumped from 79,038 in 1958 to 240,143 in 1962. By 1966, that number was over 420,000.[52]

The physical look of the ads was nothing like the ads for American cars. A look at ads for Plymouth, Ford and Chrysler show just how different the VW ads were. In the Detroit ads, the cars were part of larger landscapes (in both photographs and drawings, which, ironically, look quite a bit like the old KdF wagon ads from 1930s Germany[53]), usually with families being active[54]. The point — these were family cars and would become an essential part of family happiness. And the message was timely. By 1960, the baby boomers were entering their years of growth and soon families would be bigger and would need bigger cars for new adventures. This added to the already established American fixation with big engines and big cars. Perhaps, one could say, that Volkswagen, being a foreign automaker may have missed on this marketing queue. Doubtful. The VW ads were shrewd because they were different. Nordhoff and DDB understood that directly competing with Detroit ads could not translate well. The Beetle was not necessarily a family car and its space was its most limiting feature. So, the ad men focused on something else — something that would essentially create the Volkswagen Beetle's image in marketing folklore and in American society; an image of individuality and uniqueness that the car boasted and that one could boast by becoming an owner. In the face of conformity amongst

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[51] Ibid. pp. 74
[52] Nelson, *Small Wonder*, pp. 307
[53] *Place of Remembrance*, pp. 14
[54] Plymouth. Advertisement, *Popular Mechanics*. February 1959

American automakers and their advertisements, Volkswagen took a largely different path, a departure that established its American success.

These directly relate to Seiler's label of the culture has existing amidst the crisis of individuals. The Volkswagen appealed to Americans because it offered them their own aesthetic individuality and originality, just in the physique of their automobile. But, this point goes further. The very idea of the advertisements that DDB put out mirror the individualistic ideal of the Beetle, because, they to, had an aesthetic entirely of their own. The success of the automobile cannot be solely attributed to the linking of form and content; but the ability to tie these together and then bind them into a deeper-seated and pervasive American ideology made the transition smooth.

In 1960, DDB had produced perhaps the most famous Volkswagen ad. The ad titled "Think Small"[55] was made as a magazine ad and a television commercial. The magazine ad featured a photograph of a single Beetle pushed into the background, dwarfing its already small size. The text underneath spells out the benefits of a small car, all the while establishing the case of Volkswagen's place in American culture. "The gas attendant doesn't ask where the gas goes" it reads, addressing the idea of the car as a novelty and reinforcing its originality — in that it, being a completely new design, it may have caused such confusion. Now, of course, no attendant would need to ask. Later, the ad claims that owners no longer think about the diminutive size "Except when you squeeze into a small parking spot. Or renew your small insurance. Or pay a small repair bill." With the ad, Volkswagen envisioned a more encompassing car ownership, where the size of the car would be a lifestyle influence. In direct contrast to the over-sized, mega-engined automobiles of Detroit, the "think small" campaign became the calling card of Volkswagen advertisement. It, once more, appealed to the individual in crisis about his or her

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[55] Pictured In: Patton, *Bug*; Rowsome, *Think Small*; Nelson, *Small Wonder*

own individualism. It is also credited as being the single greatest advertising campaign of the century.[56]

While most American car companies altered their ads from year to year, highlighting upgrades and changes, Volkswagen made it known that they had never altered their design significantly, and had no plans to do so. In a 1962 ad in *Life* magazine, Volkswagen spread a picture of its models since 1949 in a grid and in large font wrote "The Volkswagen Theory of Evolution".[57] The text of the ad asked the reader to pick out a Beetle that looked different and made it known that their theory of evolution was one of stagnation and repetition. But this was an essential part of the VW strategy. Nordhoff shooed away ideas on changing the design, and at certain points took quite a bit of flack for being so stubborn. Yet, looking through the ads that ran in the early 1960s, one can see why it became so essential for the car to remain the same.

As previously stated, the ads aim at a target of stark uniqueness, and keeping the already odd-looking automobile the same year in and year out made it all the more distinguishable. Each year, the Detroit companies focused their ads by touting what made their new model an improvement over the prior model. These ads were ones that pointed out that the '62 model had a larger engine than the '61, and the next year would highlight a newer feature. Volkswagen made improvements to their cars to be certain (one famous ad read "The 1962 ½ Volkswagen and bragged how the engineering improvements were implemented immediately. The ad reasoned that the company could do such a thing because their model was so consistent.)[58], but they were minor in aesthetic transformation. In more than one ad, VW of America drew attention to this

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[56] "Top 100 Advertising Campaigns" Ad Age Advertising Century, 1999. Accessed 12 March 2010, http://adage.com/century/campaigns.html
[57] Volkswagen. Advertisement. *Life*. September 14, 1962
[58] Volkswagen. Advertisement, *Life*. February 2, 1962

detail of consistency in design, and it marked a steady contrast with the always-on-the-move designs of the major American cars.

One ad, in a late 1962 issue of *Life*, promises that, because of the lack of design change, securing parts of the car needed to be fixed were easier than any other company. The plants had everything around their warehouses because they needed them every year. [59] The technique is important not just because the availability of spare parts was unique to Volkswagen, but because the company chose to highlight it so often. Obviously, the prospect of easy fix-ups is a positive selling point, but the highlighting of the stagnation of design was taboo. But, even more than that, admitting that the factory in Wolfsburg did not engineer new parts, but merely relied on older parts, seemed an odd thing to tell a prospective buyer. It's as if someone is asking you to buy the product because it will not be changed — ever. That if you wanted to see the same old car every day of your life, you could. It's the essence of conservatism, an idealism never strong in advertisement and technology. Thanks to American-introduced ideas such as planned obsolescence and an ever-evolving idea of a comfortable living standard, most companies advertised to tout a certain progressivism (George Walker, the head of styling at Ford, once said, "We design a car to make a man unhappy with his '57 Ford 'long about the end of 1958."[60])

For Volkswagen, though, their progressivism was in their dependability. The "foreign cars" page in the January 1959 issue of Popular Mechanics describes the car as, "completely unconventional, the Volkswagen continues the same chassis and over-all styling since it began. There are no changes for 1959" and "is as dependable as always."[61] In fact, most years the short Volkswagen description remained quite the same. The description remains important because it

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[59] Volkswagen. Advertisement, *Life*. November 9, 1962
[60] Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic,* pp. 294
[61] "Foreign Cars" *Popular Mechanics.* January 1959. pp 77

is not any form of advertisement, yet it still highlights this singular focus of the company. Why? Because in the 1950s and 1960s, not changing your model by the year was unfashionable. Still, it proved to be just *that* progressivism that physically alluded the ads — that there would not be a risk of a weaker year or model, that each one could be depended on as the one that came before it, an idea that was as progressive as it was rare in America.

Yet, the physicality of the car does more to tell us of its history, as well. Knowing that the 1949 Beetle looked almost exactly like the 1963 Beetle (except for a few headlight and door tweaks), one has to credit the Doyle Dane Bernbach marketing campaign with the success for the car. Clearly, no single-year model caught the attention of Americans drastically more than the year before did. So, what changed? The ad campaign and the word of mouth reputation of the car. But, more than this, the place of Volkswagen culturally changed too, and Americans began to adopt the car for its unique wonder.

Interestingly enough, Volkswagen saw this too and, in typical fashion, put out an ad about it. A 1962 advertisement in *Life* magazine shows the bold text "15 years ago, this car was nothing to brag about" and underlying that with text about the car's post-war history. This ad is important to this discussion in two ways; both in its pertaining to, as it calls it, "the perfection of one model"[62] and in its insistence on placing its history after the fall of the Nazi regime.

First, as far as the tangible text and picture of the advertisement, it once again shows Volkswagen utilized its own originality as its attraction. No other company has spent 15 years on the same model. While it says this, it also points out that the company has made over 3,000 changes to it in 1962 alone, none explicitly visible. Here, the ad assuages the reader's worry

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[62] Volkswagen. Advertisement, *Life*. April 20, 1962

about the abstract problems of something not evolving to solve its own problems, yet it still asserts originality and uniqueness in such a way as to align itself with other Volkswagen ads and the company's overall message.

Now, as far as historical insight goes, this ad is a perfect example of rebranding. To begin with, just as the model had not changed from 1947 to 1962, it had also remained the same from its inception in the 1930s under the watch of leader Adolf Hitler. The Beetle was the same Beetle structure that Hitler had toured the streets of Berlin and Munich in, and later in Vienna and in Paris. Yet, the ad makes no mention of this. Why not though — certainly a 30 years of history is more impressive than 15. Because, VW of America knew perfectly well that it did not want to establish any tie with its German past. And the trend would continue. I have yet to find a single VW ad that mentions anything prior to 1945.

This should surprise no one. Nordhoff understood that he could not sell a Nazi car in America. So he sought to make the Beetle an American car that happened to have a German name. Although not explicitly stated, this seems to be the reasoning why the United States' corporate centers were called VW of America and not Volkswagen. The German image was stripped as much as it could be.

One aspect of rebranding is severing ties with the past brand. For VW this would be the intrinsic tie it had to Hitler and the Nazi regime. So, in America, it goes unmentioned and the focus becomes something entirely different. Indeed, while the Nazis saw the Volkswagen as a mirror of socialist potential, success, and a new standard of living, the new American ads pictured the car as its own capitalistic self, alone and different. Its success lay not in pure ownership numbers, as Hitler the Fordist would insist, but in its innovation and refreshment. Now, the Beetle had a new identity.

But, the lack of a former German Nazi identity was not the crux of this new image. It was not a new identity built upon the lack of an older one. As I mentioned, the new image was one of highly capitalistic fervor, focusing on uniqueness and a philosophy of "othering". Many ads, while not mentioning other car companies by name, have this sort of "only with Volkswagen" ideal to them, making the company distinct from its industry peers. The newly capitalistic identity was one that was at once created and mirrored in the ads the DDB produced. It was an image created on marketing risks — risks that, because of their eventual success helped make William Bernbach the most famous ad man of the 20th century.[63]

It was also DDB's plan to distribute ownership booklets. By the mid 1960s, Volkswagen dealerships were handing out these out to owners of VW, old and new. One of these, a "think small" manual from 1967, features writings and drawings from famous Americans such as Harry Golden, Herb Valen and William Steig.[64] All pertain to Volkswagen, whether it's a direct story or a cartoon in which a family packs into a car that is unmistakably a VW Beetle. In an analysis, the manuals can be treated as typical American advertising, in which a famous name is associated to a product. However, the booklet says nothing about any of these people owning a Volkswagen, nor does it entertain any endorsement. It simply points out times where the company is mentioned, depicted or pondered. Thus, the booklet functions not as an advertisement for famous Volkswagen enthusiasts, but rather as a testimony to how acclimated the car had become in American society. This was not marketing; this was a cultural assessment of success. After all, these were the men amongst men who understand the rhythms and beats of culture. For owners of Volkswagen dealerships, who were to be the recipients and ultimate

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[63] "The Advertising Century: The Top 100 People" 1999. Accessed 12 March 2010, http://adage.com/century/campaigns.html
[64] *Think Small* [Volkswagen of America, 1967]

distributors, the booklets were produced to remind just how American the Volkswagen had become.

This same idea had been used in a few ads prior to the booklets. One, published in February 1966, featured 7'1" basketball star Walt Chamberlain next to a Bug.[65] The ad mocks its car's own size and admits it could not fit the jock into the car. However it promised that anyone shorter than Wilt could fit. Again, though, the ad says nothing about Chamberlain's love for VW, or that he drives one. The ad merely relates one image of American popularity with the Beetle; an action certainly designed to make sure Americans knew that bugs could be mainstream.

When Heinz Nordhoff passed away in 1968, the Volkswagen was still the world's largest exporter of cars.[66] It would be very difficult for any critic to label Nordhoff as anything but a major success. For the man who once told his staff that, "without automobiles there would be no reconstruction,"[67] he had almost single-handedly revived a major sector of the West German economy. This, thanks to the Beetle being the first foreign car to legitimately compete in the American automobile environment, and Nordhoff's reign as top Volkswagen executive was magical. *Time* magazine, in an obituary, called him the "builder of the bug" and praised his success.[68]

Perhaps Nordhoff's most impressive feat, however, was in his ability to create at once both a car and a campaign that could alter the Volkswagen image. The crown jewel of socialistic public production, the car could have been dismissed in history as Hitler's pet project and nothing more. Heinz Nordhoff saw a potential to sell big in America if he could convince the people that a

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[65] Rowsome, *Think Small,* pp. 79
[66] "Heinz Nordhoff, Volkswagen President, Dies at 69" *New York Times*. April 13, 1968
[67] Ibid.
[68] "Manufacturing: Builder of the Bug" *Time.* April 19, 1968

Volkswagen offered more than a remnant of Nazism. His decision to hire DDB certainly helped to make this ideal into a tangible and visual reality. However, one needs to credit Nordhoff for deciding to advertise in such a remarkably revolutionary way. Every time Nordhoff decided to not change the bug's design, every time he put money aside to help boost American sales he was defying corporate expectation. In doing so, he mirrored the very idealism that he hoped the VW Beetle would emit in the United States; individualistic drive and originality. The ultimate irony of the Beetle, of course, is that, despite their different moments, Heinz Nordhoff accomplished just what Hitler tried to disprove; that one didn't need capitalism to introduce a successful car tied to present consumer culture.

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