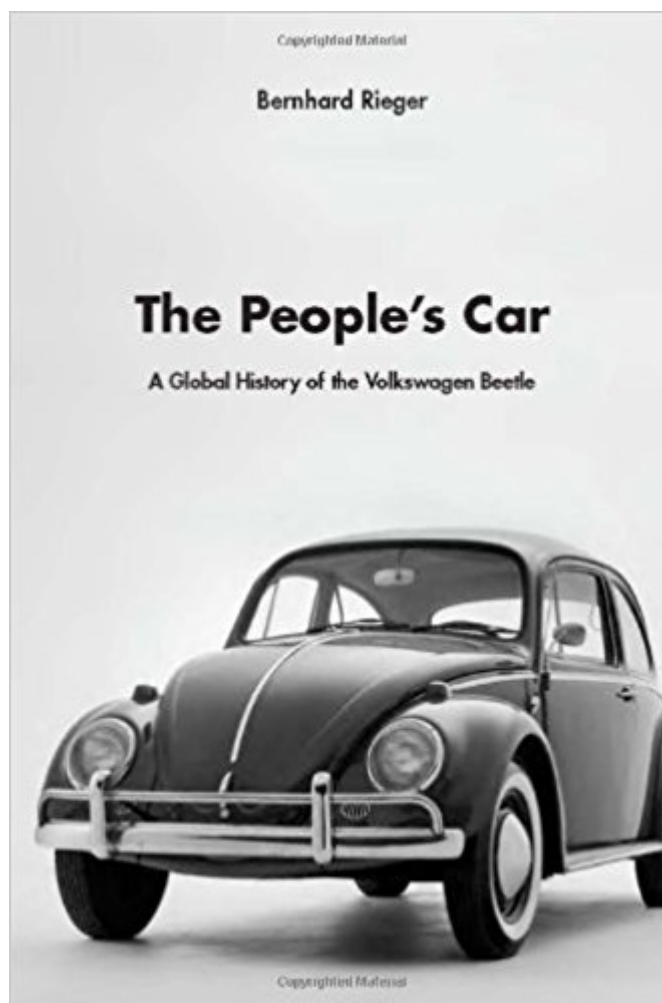


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# The People's Car: A Global History Of The Volkswagen Beetle



## Synopsis

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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

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 Zitzlsperger 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)

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

There is more to learn than like with this book. The title is a little deceptive in that it is largely a study in the socio-economic genesis and impact of the beetle, but the tale it tells is worth telling. I get the feeling this book could have been a lot more concise had it been better edited, however. There is much repetition or at least belabouring of points, and this materially detracts from its readability. Although it was harder work than it needed to be I learned much of immediate postwar history from the read, and I'm glad I did.

I saw this book reviewed in an engineering journal. As the owner of three Beetles in the past (after all, who hasn't owned one!) I was attracted to it because it covered much more than the usual

mechanical and performance detail. If you want that type of book, don't get this one. Having said that, it includes a great deal of the background to the beginnings and development of the Beetle, from the 1930s in Germany to its last years in South America. The book is not really light reading, so I found myself coming back to it after various pauses. But I don't think that's a fault. Because of my engineering background, I would have welcomed a little more descriptive and pictorial detail of the mechanics, but that's a personal view. I would thoroughly recommend it.

To many, the VW Beetle is a highly familiar cultural icon that represents the best of Californian flower power with all its associations of personal freedom - a fun automobile. If not at the anthropomorphic level of Disney's Herbie, the icon is certainly one that has good memories for many in Germany, the US, Mexico, Africa and South America as evidenced most recently by the smiles in the Super Bowl "Bug Punch" advert. The Beetle, a relatively cheap and very reliable (if not the most luxurious) form of transportation transcended the concept of the automobile to become part of an eclectic life style and a statement of individuality. Even the New Beetle, launched in 1998, and its successor the 'new' VW Beetle launched in 2011 with a body style more reminiscent of a PT Cruiser than a Beetle, immediately engendered identification with the heritage of the "original" Beetle such that "many Beetle fans" thought "they had died and gone to heaven" on seeing the New Beetle in its Concept 1 incarnation in 1994 (p.311). In the present book, the author examines the Beetle legacy in the form of its original 1930s conceptualization as "The People's Car" (hence the title) and places it in the context of the Third Reich, the postwar rise of West Germany, the role of affordable automobiles in spreading ownership and social mobility, the aforementioned flower power era with all its political connotations, the globalization of the auto industry, and to a limited degree, the decline of Detroit. The author, a historian at University College London, does a credible effort in outlining the importance of the Beetle in late 20th century history. Surprisingly, he does not place the Beetle in the context of the German automobile industry as a whole with the postwar evolution of Mercedes and BMW being, to a major extent, ignored. The book itself is however dull in contrast to its subject matter while the dust cover (which is elegant and could have come from Apple Design), belies the tedium of the book. The author's view is so academic (in all its worst connotations) in tone - except on the point of the Beetle's origins - it comes as a surprise that he actually attended festivals celebrating the car. The text also tends to ramble and repeat itself and would have benefited from better editing. This is especially true in the last chapter and the Epilogue where the author appears to have difficulty in finishing the book. The Beetle, according to the author has its design origins in Porsche's team "borrowing heavily" from the Czech Tatra T97 and its economic

underpinning from Hitler's interest in the "The People's Car". While the Third Reich's interest in the latter never reached fruition, its pre WWII investments in physical plant left a legacy for VW that allowed it to become the global marque it is today. This is an important point - perhaps a little dismissive of the genius of Ferdinand Porsche - and one well made, but the author intermingles it incessantly with the success of the Beetle such that a Beetle owner appears mandatorily required to do absolution for enjoying his or her ownership of the car. In at least 28 places throughout the text the author provides variations on the theme of the "Beetle's Nazi origins". Indeed, the author seems surprised (p.304) that "Next to the eminent personal significance Beetles can assume, their roots in the Third Reich pale into significance". Actually, he probably meant "pale into insignificance" - a minor point but one that might perhaps have been avoided if he were not so obsessed with the "Beetle's Nazi origins". While the book is generally accessible - there are elements of pretentiousness - "caesura" on p. 252 is inappropriate usage - and what on earth "mnemonic salience" (p.323) is supposed to convey to the reader is anyone's guess - neither Google nor Google Scholar can help with this. The photographs - very few in number - are poorly reproduced and add little to the text. Overall a disappointment.

This is a reader's book, loaded with information and documented facts, but it can be very dry. It has a lot of information from VW's overseas operations, not just Germany. It is book that reads more like a novel, from VW's KDF days until its final production in Mexico. I only recommend this to the die-hard bug person, like myself, as it has reading material not found in many previous VW Beetle books.

This book is very informative but I hated the writing. It bores me everytime I read this book.

Excellent history although repetitive in parts. Good overview that clarified the third Reich involvement explaining that the real development was after Hitler's demise. Well worth a read.

A great book that details the development of "the people's car." Nice addition to my Volkswagen library.

Good historical resource for the VW. Good read.

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