

## RETHINKING THE FORD-NAZI CONNECTION

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The peculiar admiration that National Socialists had for Henry Ford and the supposed sympathies that the Detroit industrialist harbored for Nazism keep attracting the curious, both academic historians and Internet dilettantes. There is something irresistible about the connection between the man taken to symbolize American industrial modernity and the quintessential villains of the twentieth century. Intriguing anecdotes abound. To name a few: The *New York Times* reported that a portrait of Henry Ford graced Hitler's Munich office in 1922.<sup>1</sup> Hitler acknowledged Ford in *Mein Kampf* and Baldur von Schirach testified in court in Nuremberg that "the decisive anti-Semitic book" he had read was Ford's *International Jew*.<sup>2</sup> According to Prince Louis Ferdinand, Hitler told him over lunch in 1933 that he was "a great admirer of Ford's" and would do his "best to put his theories into practice in Germany."<sup>3</sup> German diplomats awarded Ford a prestigious decoration in 1938. Robert Ley, head of the Nazi labor organization German Labor Front, wrote a letter to Henry Ford from his Nuremberg prison cell, days before his suicide.<sup>4</sup>

We also know that Nazi engineers and industrial managers adapted technological and functional aspects of Fordism. Flow production (assembly lines and vertical integration) had considerable appeal after 1936, when the Four-Year Plan sparked renewed interest in industrial rationalization. The Volkswagen plant invoked Ford's Rouge factory as a model, and the German Labor Front hired Ford engineers to staff it. Finally, the Nazi-appointed manager of the airplane builder Junkers, Heinrich Koppenberg, was a vocal disciple of Ford production techniques.<sup>5</sup>

Historians have proposed different understandings of the Ford-Nazi connection. Some have offered muckraking indictments of the American industrialist as a Nazi sympathizer and war profiteer.<sup>6</sup> For others, the connection exhibited Nazi "reactionary modernism," that paradoxical fusion of technological zeal and anti-modern romanticism supposedly characteristic of Nazism.<sup>7</sup> Others again have suggested

>> *the Rise of the Third Reich* (New York, 2003), 42, 54.

- 3 Prinz Louis Ferdinand von Preussen, *Als Kaisererkel durch die Welt* (Berlin, 1952), 261.
- 4 The original penciled letter is in the National Archives and Records Administration College Park (NARA), RG 238, Entry 51, Box 3.
- 5 See the essays by Manfred Grieger and Lutz Budraß in *Zukunft aus Amerika. Fordismus in der Zwischenkriegszeit*, ed. Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau and RWTH Aachen (Dessau, 1995).
- 6 Max Wallace, *The American Axis*; Neil Baldwin, *Henry Ford and the Jews: The Mass Production of Hate* (New York, 2001).
- 7 Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge, 1984); Philipp Gassert, *Amerika im Dritten Reich: Ideologie, Propaganda und Volksmeinung, 1933-1945* (Stuttgart, 1995).

1 "Berlin Hears Ford Is Backing Hitler—Bavarian Anti-Semitic Chief Has Ameri-

can's Portrait and Book in His Office," *New York Times*, December 20, 1922.

2 Quoted in Max Wallace, *The American Axis: Henry Ford, Charles Lindbergh, and >>*

a structural nexus between Fordism and fascism. In this vein, Fordism is essentially understood as a device of capitalist control over the industrial workforce. In Germany, it is asserted, Fordism only became dominant under Nazism.<sup>8</sup>

But despite these interpretations, the Ford-Nazi connection still leaves us with considerable uneasiness. It fits only awkwardly into the master narratives of a historiography still dominated by national conceptual frameworks. In the American case, the status of Henry Ford as a herald of the roaring 1920s makes it difficult to integrate his anti-Semitism and indelicate political leanings into a unified appreciation of his historical role, which, in turn, creates the cliché of the man as an “enigma.” Meanwhile, in German historiography, the juxtaposition of “Ford” and “Nazis” is still more likely to elicit ruminations about the relationship between National Socialism and modernity rather than empirical investigation.

The quality of speculation and insinuation that pervades much of the writing on Ford and the Nazis, I believe, is owed to the weak development of transnational interpretive frameworks for the 1920s and 1930s. To be sure, there are ambitious attempts to embed the specific Nazi reception of Ford and Fordism within the longitudinal context of the German “Fordist century.”<sup>9</sup> Yet the Ford-Nazi connection looks different once we withdraw this national lens and observe the remarkable global career that Ford’s ideas and practices enjoyed during the 1920s and 1930s. Nazis were hardly the only ones excited about Henry Ford during the interwar years—Ford had fans among illiberal modernizers across the globe. This was partly due to his notoriety as a major organ of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. But it also stemmed from the fact that Ford’s industrial philosophy seemed to offer a productivist strategy for transcending liberal capitalism from the Right.

The purpose of this essay, then, is to provide some contextualizing evidence for the familiar stories of the Ford-Nazi connection and to embed them in contemporaneous, transnational contexts. To do so, it is first necessary to clear up some misunderstandings of Henry Ford’s place within the American corporate arena in the interwar years. Far from typifying American capitalist modernity, Ford and his company represented a producerist *critique* of liberal American capitalism. Next, I want to situate the Weimar Nazi reception of Ford’s *antisemitica* within a broader global reshaping of the anti-Semitic discourse after World War I. I then offer some context for the 1938

8 Karl Heinz Roth, “Fordismus und Faschismus. Schlaglichter auf die Geschichte des Reemtsma-Konzerns 1910-1945,” *Bulletin für Faschismus- und Weltkriegsforschung* 30 (2007): 1-30; Rüdiger Hachtmann, “Fordismus und Sklavenarbeit. Thesen zur betrieblichen Rationalisierungsbewegung 1941 bis 1944,” *Potsdamer Bulletin für Zeithistorische Studien* 43/44 (2008): 21-34.

9 Adelheid von Saldern and Rüdiger Hachtmann, “Das fordistische Jahrhundert: Eine Einleitung,” *Zeithistorische Forschungen Online* 6 (2009), <http://www.zeithistorische-forschungen.de/site/40208942/default.aspx>.

episode of Hitler awarding Ford a medal. After briefly touching on the Nazi Volkswagen project, the essay ends by pointing out that the affinity between “fascism and Fordism” does not look quite as compelling once we acknowledge the simultaneous Soviet adaptation of Fordism. In sum, these transnational contexts suggest that we may understand the Ford-Nazi connection as having sprung from a shared background ideology characteristic of the global interwar years: the search for illiberal alternatives to liberal capitalism.

### Ford Myths

To understand the appeal that Ford exerted on the global Right in the interwar years—Nazis included—we must first dispel a few prevalent myths about Henry Ford and his company. Following Antonio Gramsci’s classic equation of “Americanism and Fordism,”<sup>10</sup> historians too often have taken Ford as the archetype of American industrial capitalism for this period. But, in truth, Ford Motor Company serves poorly as an emblem of the “New Era” of the 1920s and was entirely sidelined during the New Deal. Between 1919 and 1921, Ford Motor Company (FMC) underwent a major restructuring. After this, the company occupied a unique position in the American corporate arena, which it retained until 1941, when Edsel Ford agreed to war contracts against the wishes of his father Henry. It was only during this period that FMC became the autarchic production giant so admired by thousands of visitors from across the globe. During the same period, however, the American corporate mainstream moved in a rather different direction.

The 1920s completed the penetration of corporations into the stock market, increasing access to capital and boosting the growth of “New Era” capitalism. Meanwhile, Henry Ford had bought up all minority shares of FMC over the course of 1919, after which it remained the only American company of comparable size whose shares were not traded on the New York Stock Exchange. (In fact, FMC only went public in 1957.) While its competitor General Motors pioneered a model of corporate governance that relied entirely on professional managers, FMC fortified the charismatic leadership of its founder. Hence, the separation of ownership and management, which increasingly dominated American corporations in the 1920s, did not affect FMC until after WWII. FMC’s River Rouge complex, which took up full production in 1920, vertically integrated the supply of raw materials to an unprecedented degree, producing steel, glass, and lumber in its own branch factories. But as the market for first cars dried up, a

10 Antonio Gramsci, “Americanism and Fordism,” in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. Quintin Hoare et al. (New York 1971).

strategy of relying on suppliers for parts and raw materials, as followed by GM, proved more flexible and helped competitors avoid the massive losses FMC incurred during the Depression.<sup>11</sup>

Ford's famous implementation of the assembly line and his groundbreaking introduction of the 5-dollar day in 1914 have created the misleading impression that FMC pioneered the social rationalization and disciplinary innovations workers faced under mass production conditions. To be sure, a so-called Sociological Department was created in 1914 to supervise workers' homes and habits to ensure that they lived in stable households, were married, and did not drink or smoke.<sup>12</sup> But few recognize that the Sociological Department remained a mere episode in FMC's history—it was scrapped in 1921 as too expensive and replaced with an agnostic labor policy that did not concern itself with workers' lives outside the factory. Throughout the interwar years, Ford consistently paid above-average wages, but these rewarded work performed, not the workers performing them. Workers had no contracts and no seniority. In fact, as welfare capitalism became the norm in the USA during the 1920s, it was practiced everywhere *but* Ford Motor Company.<sup>13</sup>

Even the association of Ford's name with the coming of 1920s consumer culture is questionable. Much more than Ford's high wages, it was consumer credit schemes, again pioneered by General Motors, that expanded the American consumer goods markets in the 1920s.<sup>14</sup> Unlike its competitors, Ford's company made use of consumer credit only reluctantly and inconsistently.

FMC was most distinct from its competitors, and from all other corporations of comparable size, in the extent to which the company reinvested profits in manufacturing. As a private company, FMC had no stockholders to satisfy and no dividends to pay. Thus, Ford was uniquely able to put substance behind the claim that his company put "production over profit." According to a contemporary assessment, the ratio of reinvested profits to total capital at FMC was 99.99 percent in 1927 (compared to GM's ratio of 51.63 percent).<sup>15</sup>

In short, Gramsci was wrong. Fordism was not Americanism. On the contrary, FMC was in many ways uniquely unrepresentative of the dynamics of American capitalism in the 1920s. But what is more, Ford's alternative path was not simply the result of managerial failures, as Alfred Chandler has suggested.<sup>16</sup> Ford did not conform to the dynamics of the 1920s because his company explicitly followed an alternative strategy.

11 Alfred D. Chandler, *Scale and Scope: The Dynamics of Industrial Capitalism* (Cambridge, 1990), 205-12; Arthur J. Kuhn, *GM Passes Ford, 1918-1938: Designing the General Motors Performance-Control System* (University Park, 1986).

12 Stephen Meyer III, *The Five Dollar Day: Labor Management and Social Control in the Ford Motor Company, 1908-1921* (Albany, 1981).

13 Stuart D. Brandes, *American Welfare Capitalism, 1880-1940* (Chicago, 1976).

14 Louis Hyman, *Debtor Nation: The History of America in Red Ink* (Princeton, 2011), 10-44.

15 Lawrence H. Seltzer, *A Financial History of the American Automobile Industry* (Boston and New York, 1928), 266.

16 Alfred D. Chandler, *Giant Enterprise: Ford, General Motors, and the Automobile Industry* (New York, 1964).

This strategy was most clearly expressed in the three books that Samuel Crowther wrote for Ford. *My Life and Work*, published in 1922, was followed by *Today and Tomorrow* (1926) and *Moving Forward* (1930). These books presented ideas quite remarkable for an American captain of industry. In them Ford criticized the practice of running corporations for shareholder value, disparaged the profit motive as a driving force of industry, and put the idea of public service over individual profit. “It is the function of business to produce for consumption and not for money and speculation,” Ford informed his readers. Similarly, he declared it “utterly foolish for Capital and Labor to think of themselves as groups. They are partners.”<sup>17</sup> Historians have been too quick to dismiss these ideas as inconsequential, often on the assumption that Ford’s books were simply part of a self-serving PR strategy.

Not quite so. Ford did not hire Crowther. The editor Russell Doubleday did, and when *My Life and Work* appeared, FMC refused to aid its distribution, citing the principle that the company “handle[d] Ford products only.”<sup>18</sup> Initially, the only thing that distinguished Crowther’s book from the steady stream of *Fordiana* that began populating the bookshelves in the 1920s was a simple but highly effective technique. Crowther secured Ford’s consent to use the industrialist’s name on the cover as author and obtained permission to write in the first-person voice. This technique has tricked readers of *My Life and Work* to this day into believing that Ford was speaking to them. But, in fact, it was Samuel Crowther, putting into quotable prose the heterodox principles of FMC. In doing so, Crowther expressed his own convictions as much as Ford’s. Crowther conceived of the cooperation with Ford as a political project designed to deliver “not so much the story of a life as the development of a social theory.”<sup>19</sup>

What Crowther’s books preached (and FMC practiced) was, in fact, a producerist *critique* of liberal capitalism. *My Life and Work* cast the idea of an industrial moral economy, in which a community of producers struggled against stockholders, financiers, and idle profiteers. This illiberal modernism was not only compatible with the anti-Semitism propagated simultaneously in Ford’s paper *Dearborn Independent*. It also struck a note worldwide among radicals who thought that the time was ripe for an economic system that would supersede liberal capitalism. Too often we forget that, in the 1920s, these radicals were not only to be found on the Left. And it was right-wing modernists who admired Ford’s ideas—National Socialists among them.<sup>20</sup>

17 Henry Ford and Samuel Crowther, *My Life and Work* (Garden City, 1922), 12, 117.

18 BFRC, Acc. 285, Box 91, Liebold to Doubleday, 13 Sep. 1922.

19 Benson Ford Research Center (BFRC), Acc. 572, Box 4, Crowther to Liebold, 3 Jan. 1923.

20 Laying to rest the claim that modernism was a prerogative of the Left is Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (London, 2007).

## Fordism: A Global Infatuation

When *My Life and Work* appeared in German translation in early 1923, Weimar Germany became “infatuated” with Fordism, as the historian Mary Nolan put it.<sup>21</sup> Ford seemed to offer something for everyone—employers looked to Fordist rationalization, unions to Ford’s high wages, and conservatives to the Fordist promise of social harmony. But Fordism was hardly a uniquely German predilection. Ford’s contemporaries across the globe showered Crowther’s Ford book with praise. Each nation found its Ford booster, and letters from admirers requesting the right to translate *My Life and Work* survive in scores in the Ford archive.

For example, Brazilian journalist and literary modernist José Bento Monteiro Lobato, translator of *My Life and Work* and *Today and Tomorrow* into Portuguese, praised Ford in terms that bordered on worship. Ford, wrote Lobato, was “the most lucid and penetrating intellect of modern times,” whose visionary methods anticipated “a future state of things more efficient and just than the present,” providing “the only correct solution” to the social and economic problems of the present. “No conscientious man reading *My Life and Work*,” Lobato gushed, “can fail to discern in it the Messianic Gospel of the Future. It penetrates into the heart of things as a steel drill penetrates granite.”<sup>22</sup>

In another example from 1926, across the Pacific, T. Nakamura, head of the Economic Research Department of the Bank of Taiwan in Tokyo, wrote a glowing letter to Henry Ford. “I have just gone through your most valuable book *Today and Tomorrow* with profound interest and admiration,” wrote Nakamura. “Your wage motive and principle of service to the public, if realized everywhere, must remake the world and contribute greatly to the common cause of humanity.” Then, like Lobato, Nakamura went into genuflection, concluding, “Your book is the Bible of the modern age.”<sup>23</sup>

It is of little help for historians to dismiss the Crowther–Ford books as “boring.”<sup>24</sup> To contemporaries—Nazis included—these books were thrillers, and we must understand why this was so.

## Ford and Weimar Nazis: Anti-Semitic Critiques of the Liberal Order

Weimar Nazis first took note of Henry Ford as the leader of what they imagined to be an American movement of fellow anti-Semites.

21 Mary Nolan, *Visions of Modernity: American Business and the Modernization of Germany* (New York, 1994).

22 Monteiro Lobato, *How Henry Ford Is Regarded in Brazil* (Rio de Janeiro, 1926).

23 BFRC, Acc. 1, Box 30.

24 Christiane Eifert, “Antisemit und Autokönig. Henry Fords Autobiographie und ihre deutsche Rezeption in den 1920er Jahren,” *Zeithistorische Forschungen Online* 6 (2009), <http://www.zeithistorische-forschungen.de/site/40208933/default.aspx>.



Through the veteran *völkisch* publication *Hammer*, Ford became a household name in German right-wing radical circles. In January 1921, *Hammer* reported on the anti-Semitic campaign then conducted in the pages of the Ford-owned *Dearborn Independent* in Detroit. After the *Independent's* articles had been compiled into a volume under Ford's name and with the title *The International Jew*, it was *Hammer* that translated the book into German.



**Figure 1. An advertisement for *The International Jew* in *Hammer*, March 1924.**

The first volume of *Der Internationale Jude* appeared in the summer of 1921. By August 1925, *Hammer* was advertising the twenty-third edition of the two-volume work by “the eminent American industrialist and social politician” Ford. In April 1927, when Ford withdrew the publishing rights, *Hammer* reported a circulation of 90,000 copies of *Der Internationale Jude*.<sup>25</sup>

In the early 1920s, *Hammer* served as a clearinghouse for the ideas and conceits of the *völkisch* Right. Through *Hammer*, Ford's anti-Semitic credentials were noted by the members of the budding National Socialist Party, who took *The International Jew* as indication that “America is about to assume leadership in the international solution to the Jewish question.”<sup>26</sup> Ford became a model to emulate. When Gottfried Feder, the Nazi economic theoretician, admonished Hitler to exercise better leadership, he recommended Ford as an example: “Have you not read the article on Henry Ford in *Hammer*?”<sup>27</sup> The Nazi attention to Ford thus began as part of the keen interest that German anti-Semites had in anti-Semitic movements elsewhere. Indeed, when it came to anti-Semitism, the *völkisch* nationalists were internationalists. As *Hammer* wrote, “the Jewish question cannot be solved by any single

25 *Hammer – Zeitschrift für Deutschen Sinn*, nos. 455, 556, and 595.

26 *Der Nationalsozialist*, 10 July 1921.

27 Oron J. Hale, “Gottfried Feder Calls Hitler to Order: An Unpublished Letter on Nazi Party Affairs,” *Journal of Modern History* 30 (1958): 361.

nation,” and “the defense against this scourge of humanity must be a common one,” the success of which could only be achieved by “an international effort of all nations.”<sup>28</sup>

The rise of what could be termed an anti-Semitic international movement followed in the wake of the World War I, which had spawned the myth that Jewish financiers had caused and perpetuated it. *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which began circulating worldwide in 1919, gave those inclined to nurture apocalyptic interpretations of unsettling world events a key to understanding both the crisis of the liberal West and the Bolshevik takeover. The war and the *Protocols* profoundly changed anti-Semitism, altering the arguments of anti-Semites and the quality and ferocity of anti-Semitic discourse. This transformation remains underappreciated in two respects: the degree to which the new conspiracy theory superseded older religious and biologicistic anti-Semitism, and the degree to which the new anti-Semitism was international in nature. Based on the specious *Protocols*, the new anti-Semitic code interpreted both financial capitalism and communism as two strategies in one and the same Jewish plot, an idea that was by no means a Nazi invention.

White Russian émigrés played a key role in this reformulation by exporting the *Protocols* to the West. Not only did Nazism have a few “Russian roots”<sup>29</sup>—Ford’s anti-Semitism did, too. Ernst Liebold, Ford’s general secretary and chief executive of the *Dearborn Independent*, met with Russian émigrés and eagerly received both the *Protocols* and other indictments of the Bolshevik Revolution from them.<sup>30</sup> *The Dearborn Independent*, in turn, was largely responsible for the career of the *Protocols* in the USA, and greatly magnified their impact elsewhere.<sup>31</sup> The *Protocols* and *International Jew* were made of the same stuff, and both texts reflect an important global shift in the anti-Semitic discourse after World War I. The Nazi appropriation of Ford’s anti-Semitism is part and parcel of this shift. In short, the presence of Ford’s *International Jew* in Hitler’s personal library is no more surprising than the presence of a copy of the *Protocols*.<sup>32</sup>

The new anti-Semitic discourse, however, was inseparable from right-wing critiques of capitalism of the time. To the budding Nazi Party of the early 1920s, Ford was more than an ally in the anti-Semitic cause. He epitomized the distinction between productive and speculative capital so dear to early Nazi economic theorizing. In April 1923, just before the German edition of Henry Ford’s *My Life and Work* hit the

28 *Hammer*, no. 562, (November 1925)

29 Michael Kellogg, *The Russian Roots of Nazism: White Émigrés and the Making of National Socialism, 1917-1945* (Cambridge, 2005).

30 Baldwin, *Henry Ford and the Jews*, 81-85.

31 Leo P. Ribuffo, “Henry Ford and the *International Jew*,” in idem, *Right Center Left: Essays in American History* (New Brunswick, 1992), 70-105. Robert Singerman, “The American Career of the ‘Protocols of the Elders of Zion,’” *American Jewish History* 71 (1981): 48-78.

32 Timothy Ryback, *Hitler's Private Library: The Books that Shaped His Life* (New York, 2008).



bookshelves, the special five-hundredth edition of *Hammer* ran an article under the headline “Ford and the Industrial Future.”<sup>33</sup> The author was Paul Lehmann, who had translated Ford’s *International Jew*. Lehmann’s article was based on an extended paraphrase of a recent American portrait of Ford<sup>34</sup> in which the industrialist defended high wages and his anti-Semitic campaign, attacked stockholders, and advocated decentralizing industry to the countryside. The centerpiece of the *Hammer* article was the story of how FMC, facing a downturn in the recession of 1921, staved off a Wall Street takeover by house-cleaning and cost-cutting. Lehmann noted: “It is surprising how much Ford’s convictions connect with what *Hammer* has been writing for 15 or 20 years.” In Ford’s works “we find the living antithesis of that purely parasitical entrepreneurship, which—lacking fruitful thought and creative strength—through the abuse of financial power coerces people into servitude.” Ford is depicted as a prophet and a visionary: “Over and over, his thoughts pierce into the future. A strange appearance, this Ford, in times of deepest capitalist savagery: smiling, strong of will, he marches through these times and points to a future, the coming of which for him is as certain as tomorrow follows today.” *Hammer* subsequently published the article as an independent brochure for the price of 10 *Pfennig* apiece.<sup>35</sup>

In 1923, Gottfried Feder was working on a tract titled *The German State on National and Social Foundations*, which summarized early Nazi positions on social and economic policy.<sup>36</sup> In it, Feder established the core principle that “the task of the national economy is to meet demand and not the profitability of private capital.” From this, it followed that the entrepreneur “will organize production so that demand can be met with the lowest cost for the consumer, that simultaneously the enterprise will grow and thrive, and that the production costs will keep decreasing without lowering wages.” This, of course, was the gist of *My Life and Work*. In Feder’s later exegesis of the Nazi Party platform, he enumerated some entrepreneurs who had supposedly followed this path. He then stated: “The finest and most universally known example of this kind of manufacturer is Henry Ford.”<sup>37</sup> In the late 1920s, Feder edited the fifty-odd volumes of the “National Socialist Library,” which offered a panorama of Nazi social and economic ideas. Both *The International Jew* and *My Life and Work* were frequent entries in the otherwise slim bibliographies of these books. Many authors of the “Nazi Library” channeled Ford, and at least one did so explicitly.<sup>38</sup>

33 “Henry Ford und die industrielle Zukunft,” *Hammer*, no. 500 (April 1923).

34 Judson C. Welliver, “Henry Ford: Dreamer and Worker,” *American Review of Reviews* 64 (1921): 481–95.

35 *Hammer*, no. 505 (July 1923). 273.

36 Gottfried Feder, *Der deutsche Staat auf nationaler und sozialer Grundlage. Neue Wege in Staat, Finanz, und Wirtschaft* (Munich, 1923).

37 Gottfried Feder, *Das Programm der NSDAP und seine weltanschaulichen Grundgedanken* (Munich, 1927), 34.

38 Peter Schwerber, *Nationalsozialismus und Technik* (Munich, 1930).

## "Hitler's Medal"

On July 30, 1938, on the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday, German diplomats awarded Henry Ford the "Grand Cross of the German Eagle" at Ford Motor Company in Dearborn. Pictures of Ford shaking hands with German consular staff filled the press the next day. The *Völkischer Beobachter* ran a broadside page with the story. The episode caused an outcry in the American liberal press. "Hitler's medal," as the award became known, marked the end of the already deteriorating love affair that the American public had entertained with Ford. But what kind of award was Hitler's medal actually?



**Figure 2. German diplomats presenting Ford with the "Grand Cross of the German Eagle" on July 30, 1938. From left to right: Fritz Hailer, German vice-consul in Detroit; Henry Ford; Karl Kapp, German consul in Cleveland. Source: Associated Press. Reproduced by permission.**

The Nazi leadership had created the "Grand Cross of the German Eagle" in May 1937 to honor its allies abroad. Mussolini was the first recipient of the Cross; it had been pledged in June 1937 and was awarded on the occasion of Il Duce's visit to Berlin in September of that year. The award came in six ranks—from "Grand Cross" and "Cross with Star" to a simple medal—and was later differentiated into military and civilian versions ("with swords" and "without swords"). The German Foreign Office awarded the lesser ranks of the decoration liberally: from its inception through the end of 1939, there were 4,177 civilian and 5,718 military recipients. The Grand Cross was more restrictive, though hardly exclusive. It was awarded 256 times between 1937 and 1940. The large majority of recipients were Italians; the remainder Japanese, Spanish, Hungarian, and Bulgarian. In 1939, the award was amended to include a "Golden Grand Cross," the recipients of which were limited to sixteen. They included Italian Foreign Minister Ciano, General Franco, the Japanese ambassador to Berlin Oshima, and the German wartime allies Horthy, Antonescu, King Boris, Ryti, and Tiso.<sup>39</sup>

The decoration presented both a diplomatic tool in forging the Anti-Comintern coalition and a needle to weave the web of an anti-liberal

39 Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes Berlin (PAAA), BA 68987 and R 119091, "Verdienstorden vom Deutschen Adler."

international movement. Thus, when General Franco was decorated in March 1940, the dedication specified that both Spain and Germany were fighting “the same foe, who, deceiving the world with false slogans of liberalism and democracy, obscures and pursues egotistical aims.” Both countries were building a “new Europe” from the struggle between “a new, healthy worldview and the aging ideas of a decayed world.”<sup>40</sup>

But the Cross of the German Eagle also played a role in courting American economic partners of Nazi Germany in the 1930s. Only weeks after the award was created, Hjalmar Schacht pinned its second class (“cross with star”) version on the chest of Thomas Watson, the chief executive of IBM, on the occasion of his visit to Berlin in June 1937. James D. Mooney, head of overseas operations at General Motors, received the award in August 1938. All in all, twenty-two American citizens received the award between 1937 and 1940. Among them were Ford’s general secretary Liebold and his friend, the German consul in Detroit Fritz Hailer, who was an American citizen of German heritage. Of all American recipients, only Ford was granted the highest rank, the “Grand Cross.”<sup>41</sup>

Nazi admiration for Ford is thus amply documented. But did Ford reciprocate the feeling? Rumors, according to which Ford financially supported Hitler’s party in the 1920s, have never been verified by evidence—and their accuracy seems unlikely, given Ford’s general aversion to credit and his consistent refusal to honor monetary solicitations from all quarters. While IBM’s Thomas Watson publicly conveyed to Hitler his “pride in and deep gratitude for” the award, Ford remained silent, but did refuse calls to return the award both after the pogrom of November 1938 and even after the German declaration of war in December 1941. Though the American media were quick to label Ford a fascist, his political leanings were less developed. Without doubt, the late Henry Ford was consistently in thrall to the anti-Semitic conspiracy theories that arose and flourished in the United States after World War I. These conspiracy theories had considerable overlaps and, as we have seen, some common sources with Nazi anti-Semitism. But Ford’s horizon hardly extended to the political and economic realities of Nazi Germany. His refusal to repudiate Nazi Germany was, most of all, a tool to provoke the heralds of the New Deal order, which he detested. For Roosevelt’s opponents on the radical Right, invoking Nazi Germany was always primarily a way to take a stand in an American debate.<sup>42</sup>

40 PAAA, BA68986.

41 PAAA, R119091. On Mooney and his award, see Henry A. Turner, *General Motors and the Nazis: The Struggle for Control of Opel, Europe’s Biggest Carmaker* (New Haven, 2005), 104–26. On Watson’s award, see Edwin Black, *IBM und der Holocaust* (Munich, 2001), 174.

42 Michaela Hönicke Moore, *Know Your Enemy: The American Debate on Nazism 1933–1945* (Cambridge/New York, 2010).

However, the evidence demonstrates that Ford's general secretary Ernst Liebold, a German American and close confidant of Ford's since the early 1910s, was sympathetic to the Nazi cause and flattered himself about his numerous contacts in Germany. Liebold was on good terms with German consular staff. He developed a particularly close relationship with the German consul of Detroit, Fritz Hailer (a fellow German American and US citizen). Through Hailer, Liebold kept abreast of developments in Germany. Hailer arranged Liebold's subscription to the *Völkischer Beobachter* and forwarded him Nazi propaganda material. A typical piece of correspondence between Hailer and Liebold is this letter from April 7, 1938:

Dear Mr. Liebold,

Acknowledging your check in the sum of \$10.00 for the German "Winter Relief Fund" and thank you very much for your contribution. Your name was inserted on the contribution list. ...

Will be glad to hear from you concerning the reservation of tickets for April 12<sup>th</sup> at the Greenfield Village Theater.

I am sending to you, under separate cover, a copy of the speech delivered by the "Führer" in the Reichstag February 20, 1938, which I am sure will interest you.<sup>43</sup>

On January 31 1938, Liebold wrote to Otto Meissner, the chief of staff at Hitler's chancellery: "It is five years ago today that the present German Führer became German Chancellor and the past five years have seen a definite advance in German progress. It is for this reason that I am writing to express my congratulations with the hope that the progress you are making may continue."<sup>44</sup> In October 1940, the German consul in New York alerted Liebold to an interview by the German Minister of Transportation Dormmüller to be broadcast "over all German shortwave stations." The following day, Liebold wrote to Müller to "convey [his] congratulations to Dormmüller," stating that he was "quite frankly impressed with ... the progress which ha[d] been made insofar as new construction work in Poland [was] concerned."<sup>45</sup>

43 BFRC, Ford Werke Database, FMC 0014204.

44 BFRC, FWDb, FMC 0014198.

45 BFRC, FWDb, FMC 0014209 and FMC 0014195. See also Max Wallace, *The American Axis*, for an exhaustive account of Liebold's Nazi sympathies.

### **Ford and the Volkswagen Project**

Ford Motor Company made a hitherto overlooked cameo appearance in the tragicomedy that was the Nazi Volkswagen project, the regime's botched attempt to mass-produce an affordable "people's

car.” The reluctance of the German auto industry to involve itself in the construction of the Volkswagen soon led Wilhelm Keppler, at the time chief economic adviser to Hitler, to request the assistance of the American-owned car builders in Germany. Keppler carried out negotiations with the American management of Opel/General Motors as well as with FMC. An unlikely figure usurped the role of agent between the Ford headquarters in Detroit and Berlin in these negotiations: Prince Louis Ferdinand of Prussia, the deposed Kaiser’s grandson. Louis Ferdinand, at the time of the negotiations in his late twenties, had worked in Ford factories in Michigan and Argentina as an adolescent, became one of Ford’s protégés, and helped establish a

close relationship between Henry Ford and the Kaiser’s family exiled in Doorn.<sup>46</sup> Louis Ferdinand was fascinated by Ford’s illiberal modernism and expressed the opinion that a project like the Volkswagen rightfully belonged to Ford.<sup>47</sup> A delegation from Hamburg, where Keppler suggested the Ford-Volkswagen plant could be built, even traveled to Dearborn and was granted a meeting with Henry Ford and his chief production manager Sorensen. However, the Volkswagen plans did not persuade Sorensen, and Ferdinand’s maneuverings annoyed the management of FMC’s branch in Cologne. The plan came to naught, and Louis Ferdinand distanced himself from Henry Ford and the company.

The role model for the Nazi Volkswagen Project was Ford’s Dearborn factory and his Model-T. The Volkswagen plant was modeled on Ford’s River Rouge. The layout was sketched by Fritz Kuntze, the chief engineer of the power plant at the Rouge, a German American

46 The Ford film department produced a series of moving pictures for the personal use of the Kaiser’s family. Copies are at the Ford Film Collection (NARA 200FC) at the National Archives, College Park.

47 BFRC, Acc. 572, Box 26, Louis Ferdinand to Sorensen, 26 June 1934.



**Figure 3. Louis Ferdinand lobbies for Ford involvement in the Volkswagen project, Dearborn, 1934. The men from left to right: Charles Sorensen, head of operations at FMC; Ludwig Wirtz, representative of the Hamburg authorities; Henry Ford; Prince Louis Ferdinand. The lady in the center could not be identified. Source: Benson Ford Research Center, Acc.1660, Box 145. Reproduced by permission.**



who had left Germany for the USA in the 1920s and returned in 1937 to join Volkswagen.<sup>48</sup> Along with Kuntze, the German Labor Front recruited a stream of German-American skilled workers and engineers from across the American Midwest to come to Germany.<sup>49</sup> While the recruitment campaign was motivated by the acute shortage of skilled labor in Germany, it also delivered personnel familiar with American production techniques. But even in this, the Nazi auto enthusiasts were hardly alone. The Soviet Union had beaten the Nazis to their own “River Rouge” by almost ten years: the technical assistance program between the Chief Economic Council of the Soviet Union and FMC of May 1929 provided the cornerstone for the auto factory of Gor’kii, 400 kilometers east of Moscow. In the Soviet rhetoric about the goals of the first Five-Year Plan, cars played a key role as a signifier of the advanced and industrialized power the Soviet Union aspired to be.<sup>50</sup> When Hitler habitually used Ford and the high level of American motorization as a reference point in his speeches at the yearly International Automobile Expositions of the 1930s, he was therefore not simply indulging a pet preference of his. Rather, he was exploiting a common symbol of illiberal modernization.

### “Fordism and Fascism”

The idea that there is a structural link between Fordism and fascism was first articulated by Antonio Gramsci. The Italian heterodox Marxist saw in Fordism a new global phase of capitalist self-renewal radiating from the United States around the world. Europe, which historically trailed the US, sought to catch up by introducing Fordism without the necessary underlying social structure, so it had to rely on force. “For this reason,” Gramsci wrote, “the introduction of Fordism [in Europe] takes place in particularly brutal and insidious forms, and by means of the most extreme coercion,”<sup>51</sup> which was “objectively” necessary to impose the discipline on the working classes that capital in an age of mass production required.

Gramsci, writing in 1930, was, of course, referring to Italian Fascism. But his diagnosis had ramifications for a whole host of interpretations from Dimitroff’s thesis to the Frankfurt School, which both saw in National Socialism the unleashed coercive potentials of a capitalist society in deep economic crisis. To this day, the Nazi flirtation with Fordism is sometimes taken as a sure sign of the structural affinity between Nazi coercion and rationalized capitalism. Hence, Fordism in the Third Reich is analyzed as a “technique of domination” (*Herrschaftstechnik*).<sup>52</sup> Nazism, in other words, is said to have crucially

48 Manfred Grieger, “River Rouge am Mittellandkanal. Das Volkswagenwerk während des Nationalsozialismus,” in *Zukunft aus Amerika. Fordismus in der Zwischenkriegszeit*, ed. Rheinisch-Westfälische Technische Hochschule Aachen (Dessau, 1995), 163-73.

49 FBI report “Labor Recruiting Campaign Conducted in the US by German Volkswagen Werke,” NARA, RG 319, Entry 47, Box 464.

50 Lewis Siegelbaum, *Cars For Comrades: The Life of the Soviet Automobile* (Ithaca, 2008).

51 Gramsci, “Americanism and Fordism,” 281.

52 See, with further references, von Saldern and Hachtmann, “Das fordistische Jahrhundert.”



implemented necessary structural changes in work processes and worker discipline, both in and outside the factory, on which post-1945 Fordism was able to build.

These arguments seem plausible. Surely, capitalism needed disciplined and productive workers, and so did National Socialism, especially after Nazi war production turned unemployment into a labor shortage in less than four years. But it is problematic to understand Fordism in Gramscian terms: as a strategy of capitalist domination, the coercive potential of which only materialized under “fascism.” Yet again, a transnational perspective reveals why. Nazis were not the only ones to rediscover Fordism in the face of a skilled labor shortage. So did Soviet planners. The Soviet obsession with Fordism was second to none during the interwar years. The Russian translation of *My Life and Work* went through at least eight editions, while *Today and Tomorrow* circulated in three competing editions.<sup>53</sup> Soviet planners celebrated the “decisive repudiation of craft-based principles” found in Fordism, a system that abolished “subjectivism, traditions and routines” in favor of “scientific research and rational work methods.”<sup>54</sup> The automobile factory that the Chief Economic Council erected in Gor’kii with FMC’s technical assistance was designed around flow production layouts. The assembly lines were crucial when the factory became a forge for tanks after 1941.<sup>55</sup>

Clearly, the Gramscian paradigm cannot explain the Soviet adaptation of Fordism. A chronic labor shortage since 1928 made Fordism an attractive option in the Soviet attempt to overcome capitalism by productivist means. Here, too, Fordism was perhaps a technique of domination and worker repression<sup>56</sup>—but it can hardly be explained as a capitalist production regime transmogrified into Soviet Communism. The empirical link between Fordism and Communism makes the stipulation of a structural nexus between Fordism and Nazism look dubious, indeed. Fordism and fascism were compatible, but for different reasons than hitherto appreciated. Far from demonstrating the coercive potential of advanced capitalism, the link between interwar Fordism and fascism lay in a shared productivist critique of liberal capitalism that was all the rage transnationally during the interwar years.

## Conclusion

Baldur von Schirach’s reference to Ford during his testimony in Nuremberg was quite likely meant to provoke his American

53 Genri Ford, *Moia zhizn'; moi dostizheniia* (Leningrad, 1927); Ford, *Segodnia i zavtra* (Moscow, 1926).

54 A. Mikhailov, *Sistema Forda* (Moscow, 1930), 122.

55 *Organizatsiia potochnogo proizvodstva na GAZ imena Molotova v dni velikoi otechestvennoi voiny* [The organization of flow production at Gor’kii Auto Plant “Molotov” in the days of World War II] (Gor’kii, 1945).

56 Jeffrey Rossman, *Worker Resistance under Stalin: Class Revolution on the Shop Floor* (Cambridge, MA, 2005).

prosecutors. On this occasion, the former Nazi youth leader claimed that young right-wing radicals in the 1920s admired not only Ford, but also “the great benefactor” Herbert Hoover (Schirach was referring to Hoover’s role in the postwar European relief effort). And yet, Schirach’s testimony is credible and quite revealing about the nature of the Ford-Nazi connection. Here is the full quote:

The decisive anti-Semitic book which I read at that time, and the book which influenced my comrades ..., was Henry Ford’s book, *The International Jew*. I read it and became an anti-Semite. In those days this book made a great impression on my friends and myself because we saw in Henry Ford the representative of success, and also the representative of a progressive social policy.<sup>57</sup>

Productive “success,” and anti-Semitism as “progressive social policy”—that, in a nutshell, describes the appeal that Henry Ford exerted on a whole stratum of illiberal modernizers across the globe. After 1945, liberalism became the unchallenged *telos* of modernizing projects. But the 1920s and 1930s were a period in which liberalism was on the ropes, capitalism—especially after 1929—appeared to have failed, and the future seemed to many to belong to illiberal, productivist alternatives. Ford seemed to offer such an alternative.

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57 Quoted in Wallace, *American Axis*, 42.