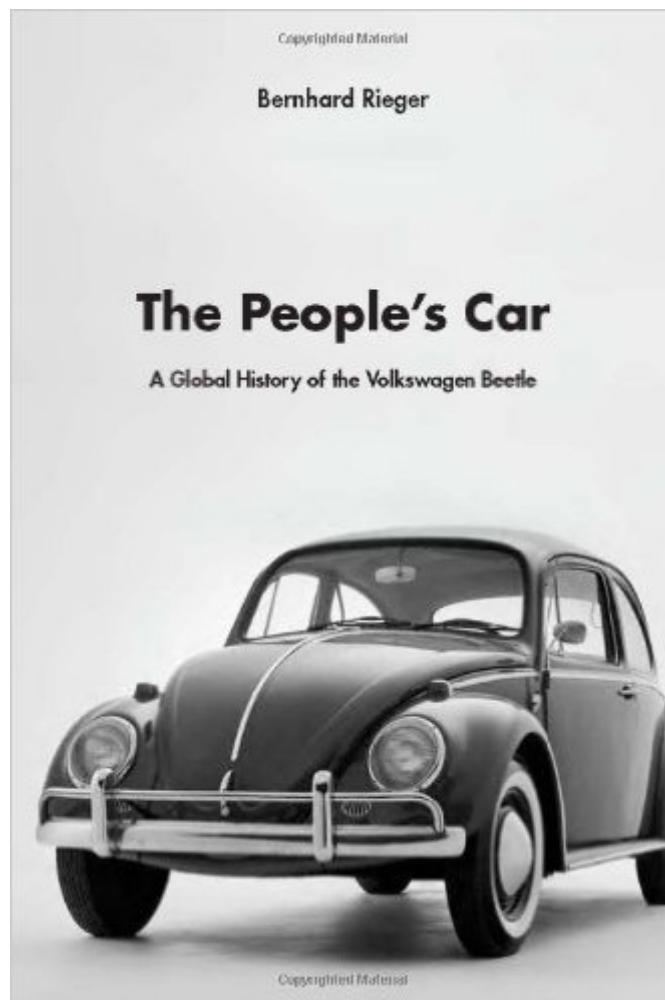


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The People's Car: A Global History Of The Volkswagen Beetle



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

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.

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