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Ford et GM examinés pour une prétendue collaboration nazie

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Trois ans après que les banques suisses sont devenues la cible d'une fureur mondiale à propos de leurs relations commerciales avec l'Allemagne nazie, les principaux constructeurs automobiles américains se retrouvent mêlés à un débat similaire.



Des diplomates allemands décernent à Henry Ford, au centre, la plus haute décoration de leur pays pour les étrangers, la Grand-Croix de l'aigle allemand, en juillet 1938. (AP Photo)

Comme les banques suisses, les constructeurs automobiles américains ont vigoureusement nié avoir aidé la machine de guerre nazie ou avoir profité de manière significative du recours au travail forcé dans leurs filiales allemandes pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Mais les historiens et les avocats qui étudient les recours collectifs au nom d'anciens prisonniers de guerre sont occupés à amasser des preuves de la collaboration des constructeurs automobiles avec le régime nazi.

Les enjeux pour les constructeurs automobiles américains vont bien au-delà des sommes relativement modestes impliquées dans le règlement d'un éventuel procès. Pendant la guerre, les constructeurs automobiles se sont forgé une réputation d'"arsenal de la démocratie" en transformant leurs lignes de production pour fabriquer des avions, des chars et des camions pour les armées qui ont vaincu Adolf Hitler. Ils nient que leurs énormes intérêts commerciaux dans l'Allemagne nazie les aient amenés, consciemment ou non, à devenir également "l'arsenal du fascisme".

La Ford Motor Co. a mobilisé des dizaines d'historiens, d'avocats et de chercheurs pour lutter contre une affaire civile intentée par des avocats de Washington et de New York spécialisés dans l'obtention d'importants règlements en espèces auprès de banques et de compagnies d'assurance accusées d'avoir fraudé les victimes de l'Holocauste. En outre, un livre dont la publication est prévue l'année prochaine accusera General Motors Corp. d'avoir joué un rôle clé dans les invasions hitlériennes de la Pologne et de l'Union soviétique.

"General Motors était bien plus important pour la machine de guerre nazie que la Suisse", a déclaré Bradford Snell, qui a passé deux décennies à rechercher l'histoire du plus grand constructeur automobile du monde. "La Suisse n'était qu'un dépôt de fonds pillés. GM faisait partie intégrante de l'effort de guerre allemand. Les nazis auraient pu envahir la Pologne et la Russie sans la Suisse. Ils n'auraient pas pu le faire sans GM."

General Motors et Ford insistent sur le fait qu'ils n'assument que peu ou pas de responsabilité dans les opérations de leurs filiales allemandes, qui contrôlaient 70 % du marché automobile allemand au début de la guerre en 1939 et se sont rapidement réorganisées pour devenir des fournisseurs de matériel de guerre à l'Allemagne. armée.

Mais les documents découverts dans les archives allemandes et américaines montrent une image beaucoup plus compliquée. Dans certains cas, les dirigeants américains de GM et de Ford ont accepté la conversion de leurs usines allemandes à la production militaire à un moment où des documents du gouvernement américain montrent qu'ils résistaient toujours aux appels de l'administration Roosevelt à intensifier la production militaire dans leurs usines à la maison .

Après trois ans d'introspection nationale, les plus grandes banques suisses ont accepté en août dernier de verser 1,25 milliard de dollars aux survivants de l'Holocauste, une étape à laquelle elles avaient initialement résisté. Loin de s'éteindre, cependant, la controverse sur les relations commerciales avec les nazis a donné un nouvel élan à des enquêtes de longue date sur des questions telles que l'art pillé, les prestations d'assurance impayées et le recours au travail forcé dans les usines allemandes.

Bien que certaines des allégations contre GM et Ford aient fait surface lors des audiences du Congrès de 1974 sur les pratiques monopolistiques dans l'industrie automobile, les entreprises américaines ont largement réussi à minimiser leurs liens avec l'Allemagne nazie. Comme pour la Suisse, cependant, leur succès même à projeter une image saine et patriotique d'eux-mêmes est maintenant retourné contre eux par leurs détracteurs.

"Quand vous pensez à Ford, vous pensez au baseball et à la tarte aux pommes", a déclaré Miriam Kleinman, chercheuse du cabinet d'avocats Cohen, Millstein et Hausfeld à Washington, qui a passé des semaines à examiner des dossiers aux Archives nationales dans le but de construire un esclavage. affaire de travail contre la société basée à Dearborn. "Vous ne pensez pas qu'Hitler ait un portrait d'Henry Ford sur le mur de son bureau à Munich."

Ford et General Motors ont refusé les demandes d'accès à leurs archives de guerre. Le porte-parole de Ford, John Spellich, a défendu la décision de l'entreprise de maintenir des liens commerciaux avec l'Allemagne nazie au motif que le gouvernement américain avait continué d'entretenir des relations diplomatiques avec Berlin jusqu'à l'attaque japonaise sur Pearl Harbor en décembre 1941. Le porte-parole de GM, John F. Mueller, a déclaré que le général Motors a perdu le contrôle quotidien de ses usines allemandes en septembre 1939 et "n'a en aucune façon aidé les nazis pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale".

Pour les IG, une mauvaise surprise

Lorsque les GI américains ont envahi l'Europe en juin 1944, ils l'ont fait dans des jeeps, des camions et des chars fabriqués par les trois grands constructeurs automobiles dans le cadre de l'un des plus grands programmes de militarisation jamais entrepris. Ce fut une mauvaise surprise de découvrir que l'ennemi conduisait également des camions fabriqués par Ford et Opel - une filiale détenue à 100%

par GM - et pilotait des avions de guerre construits par Opel. (Le rôle de Chrysler dans l'effort de réarmement allemand était beaucoup moins important.)

Lorsque l'armée américaine a libéré les usines Ford de Cologne et de Berlin, elle a trouvé des travailleurs étrangers démunis confinés derrière des barbelés et des documents de l'entreprise vantant le "génie du Führer", selon des rapports déposés par des soldats sur les lieux. Un rapport de l'armée américaine rédigé par l'enquêteur Henry Schneider daté du 5 septembre 1945 accuse la filiale allemande de Ford de servir d'"arsenal du nazisme, du moins pour les véhicules militaires" avec le "consentement" de la société mère à Dearborn.

Le porte-parole de Ford, Spellich, a décrit le rapport Schneider comme "une mauvaise interprétation" des activités de la société mère américaine et a noté que les dirigeants de Dearborn avaient souvent été tenus dans l'ignorance par leurs subordonnés allemands au sujet des événements de Cologne.

The relationship of Ford and GM to the Nazi regime goes back to the 1920s and 1930s, when the American car companies competed against each other for access to the lucrative German market. Hitler was an admirer of American mass production techniques and an avid reader of the antisemitic tracts penned by Henry Ford. "I regard Henry Ford as my inspiration," Hitler told a Detroit News reporter two years before becoming the German chancellor in 1933, explaining why he kept a life-size portrait of the American automaker next to his desk.

Although Ford later renounced his antisemitic writings, he remained an admirer of Nazi Germany and sought to keep America out of the coming war. In July 1938, four months after the German annexation of Austria, he accepted the highest medal that Nazi Germany could bestow on a foreigner, the Grand Cross of the German Eagle. The following month, a senior executive for General Motors, James Mooney, received a similar medal for his "distinguished service to the Reich."

The granting of such awards reflected the vital place that the U.S. automakers had in Germany's increasingly militarized economy. In 1935, GM agreed to build a new plant near Berlin to produce the aptly named "Blitz" truck, which would later be used by the German army for its blitzkrieg attacks on Poland, France and the Soviet Union. German Ford was the second-largest producer of trucks for the German army after GM/Opel, according to U.S. Army reports.

The importance of the American automakers went beyond making trucks for the German army. The Schneider report, now available to researchers at the National Archives, states that American Ford agreed to a complicated barter deal that gave the Reich increased access to large quantities of strategic raw materials, notably rubber. Author Snell says that Nazi armaments chief Albert Speer told him in 1977 that Hitler "would never have considered invading Poland" without synthetic fuel technology provided by General Motors.

As war approached, it became increasingly difficult for U.S. corporations like GM and Ford to operate in Germany without cooperating closely with the Nazi rearmament effort. Under intense

pressure from Berlin, both companies took pains to make their subsidiaries appear as "German" as possible. In April 1939, for example, German Ford made a personal present to Hitler of 35,000 Reichsmarks in honor of his 50th birthday, according to a captured Nazi document.

Documents show that the parent companies followed a conscious strategy of continuing to do business with the Nazi regime, rather than divest themselves of their German assets. Less than three weeks after the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, GM Chairman Alfred P. Sloan defended this strategy as sound business practice, given the fact that the company's German operations were "highly profitable."

The internal politics of Nazi Germany "should not be considered the business of the management of General Motors," Sloan explained in a letter to a concerned shareholder dated April 6, 1939. "We must conduct ourselves [in Germany] as a German organization. . . . We have no right to shut down the plant."

U.S. Firms Became Crucial

After the outbreak of war in September 1939, General Motors and Ford became crucial to the German military, according to contemporaneous German documents and postwar investigations by the U.S. Army. James Mooney, the GM director in charge of overseas operations, had discussions with Hitler in Berlin two weeks after the German invasion of Poland.

Typewritten notes by Mooney show that he was involved in the partial conversion of the principal GM automobile plant at Russelsheim to production of engines and other parts for the Junker "Wunderbomber," a key weapon in the German air force, under a government-brokered contract between Opel and the Junker airplane company. Mooney's notes show that he returned to Germany the following February for further discussions with Luftwaffe commander Hermann Goering and a personal inspection of the Russelsheim plant.

Mooney's involvement in the conversion of the Russelsheim plant undermines claims by General Motors that the American branch of the company had nothing to do with the Nazi rearmament effort. In congressional testimony in 1974, GM maintained that American personnel resigned from all management positions in Opel following the outbreak of war in 1939 "rather than participate in the production of war materials."

However, according to documents of the Reich Commissar for the Treatment of Enemy Property, the American parent company continued to have some say in the operations of Opel after September 1939. The documents show that the company issued a general power of attorney to an American manager, Pete Hoglund, in March 1940. Hoglund did not leave Germany until a year later. At that time, the power of attorney was transferred to a prominent Berlin lawyer named Heinrich Richter.

GM spokesman Mueller declined to answer questions from The Washington Post on the power of attorney granted to Hoglund and Richter or to provide access to the personnel files of Hoglund and

other wartime managers. He also declined to comment on an assertion by Snell that Opel used French and Belgian prisoners at its Russelsheim plant in the summer of 1940, at a time when the American Hoglund was still looking after GM interests in Germany.

The Nazis had a clear interest in keeping Opel and German Ford under American ownership, despite growing hostility between Washington and Berlin. By the time of Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the American stake in German Ford had declined to 52 percent, but Nazi officials argued against a complete takeover. A memorandum to plant managers dated November 25, 1941, acknowledged that such a step would deprive German Ford of "the excellent sales organization" of the parent company and make it more difficult to bring "the remaining European Ford companies under German influence."

Documents suggest that the principal motivation of both companies during this period was to protect their investments. An FBI report dated July 23, 1941 quoted Mooney as saying that he would refuse to take any action that might "make Hitler mad." In fall 1940, Mooney told the journalist Henry Paynter that he would not return his Nazi medal because such an action might jeopardize GM's \$100 million investment in Germany. "Hitler has all the cards," Paynter quoted Mooney as saying.

"Mooney probably thought that the war would be over very quickly, so why should we give our wonderful company away," said German researcher Anita Kugler, who used Nazi archives to trace the company's dealings with Nazi Germany.

Even though GM officials were aware of the conversion of its Russelsheim plant to aircraft engine production, they resisted such conversion efforts in the United States, telling shareholders that their automobile assembly lines in Detroit were "not adaptable to the manufacture of other products" such as planes, according to a company document discovered by Snell.

In June 1940, after the fall of France, Henry Ford personally vetoed a U.S. government-approved plan to produce under license Rolls-Royce engines for British fighter planes, according to published accounts by his associates.

Declaration of War Alters Ties

America's declaration of war on Germany in December 1941 made it illegal for U.S. motor companies to have any contact with their subsidiaries on German-controlled territory.

At GM and Ford plants in Germany, reliance on forced labor increased. The story of Elsa Iwanowa, who brought a class-action suit against Ford last March, is typical. At the age of 16, she was abducted from her home in the southern Russian city of Rostov by German soldiers in October 1942 with hundreds of other young women to work at the Ford plant at Cologne.

"The conditions were terrible. They put us in barracks, on three-tier bunks," she recalled in a telephone interview from Belgium, where she now lives. "It was very cold; they did not pay us at all and

scarcely fed us. The only reason that we survived was that we were young and fit."

In a court submission, American Ford acknowledges that Iwanowa and others were "forced to endure a sad and terrible experience" at its Cologne plant but maintains that redressing such "tragedies" should be "a government-to-government concern." Spellich, the Ford spokesman, insists the company did not have management control over its German subsidiary during the period in question.

Ford has backed away from its initial claim that it did not profit in any way from forced labor at its Cologne plant. Spellich said that company historians are still researching this issue but have found documents showing that, after the war, American Ford received dividends from its German subsidiary worth approximately \$60,000 for the years 1940-43. He declined a request to interview the historians, saying they were "too busy."

The extent of contacts between American Ford and its German-controlled subsidiary after 1941 is likely to be contested at any trial. Simon Reich, an economic historian at the University of Pittsburgh and an expert on the German car industry, says he has yet to see convincing evidence that American Ford had any control over its Cologne plant after December 1941. He adds, however, that both "Opel and Ford did absolutely everything they could to ingratiate themselves to the Nazi state."

While there was no direct contact between American Ford and its German subsidiary after December 1941, there appear to have been some indirect contacts. In June 1943, the Nazi custodian of the Cologne plant, Robert Schmidt, traveled to Portugal for talks with Ford managers there. In addition, the Treasury Department investigated Ford after Pearl Harbor for possible illegal contacts with its subsidiary in occupied France, which produced Germany army trucks. The investigation ended without charges being filed.

Even though American Ford now condemns what happened at its Cologne plant during the war, it continued to employ the managers in charge at the time. After the war, Schmidt was briefly arrested by Allied military authorities and barred from working for Ford. But he was reinstated as the company's technical director in 1950 after he wrote to Henry Ford II claiming that he had always "detested" the Nazis and had never been a member of the party. A letter signed by a leading Cologne Nazi in February 1942 describes Schmidt as a trusted party member. Ford maintains that Schmidt's name does not show up on Nazi membership lists.

Mel Weiss, un avocat américain d'Iwanowa, soutient que l'américain Ford a reçu des bénéfices "indirects" du travail forcé dans son usine de Cologne en raison de l'augmentation globale de la valeur des opérations allemandes pendant la guerre. Il note que Ford était désireux d'exiger une compensation du gouvernement américain après la guerre pour les «pertes» dues aux dommages causés par les bombes à ses usines allemandes et devrait donc également être responsable de tout avantage découlant du travail forcé.

Des arguments similaires s'appliquent à General Motors, qui a reçu 32 millions de dollars du gouvernement américain pour les

dommages subis par ses usines allemandes. L'avocat de Washington Michael Hausfeld, qui est impliqué dans le procès de Ford, confirme que GM est également "sur notre liste" en tant que cible possible.

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