

*General Motors and the Nazis: The Struggle for Control of Opel, Europe's Biggest Carmaker.* By Henry Ashby Turner Jr. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005. viii + 200 pp. Photographs, appendix, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$38.00. ISBN: 0-300-10634-3.

Reviewed by S. Jonathan Wiesen

Following in the footsteps of other German historians, Henry Ashby Turner has written a focused examination of a single company during the Third Reich. But unlike previous studies, Turner's book looks at a major German corporation that was owned by Americans. This tantalizing shift toward U.S. industry invites a number of questions that have often been posed in a tendentious manner. What were the financial and personal links between American business and German industry during the Nazi period? Did American companies derive profits from their subsidiaries in the Third Reich? Did they contribute to the ideological, military, and genocidal projects of National Socialism? In his compact and meticulous case study, Turner offers measured and compelling answers to these questions.

In 1929 General Motors purchased the recently incorporated Adam Opel Company, a family-owned manufacturer of sewing machines and bicycles that had become a major producer of cars and trucks. Despite an unfavorable beginning during the Great Depression, within seven years GM's subsidiary grew into the largest automaker in Europe. As Turner demonstrates, the size of Opel inevitably made it a key player in the Third Reich, but its prominence also posed challenges for the firm. With Hitler railing against foreign-owned companies, Opel did its best to camouflage its American ownership by ensuring that its daily operations were conducted almost exclusively by German executives. Even though Opel lost out in its bid to produce the Volkswagen (a fascinating story Turner reconstructs in detail), its profits soared. For GM shareholders in the United States, however, these returns were beyond reach, because the currency controls imposed by the Reich made it nearly impossible to convert corporate earnings into dollars. The dividends remained in marks that were primarily funneled back into Opel. The company, which operated under a German corporate structure, increasingly became, in Turner's words, "a hostage of the Third Reich in hopes of better times" (p. 151).

Turner has proved himself before to be a keen observer of political intrigue and backroom deals, and he finds plenty of rich material in the recently catalogued documents. We watch as company managers move among state and Nazi party leaders to prevent an outright German takeover of the firm, and as James Mooney, president of GM's overseas operations, attempts to broker a peace treaty to end World War II. Mooney's shuttle diplomacy between

Roosevelt and Hitler came to naught, leading to unfair accusations that he was a Nazi sympathizer.

Turner's study is most rewarding when he goes directly to the issue of complicity. His study makes it clear that General Motors lost control of the company during World War II, and thus had no say over its subsequent military production or its use of forced and slave labor. For Turner, Opel's 1938 decision to open an aircraft-components plant to supply the Luftwaffe was the most questionable aspect of this history. This move resulted in American technology directly benefiting the Nazi war effort against the Allies. Also troubling was GM's decision in 1951 to claim Opel dividends that had been put aside during the war, thus allowing the company to profit after the fact from returns generated during the Third Reich. When looking directly at the Nazi years, however, General Motors, short of folding Opel entirely, was compelled to play along. During the war, company executives in Detroit likely knew the uses to which its German factory was being put, but they had no access to their subsidiary, and in 1942 GM wrote off Opel as a total loss.

This book offers historians refreshingly new material from the archives. But Turner's succinctness comes at the expense of a wider exploration into the transatlantic economic relations that frame this story. What does this back-and-forth between business leaders, and the image of a company dangling between two countries and two business models, tell us about economic and political power under Hitler? Was GM typical of American firms in its general lack of moral qualms about doing business in a politically unsavory setting? Did the sheer size of its subsidiary, Opel, make it more accommodating to the Nazi regime than other multinationals? Likewise the reference to the "tainted money" (p. 158) accepted in 1951 piques the reader's interest, and one wishes that Turner had addressed GM's postwar attempts (or lack thereof) to deal with its past. In sum, this book is a model of scrupulous scholarship and brisk writing, but its larger implications remain open to further study.

What impact, if any, will Turner's account have on General Motors today? On the company Web site, GM has not incorporated Turner's findings into its official chronology, indicating only that in 1940 "the German government officially seized control of Adam Opel AG." Likewise, the Opel Web site refers only to questions of production in the 1930s. This runs contrary to the practice of other German companies, whose official Web histories bear the imprint of recent research into the Nazi years. As stories of corporate complicity in Nazi Germany fade from the news, perhaps General Motors and Opel reckon that the larger buying public is not paying attention. It remains to be seen whether Henry Turner's book will change that assumption.

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