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April 16, 2013

The Seductive Automobile:  
Automobile Culture as a Vehicle for Americanization, 1950-1973

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## Abstract

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In the post World War II era, Europe remained war-torn and in need of reconstruction. Countries in Western Europe aligned themselves with the democratic, capitalistic model espoused by the United States, while Eastern Europe was swallowed up by Soviet Communist influence. With the aid of the Marshall Plan, American companies began selling goods to Western European consumers, and through their advertising, ended up selling consumers a version of American life. Sheltered behind the Iron Curtain, Eastern Europeans did not participate in the mass American consumer culture that was spreading in Western Europe. At the center of this consumer narrative was the automobile, as Western Europeans expressed their desire to participate in American consumer culture by buying cars. However, Eastern Europeans displayed a similar fascination for the automobile in their respective cultures, despite being restrained by Communism. This project examines the development of car cultures in West Germany, East Germany, and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and reveals the differences and similarities with American car culture. Studying car culture in these countries also reveals a lot about materialistic desire in Eastern Europe and how this desire was linked to American consumer culture.

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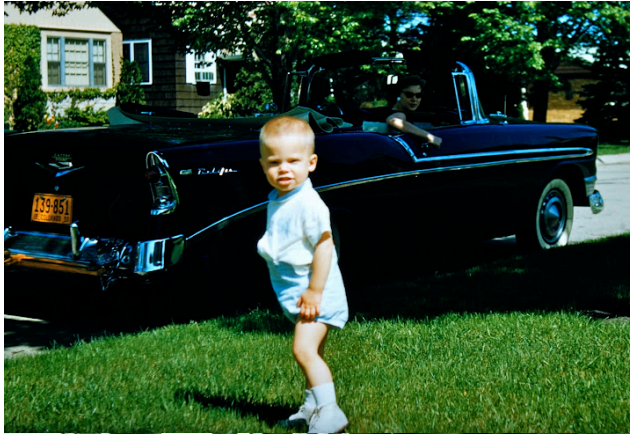
Finally, I would like to thank Gabrielle, Papa, and Mama. Throughout my life, they have been the greatest examples of love and have supported me in all that I do. I aspire to be like them in all that I do, and I am fortunate to have been blessed with them in my life. Without them, I would not have had the courage and support necessary to undertake a project of this magnitude. From the bottom of my heart, I love all three of you deeply, and I dedicate this thesis to you with utmost gratitude.

Nick Going  
Druid Hills, Atlanta, GA  
April 15, 2013

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## Pictures



From Left to Right:

- a) A picture of my dad and grandmother with their 1956 Chevy Bel Air, ca. 1956
- b) My grandfather's prized 1956 Bel Air, kept in pristine condition, ca. 1956
- c) My grandfather with his first car in London- a VW Beetle, ca. 1955
- d) My dad with his first car in Gainesville, FL- a red VW Beetle, ca. 1974
- e) Me with my first car in Atlanta, GA- a red Mini Cooper S, 2011
- f) Me at a Mercedes-Benz dealership in Munich with my mother, ca. 2004



## Introduction: The World of Car Culture

Market consumerism has largely defined the United States experience for citizens and visitors alike in the post-war era and has dominated much of the history of this era.<sup>1</sup> As Andy Warhol said:

What's great about this country is America started the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the same things as the poorest. You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you can know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke, too. A Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one bum on the corner is drinking. All the Cokes are the same and all the Cokes are good.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1950s and 1960s, the United States asserted itself as a giant marketplace, and Americans shaped their lives around the types of goods they bought. In the swelling sea of suburban conformity, American men and women participated in this conformity by buying products their neighbors owned. On the flip side, Americans escaped the materialistic conformity by buying products their neighbors did not own, or asserted their status by buying a Cadillac rather than a simple Chevy.<sup>3</sup>

Cars played a significant role in the life of a 1950s and 60s American, as the car served as the most highlighted material object. Authors and musicians positioned the car at the center of their work during the 1950s and 60s. Driving provided the backdrop for literature like Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and for films like *Rebel Without a Cause*. In addition, musicians such as

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1. Lawrence B. Glickman, *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 7-11.

2. Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: (From A to B and Back Again)* (Orlando: Harvest, 1977), 100-101.

3. For a greater description of the history of American consumerism, please refer to Jean-Christophe Agnew's "Coming Up for Air: Consumer Culture in Historical Perspective" within *Consumption and the World of Goods*. More scholarship on this matter is presented in Lawrence Glickman's *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*, and pp. 7-11 provide insight on the history of America's consumer society. A comprehensive history of American consumerism can be found in Regina Lee Blaszczyk's *American Consumer Society, 1865-2005; From Hearth to HDTV*.

The Beach Boys featured driving within their songs. Cars also provided the setting for national trauma in the 1960s, as President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in a Lincoln Continental. At home, the two largest purchases an average American would make were the purchases of their car and home, and this applies today. For many Americans, a car was a rolling status symbol and a sign of social mobility. By the design of the car, an individual could demonstrate their class through the type of car he drove, as more expensive cars were outfitted with chrome and other indicators to denote wealth.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the car being a rolling status symbol, the car allowed for the accessible, unrestrained travel of Americans throughout the country. Today, the car is still the cheapest way for Americans to travel, and throughout the 20<sup>th</sup>-Century, this was the case. For teenagers, driving provided a subversive escape from home and from suburban life. Films such as *American Graffiti* depict the experiences of teenagers with cars, as they engaged in hot-rodding and other rebellious activities in their cars.<sup>5</sup> The car proved so central to the experience of American suburban life that there is a term used to describe this relationship with cars— *automobility*. As Kari Hensley writes: “This term dates back to at least the first years of the twentieth century and refers not simply to the act of driving, but to perceptions shaped by it, attitudes toward it, and knowledge of it, as well as a ‘broader array of signs, institutions, objects, practices, and feelings.’”<sup>6</sup> In the 1950s and 60s, driving became *automobility* and cars adopted a greater historical and cultural significance in characterizing American suburban life. While the

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4. See Shelley Nickles’ “More is Better: Mass Consumption, Gender and Class Identity in Postwar America,” within the *American Quarterly* (2002). Detroit was actively involved in creating a “ladder of consumption,” or a way for people to assert their wealth through the type of car they purchased. The concept of the “ladder of consumption” fit in with the idea of consumption as a marker of class and an equalizing force.

5. While some of the activities teenagers participated in with their cars proved idyllic, some activities were bad. The car was at the center of the dating experience for teenagers, for good and bad. See Lisa Lindquist Dorr’s “The Perils of the Back Seat: Date Rape, Race and Gender in 1950s America” in *Gender and History* (2008). For more information on how cars were at the center of dating, see Beth Bailey’s book *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America*.

6. Kari Hensley, “One Nation Behind the Wheel: Automobility in U.S. Culture,” *American Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (March 2010): 173.

Volkswagen Beetle was a German car, it catered to this idea of accessible transportation for the masses, making it immensely popular among teenagers and ordinary people in America.

History has concentrated largely on the production of automobiles and neglected to emphasize the importance of car culture as an artifact of cultural history. Rudy Koshar, in discussing the history of car culture in the United States and Europe, presents a conundrum in automotive historiography. He argues that historians up to this point have not looked at the cultural importance of cars in history and urges a change in the framing of automotive history:

Often quite unintentionally, this literature abounds in information on the quotidian meaning of the automobile, and on the close interrelations between humans and machines. But its semiotic largesse comes at a price: a lack of analytical bite and historical distance, to say nothing of complete inattention to recent anthropology, cultural history, cultural studies and literary theory.<sup>7</sup>

Koshar encourages the placement of automotive history within the scope of anthropological, cultural, and literary studies. Koshar presents an exception to the standard model of automotive history as Wolfgang Sach's *For Love of the Automobile: Looking Back into the History of our Desires*. Regardless of the nuances of Koshar's argument, he does suggest a template for automotive history. He argues that Wolfgang Sach's book "is more evocative than analytical," but he praises the text as a "study of desire." In this light, contemporary automotive history has to be a thorough analysis of the desire surrounding automobile ownership, looking at a variety of sources to see how cars serve as historical artifacts. Ultimately, people were seduced by their cars, and this seduction permeated all geographical and ideological boundaries.

In this project, I analyze the historical implications of cars through a variety of sources that highlight people's desire for cars throughout the post-war era. After World War II, a war-

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7. Rudy Koshar, "On the History of the Automobile in Everyday Life," *Contemporary European History* 10, no. 1 (March 2001): 144.

torn Europe was left in shambles. The conditions necessitated a total reconstruction of the European geographical and cultural landscape, and the car played an important role in this reconstruction. As a result, the car was envisioned as a symbol of peace, privacy, speed, and desire. People could exercise their desire for speed and power in a peaceful manner behind the car. Because of what the car offered, Europeans fell in love with cars and desired the freedom that arrived with automobile ownership. I have concluded that the best way to analyze automotive desire is by looking at the history of car culture in four distinct cultures. Car culture really began as a cultural phenomenon in the 1950s and began dying down around 1973 with the Arab Oil Embargo, as cultures had embraced automobility up to this point as a symbol of economic progress and fuel shortages forced people to reinterpret the purpose of their automobiles in light of this fuel crisis.<sup>8</sup> All cultures from 1950 through 1973 displayed some form of car culture, but the oil crisis put a damper on the automobility within these car cultures. Furthermore, the production and maintenance of cars defines car culture, but for this study car culture refers to the relationship people had with their cars and the expressions of desire they displayed for owning cars. My study analyzes car consumption, rather than the production and marketing of cars throughout the 1950s and 60s.

Because desire is central to my analysis of car culture during the 1950s and 60s, I have decided to look at car culture in the United States, West Germany, East Germany, and the Soviet Union. I show readers that a desire for cars transcended all ideological barriers during the height of the Cold War, despite cars signifying the West in the Communist cases. In Germany during the fall of the Berlin Wall, people no longer used their cars as an imaginary way to experience the West, but instead used their Trabants to drive into the land they had sought to experience for years. East Germans fell in love with their Trabants as the Trabant provided the materialistically

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8. Arguably, the second oil crisis of 1978 had more of a detrimental effect on automobility.

starved East Germans with a slice of Western consumerism. It was precisely their Trabants that took them across the fallen Berlin Wall to at last experience the West. Jonathan Mantle writes:

The thousands of Trabants that poured across the border came to symbolize the new freedom that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall. The East Germans, or ‘Ossis,’ voted the Trabant ‘Car of the Year’ simply for helping thousands of them escape to freedom from Czechoslovakia and Hungary. Many families crossed the old border and simply abandoned their vehicles, disassociating themselves from the grotesque parody that had been the other German people’s car.<sup>9</sup>

Mantle portrays the Trabant as a “grotesque parody” that drove Communist citizens into the West, but he fails to consider that the technologically pathetic Trabi represented freedom more than any other Western vehicle at the time. A vehicle of desire, the Trabant was a dream car for thousands of East Germans who sought the Western consumer experience. Like their brothers to the West, East Germans had relationships with their cars, as their Trabants provided them with an escape their communities and allowed people to demonstrate their individualism materialistically. Ultimately, it is the Trabant that became the link between the East and West during the fall of the Berlin Wall, as no object quite captured the East German desire for freedom quite like the Trabant.

In analyzing the importance of automobility and car culture further, I hope to show that the embrace and purchase of cars across West and East Germany and the Soviet Union also reflects the subtle Americanization of these cultures, despite the German Democratic Republic and the Soviet Union’s superficial opposition to all things American. West Germans, East Germans, and Soviet citizens were seduced by the automobile in a similar way that Americans had been seduced at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>-Century. I investigate why the car was such a seductive materialistic object and analyze the historical significance of this seduction. Often people will argue that cars are European by birth and American by adoption; I am arguing that

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9. Jonathan Mantle, *Car Wars: Fifty Years of Backstabbing, Infighting, and Industrial Espionage in the Global Market* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2011), 144.

car culture is American by birth and European by adoption, and that car culture provides historical insight into the gradual Americanization of Europe during the Cold War.

## Chapter 1: An Exportable Culture

Historians acknowledge that the automobile is “European by birth, American by adoption.”<sup>10</sup> It is this American adoption of the automobile as a form of transportation and a way of life that generated a distinctive consumer culture around cars. Instead of focusing on the history of automotive production and the economics surrounding the sale of cars, the question of the historical significance of the everyday use and meaning of cars in America has triggered the curiosity of historians.<sup>11</sup> Rudy Koshar observes: “Scholars have done their part to analyze the key developments in automotive design, focusing more generally on the leading personalities in styling and engineering rather than on broader artistic or historical contexts.”<sup>12</sup> As a result, it is the responsibility of historians now to interpret the significance of cars as cultural artifacts, artifacts that transformed American life, and the historical impact of specific modes of consuming the car on America have been enormous.

The United States began its infatuation with the automobile at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, before the success of the Ford Model T. Americans embraced this novel form of transportation, and cars soon became a need rather than simply an object of desire. The year 1910 marked a surge in automobile production as the demand for cars rose drastically in part due to Henry Ford’s innovative production methods meant to make the car more affordable and, therefore accessible, to meet this market. Before the introduction of the Model T, automobile companies suffered from a lack of organization.<sup>13</sup> Henry Ford’s solution to the disorganization of the automobile industry and his vision of affordable transportation for the masses was

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10. James J. Flink, *The Car Culture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1975), 5.

11. See Rudy Koshar’s “On the History of the Automobile in Everyday Life,” *Contemporary European History* 10, no. 1 (March 2001): 143-154.

12. Rudy Koshar, “On the History of the Automobile in Everyday Life,” *Contemporary European History* 10, no. 1 (March 2001): 143.

13. Flink, 18.

manifest in the assembly line. Ford's invention of the assembly line shifted the way goods would be produced in the United States and around the world, and his tectonic innovation of the assembly line allowed for the consumption of goods by the masses.<sup>14</sup> This became known as "Fordism"—a defining strategy of 20<sup>th</sup>-Century capitalism that concentrated on the marriage of mass production and mass consumption. Fordism's achievement was more than just a technological innovation; it reinvented the way in which people consumed goods. Ford famously paid his workers five dollars a day so that they would be able to afford the purchase of one of their cars.<sup>15</sup> With the rise of Fordism, working class Americans could now make their dream of purchasing a car a reality, and the fifteen million Model T sales Ford Motor Company made from 1908 to 1927 reflects this heightened demand.<sup>16</sup> The American media only furthered the flames of automotive desire, as journalists and filmmakers expressed their fascination for cars through a variety of sources.<sup>17</sup> Inadvertently, these automotive articles acted as good advertising for cars, as journalists more often than not sang their praises for cars as a novel form of transportation.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, people raced their Model T's in speed competitions, developing a spectator sport that further supported a culture surrounding the car.<sup>19</sup> The invention of the assembly line, the affordability of the Model T, and the automotive press

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14. Flink, 68; Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., *Giant Enterprise: Ford, General Motors, and the Automobile Industry. Sources and Readings* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1964), 29-31.

15. See Charles S. Maier's "Between Taylorism and Technocracy: European Ideologies and the Vision of Industrial Productivity," *Journal of Contemporary History* 5, no. 2 (1970), 27-61 for more information about the importance of Fordism.

16. Tom McCarthy, *Auto Mania: Cars, Consumers, and the Environment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 30.

17. Hollywood films at that time showcased cars in melodramas and other films like the "Keystone Cops."

18. Flink, 20.

19. McCarthy, 33.



contributed to a cultural fascination with the car, an infatuation that was unparalleled by any prior consumer good.<sup>20</sup>

Eventually, America's infatuation with the car blossomed into a full-blown romance, and the United States proved to be fertile ground for the cultivation of car culture. Politically and economically, the American government's deregulation of the automobile industry allowed for car companies to produce cars cheaply in comparison with their European counterparts. America also invested significantly in infrastructure to support the car, transforming the landscape of cities across the United States.<sup>21</sup> European governments grew more involved in the production and regulation of automobiles in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century.<sup>22</sup> Socially and culturally, cars reflected American individualism. In owning a car, a driver gained more autonomy over his transportation and landscape; with a car, he had the freedom to go anywhere at any time. Advertisers marketed the individualism of car ownership, as the concept of a personal driving experience appealed to consumers.<sup>23</sup> The car additionally provided individuals an escape from city life, nurturing in the development of suburbs.<sup>24</sup> Because of its role as a device of social change, James Flink argues that the car holds a profound historical significance: "Viewed as a solution to these major social problems, the general adoption of the automobile was the most important reform of the pre-World War I era, an especially attractive reform to Americans

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20. The Model T was a mass market phenomenon. For more information about this, see Flink's *America Adopts the Automobile* or Seiler's *Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of Automobility in America*.

21. See the example of Robert Moses in Marshall Berman's *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982).

22. Flink, 32.

23. Robert Moses argued this. There is a lot of scholarship surrounding the individualism of automobile ownership. See this blog post for a brief discussion of the subject: <http://www.frontporchrepublic.com/2011/10/cars-individualism-and-the-paradox-of-freedom-in-a-mass-society/>, as well as Hirschman's "Men, Dogs, Guns, and Cars," *Journal of Advertising* (2003) and Paul Ingrassia's *Engines of Change: A History of the American Dream in Fifteen Cars*. This individualistic nature of car ownership was also marketed to consumers.

24. Flink, 38-39.

because it did not involve collective political action.”<sup>25</sup> Because of this, the car, in the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century, was more than a transportation appliance. Through Fordism, the transformation of the American landscape, and brilliant advertising, the car served as a driver of social change, a vehicle that allowed people to transform the way they lived and engaged with society.

Undoubtedly the Great Depression and the Second World War changed people’s priorities about consumer goods and cars represented the idealistic culture of decades past. However, Tom McCarthy argues that 1945-1955 denotes the heightened era of American automotive production, and as a result, the bleakest era in automotive-related environmental degradation.<sup>26</sup> His monograph analyzes American car culture through an environmental history lens, yet he makes insights on American car culture in general. The Second World War enhanced Americans’ desire for new cars, as most citizens could not afford the purchase of a new car during wartime. McCarthy includes this statistic to capture the allure for cars after the war: “A *Fortune* magazine survey published in December 1943 indicated that Americans longed to buy a new automobile before anything else. Not surprisingly, passenger car registrations doubled between 1945 and 1955 from 25.8 to 52.1 million.”<sup>27</sup> The post-war era ushered in a new thirst for automobiles and contributed to a decade of American automotive success. McCarthy writes: “In 1955 Americans bought a record 7.9 million cars, 19 percent more than the previous best sales year in 1950. The Big Three— General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler— sold 95 percent of these automobiles. In fact, American automakers sold 99.2 percent of all passenger vehicles, the high water mark of Detroit’s domination of the American automobile market.”<sup>28</sup> This data suggests a renewed American desire for cars after war and depression, and the General Motors,

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25. Flink, 40.

26. McCarthy, xvii

27. McCarthy, 101.

28. McCarthy, 100.

Ford, and Chrysler satisfied America's demand at this time. Cars were back, and car culture was reborn.

The Cadillac represented this shift in car culture. From 1945 up through the 1960s, cars continued to represent desire and status, yet cars became accessories to a middle-class lifestyle.

As Shelley Nickles writes:

By World War II, class had come to be synonymous with the "collar line," yet historians have shown that, along with income and occupation, patterns of education, sociability, and style of life also have played a role in class formation and identity. The new postwar working class that was the subject of debate in this public discourse referred to white "blue-collar" wage earners and their families, a predominantly northern industrial workforce that included the children and grandchildren of European immigrants for whom ethnicity had become a class marker.<sup>29</sup>

After World War II, class distinction became more nuanced, as one's "style of life" became a defining feature of class identity. Ethnicity no longer defined an individual's class in the multicultural landscape of postwar America, an individual's material possessions transformed from simple goods to status symbols. General Motors recognized this transformation and positioned the Cadillac to serve as the automotive status symbol for upper middle-class to wealthy Americans. Cadillacs served as the flagship models for General Motors, and they represented cutting-edge design with their tailfins and new technological innovations.<sup>30</sup>

Cadillacs became symbols of prestige and wealth, and driving a Cadillac proved more than just transportation—driving became a demonstration of status. Consumers who had risen from poverty used their Cadillacs to demonstrate their financial success, just as African Americans and Jews asserted their racial equality from behind the wheel of their Cadillac.<sup>31</sup> In films depicting the 1950s, Cadillacs depicted wealth. In the 1989 film *Driving Miss Daisy*, the

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29. Shelley Nickles, "More is Better: Mass Consumption, Gender and Class Identity in Postwar America," *American Quarterly* 54, no. 4 (2002), 582.

30. McCarthy, 103.

31. McCarthy, 105.

protagonist is chauffeured by her African American driver in 1950s Georgia in her black Cadillac. A notable scene in the movie is when a racist, Alabama police officer interrogates the two characters on the basis that a black man is caught driving such an expensive automobile. Upon further interrogation, the police officer learns that the protagonist, Miss Daisy, is an older Jewish woman. With her chauffeur, they eventually escape the police officer's bigoted interrogation about two minorities driving in an expensive Cadillac, a symbol of wealth and superiority in 1950s American culture.<sup>32</sup>

Cadillac advertisements during the 1950s referred to the cars' luxury, elegance, and design, focusing on the aesthetic appeal of the car rather than the car's practical utility.<sup>33</sup> From the advertising, owning a Cadillac assumed that the owner participated in an elegant life of prestige, an image that appealed to consumers desiring to participate in the glamour of 1950s American life. In selling Cadillacs, General Motors photographed celebrities next to Cadillacs and planned private viewing parties for celebrities and prominent figures to preview new models. As Alfred D. Chandler, Jr. writes: "A quick tour of G.M.'s selling activities does not suggest a battlefield so much as it suggests Hollywood, especially around announcement time."<sup>34</sup> These events only enhanced the allure for a Cadillac and helped General Motors be successful in its sale of Cadillacs. Celebrities, in return, drove Cadillacs. In 1956, Elvis Presley owned four Cadillacs, reflecting the opulence of being an American celebrity.<sup>35</sup> From 1945 until 1970, the car served as an accessory to American life and the Cadillac showed that cars could denote status. While the automobile continued to represent desire, cars shaped and reflected American

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32. *Driving Miss Daisy*, directed by Bruce Beresford, Zanuck Company, 1989.

33. "1958 TV Commercials- Cadillac," YouTube, 0:58, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PgdMgOOGd7M> (accessed March 31, 2013).

34. Chandler, 158.

35. McCarthy, 99.

life more openly. As a result, car culture reached new heights in the 1950s.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to the ways in which the car served as an accessory to American life, Americans produced accessories to adapt to the burgeoning car culture in the United States during the 1950s. Fashions within the 1950s began changing in response to automotive design, and car designs inspired European and American clothing designers.<sup>37</sup> An evident design that came to fruition as a result of 1950s car culture was the car coat, a shortened coat that enabled a coat-wearing individual easy entrance and exit in a car. Richard Martin argues: “Of course, there had much earlier been apparel inventions such as dusters that accompanied the automobile, but the 1950s car coat is the most indicative of the post-war period in its specific name and its accommodation not only to the car but the culture of the car.”<sup>38</sup> The creation of the car coat is important in emphasizing the significance of the car in other cultural dimensions. Not only did the automotive industry benefit from exposure from fashion designers, but the automotive industry strengthened the fashion industry in the way designers directly responded to 1950s car culture. Designers would develop clothing specifically organized to correspond with driving or an individual’s car.<sup>39</sup> The extent to which automobiles were woven in the fabric of 1950s America is astonishing; the car proved immensely important in contributing to a way of life.<sup>40</sup>

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36. For more information on how the Cadillac transformed the American automotive industry, see Douglas Brinkley’s *Wheels for the World: Henry Ford, His Company and a Century of Progress*. This book shows the ways in which the Ford Motor Company responded to the Cadillac in design and engineering.

37. Richard Martin, “Fashion and the Car in the 1950s,” *Journal of American Culture* 20, no. 3 (Fall 1997): 51. See also Inglis’ “Auto Couture: Thinking the Car in Post-War France,” *Theory, Culture, and Society* (2004) to see how French fashions transformed because of the car.

38. Martin, 54.

39. Martin, 56.

40. Levittown, PA is an excellent example of the ways in which the automobile transformed a community. See Kelly’s *Expanding the American Dream: Building and Rebuilding Levittown* and Anderson, “Levittown is Burning! The 1979 Levittown, Pennsylvania Gas Line Riot and the Decline of the Blue-Collar American Dream,” *Labor* (2005). Levittown’s architecture was also transformed because of the car. See also Lewis and Goldstein, eds., *The Automobile and American Culture*, “The Automobile and the American House.”

Furthermore, musicians responded to car culture in their songs. The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century observed the introduction of songs about cars and driving, but the 1950s witnessed an explosion of songs pertaining to car culture, a theme that reached its height in the 1960s. According to scholar John DeWitt, the United States is unique in its music about car culture: “Although the car is not an unusual subject in world music, I believe no other country has matched America’s sheer volume of songs about cars, particularly hot rods.”<sup>41</sup> Americans are unique in the extent to which they wrote about cars in the 1950s and 60s, showing the impact of cars on art. DeWitt goes on to write: “Songwriters in the ‘50s in almost every genre recognized the car’s increased significance in American life and imagination...But it was in the Sixties that the marriage of car culture and rock ‘n’ roll was really consummated.”<sup>42</sup> For American musicians like the Beach Boys, driving represented freedom and independence, and their songs maximized on the romantic allure of cars. Singing of the highway cemented the artistry of driving in the American psyche, and cars transcended from being machines to symbols of American life. In addition to music, literature like Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* focuses on driving throughout the United States, and other Beat poets discussed driving in their works.<sup>43</sup> This powerful concept of driving as a manifestation of American freedom drove people to further recognize cars as both a defining element and product of American culture.<sup>44</sup>

In the 1950s, American films either highlighted the negatives or showcased the benefits of automobile ownership. Film studios like Disney included animated cars in the story lines of movies, in an attempt to inform American citizens about the consequences or perils of driving. While these films showcased cars and driving, their intent was to analyze the detrimental effect

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41. Jack DeWitt, “Cars and Culture: Songs of the Open Road,” *The American Poetry Review* (March 2010).

42. DeWitt, “Cars and Culture: Songs of the Open Road”

43. Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976).

44. DeWitt, “Cars and Culture: Songs of the Open Road.”

of driving on American culture. *Story of Anyburg, U.S.A.* (1957) puts the character of the car on trial in a courtroom environment to inform viewers of the ills associated with driving and producing cars.<sup>45</sup> This critical cinematic relationship with the car continued into the 1960s, where some Disney films continued to teach audiences about driving properly and responsibly.<sup>46</sup> The 1955 film *Rebel Without a Cause* depicts teenage delinquents as they rebel against their parents and drive away from their homes. This film associates cars with teenage rebellion, and highlights the car's potential as a vehicle for teenage delinquency.<sup>47</sup> However, not all films during the 1950s and 60s took a critical approach to driving. As a form of advertising, General Motors developed Motorama films that featured the technological innovations of new models and maximized the cultural appeal of cars.<sup>48</sup> The 1956 Motorama film, *Design for Dreaming*, depicted a woman's allure at brand new cars and demonstrated how cars represented the future in terms of design and technology. The film focused on the aesthetic appeal of cars and how cars serve as perfect accessories to a 1950s American life.<sup>49</sup> Regardless of the context in which cars were depicted in film, Paul Wells argues that the car's appearance in animated film reveals impact on American life: "In whatever event, animation reflects social and cultural trends in the same way as many art-forms, and between 1950 and 1968, offered an often insightful view of the car's impact upon American culture, showing that like the car itself, it could accommodate expressions of desire and dread unable to be articulated elsewhere."<sup>50</sup> Film showcased the desire

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45. Paul Wells, "Automania: Animated Automobiles 1950-1968," in *The Motor Car and Popular Culture in the 20th Century*, ed. David Thoms, Len Holden, and Tim Claydon (Ashgate Publishing Limited, 1998). 90.

46. Wells, 91.

47. *Rebel Without a Cause*, directed by Nicholas Ray, Warner Bros, 1955.

48. Wells, 86.

49. USAutoIndustry, "Design for Dreaming 1956 General Motors Motorama Film," YouTube, 9:17, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4\\_ccAf82RQ8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_ccAf82RQ8) (accessed March 31, 2013).

50. Wells, 92.

and concern for cars in the 1950s and 60s, documenting the impact of cars on American culture.<sup>51</sup>

However, the most obvious manner in which the car transformed American culture is the way in which the car inspired the restructuring of the urban environment. The popularity of cars in the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century beckoned the creation of infrastructure to accommodate automotive traffic, and developers responded with the construction of roads and bridges that transformed the American landscape for posterity. In this case, cars not only changed the way people lived, but transformed how people carried out their daily lives. In other words, people did not only use cars as accessories for their lives; cars shifted the manner in which people lived. Marshall Berman, in his book *All That Is Sold Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, draws from his experience as a youth in the Bronx as he observed the stark transformation of his neighborhood by the construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway in the 1950s. He recalls how roads planned by Robert Moses threw people out of their homes, upset community life, and gave people a reason to leave the neighborhoods they called home.<sup>52</sup> To him, the highway Robert Moses proposed for the Bronx in 1953 disrupted the community in which he was raised.<sup>53</sup> For Robert Moses, the Cross-Bronx Expressway furthered his utopic plan for the expansion of roadways surrounding New York, a plan born out of a desire for the public to travel out of the city on pastoral weekend trips.<sup>54</sup>

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51. In addition to film, television advertisements incorporated the placement of cars in various commercials. See Newell, Salmon, Chang, "The Hidden History of Product Placement," *The Journal of Broadcasting, Television, and Film* (2006).

52. Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 291-292.

53. Berman, 292.

54. Again, Levittown, PA is an excellent example of the ways in which the automobile transformed a community. See Kelly's *Expanding the American Dream: Building and Rebuilding Levittown* and Anderson, "Levittown is Burning! The 1979 Levittown, Pennsylvania Gas Line Riot and the Decline of the Blue-Collar American Dream," *Labor* (2005). Levittown's architecture was also transformed because of the car. See also Lewis and Goldstein, eds., *The Automobile and American Culture*, "The Automobile and the American House."



Moses' projects not only reflect his personal vision for New York, but also his vision of modernism in America. Berman suggests: "The public works that Moses organized from the 1920s onward expressed a vision— or rather a series of visions— of what modern life could and should be."<sup>55</sup> This modern life involved driving— driving into cities, driving away from the city— and making use of new cars. Moses advanced the modernization of New York in his construction of new roads and bridges: "To oppose his bridges, tunnels, expressways, housing developments, power dams, stadia, cultural centers, was— or so it seemed— to oppose history, progress, and modernity itself."<sup>56</sup> In modernizing American society, roads became a defining element of American culture. Roads and parkways served as modes of escape from city life, or as Berman states, "another dimension of modern pastoral."<sup>57</sup> According to Berman, highways and roads became parks or gardens in a sense, as driving on roads were "a uniquely privatized form of public space."<sup>58</sup> Roads allowed for communal engagement from the privacy of your own car, in contrast to parks. In the 1950s and 60s with the construction of new transportation infrastructure in metropolitan areas, people would be together on highways, but isolated from each other in their own cars. Because roads transformed American life to such an extent, Berman recognizes Moses's work as "a new breakthrough in modernist vision and thought."<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, Moses's work as a whole "served as a rehearsal for the infinitely greater reconstruction of the whole fabric of America after World War Two."<sup>60</sup> Building roads was not simply an act of construction; building roads reshaped society while transforming the landscape of 20<sup>th</sup>-century America.

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55. Berman, 296.

56. Berman, 294.

57. Berman, 298.

58. Berman, 299.

59. Berman, 302.

60. Berman, 307.

With the rising popularity of the car in America after the Second World War, the car transformed into something other than a form of transportation. Cars changed the way people interacted with each other in society. In the 1950s and 60s, cars became symbols of status and accessories to a life people desired to live. Designers, musicians, writers, filmmakers, and other artists began adapting their media to reflect a burgeoning car culture. And cars served as the impetus for developers like Robert Moses to alter the landscape of America, changing the way Americans engaged with their urban and rural environment. Thus, cars are not simply automobiles. Cars were the central driver of modernity in 1950s and 60s America, influencing every facet of American life. In restructuring urban life, cars transformed modern American culture. The allure of the car generated a whole culture shaped and influenced by cars. But, desire knows no boundaries; modern American culture was ready for export as “an ideology on four wheels.”<sup>61</sup>

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61. Benjamin R. Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld: Terrorism's Challenge to Democracy* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995), 25.

## Chapter 2: Cars as Artifacts of the American Consumer Empire

After the Second World War, the United States was positioned as a superpower. Victory from the war, the invention of the atomic bomb, and a growing economy gave the United States a boost in its international status. The 1950s saw the United States swell into a great economic and political power, and with the beginning of the Cold War, the United States represented a formidable ideological and political adversary for the Soviet Union. Sandwiched between these two powers, European nations oriented themselves voluntarily or by force with the United States or the Soviet Union. The Marshall Plan assisted in the redevelopment of Western Europe and oriented former allied territories toward the American capitalistic mindset, producing a symbiotic relationship where Western Europe rebuilt itself by buying American goods or products from companies that imitated American companies. The United States, in return, benefitted from the sale of American products to Europeans, all while strengthening allegiances at the dawn of the Cold War.<sup>62</sup> In Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union maintained political and economic control of countries occupied during the war, expanding Communism and the landscape of the U.S.S.R. in one sweep. Instead of maintaining their own political autonomy, most Eastern European countries came under the direct or indirect governance of the Soviet Union.<sup>63</sup> As a result, Western and Eastern European nations fought to preserve their cultures in spite of political and geographical shifts after the war. Because life had not changed as much in the United States, Americans could focus on a less essential matter: selling America.

Victoria de Grazia argues that the United States transformed into a “Market Empire” in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, an economic/cultural empire rather than a political empire. Within her

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62. Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through 20th-Century Europe* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 5.

63. See Anne Applebaum's *The Iron Curtain*, ch. 10. Applebaum provides a comprehensive overview of the ways in which the Soviet Union controlled Eastern Europe.

monograph, she articulates her claim fully, but her introduction clearly outlines her definition of a “Market Empire:”

Its most distant perimeters would be marked by the insatiable ambitions of its leading corporations for global markets, the ever vaster sales territories charted by state agencies and private enterprise, the far-flung influence of its business networks, the coin of recognition of its ubiquitous brands, and the intimate familiarity with the American way of life that all of these engendered in peoples around the world.<sup>64</sup>

De Grazia argues that American consumer culture guided American influence in Europe during the 20<sup>th</sup>-century. The extent to which the United States dominated and controlled European markets through the sale of products proved immense; de Grazia’s thesis provides a clear historical contextualization of the situation as the United States’ influence resembles British commercial dominance during the 19<sup>th</sup>-century.<sup>65</sup> However, the United States as a “Market Empire” characterizes more than just the successful sales of objects. In selling goods, American companies sold the American culture through the “recognition of its ubiquitous brands, and the intimate familiarity with the American way of life.” Superficially, American companies sold products to Europeans, but in reality, they were selling an image of America and American culture, one that proved incredibly appealing.<sup>66</sup>

On the seduced side, Western Europe provided American companies with a fertile landscape for sales success. De Grazia argues: “American hegemony was built on European territory.”<sup>67</sup> Western Europeans bought into their image of the American way of life, and desired to engage in an American lifestyle in whatever extent possible. In buying an American product, or a European product manufactured in an American manner, Western Europeans bought American culture. Thus: “In post-World War II western Europe, to the degree that U.S. power

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64. De Grazia, 3.

65. See Frank Trentmann’s *Free Trade Nation*, especially his introduction and chapter 1 to see how the “Market Empire” resembles 19th-century British commerce.

66. De Grazia, 2-3.

67. De Grazia, 4.

has been characterized as imperial, it has been to distinguish its light touch as befitting an ‘empire by invitation, an ‘empire by consensus,’ or an ‘empire of fun.’”<sup>68</sup> This can be demonstrated by the marketing strategies American automobile companies adopted in Europe after the War. The fact that they attempted to sell American cars right after the War was problematic, and had whiffs of imperialism.<sup>69</sup> Because of this embrace of American goods, and as a result American culture, American companies did not face any barriers in their consumerist invasion of Western Europe: “So too, American business culture, in the absence of Europe’s rich legacy of commercial institutions, was freer to imagine the market as unbounded except by the seller’s fantasy and the buyer’s purchasing power.”<sup>70</sup> And American companies appealed precisely to European fantasy. European companies could not compete with the Americans in selling goods, as European products lacked the cultural appeal of American items. What began as a brilliant business venture transformed into the gradual Americanization of Western Europe. As people bought their beloved American goods, people became Americanized as they bought into the American way of life.

The gradual Americanization of Western Europe throughout the 20<sup>th</sup>-century through Europeans’ consumption of American products threatened to destroy European culture. In response, the Leftist European intellectuals adopted the role of informing citizens of the dangers of capitalism and excessive consumerism.<sup>71</sup> Most notably, French philosophers and intellectuals

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68. De Grazia, 6.

69. For more information on the marketing strategies of American automobile companies in selling cars abroad after World War II, please refer to Steven Tolliday’s “Transplanting the American Model? US Automobile Companies and the Transfer of Technology and Management to Britain, France, and Germany, 1928-1962.” Also see Jonathan Zeitlin’s *Americanization and its Limits: Reworking US Technology and Management in Post-war Europe and Japan*.

70. De Grazia, 9.

71. Richard Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 47.

cast America in a negative light, arguing that the United States embodied materialism.<sup>72</sup> Because of the appeal of American materialism, French intellectuals developed a fear that the United States would replace Germany as a fascist, totalitarian state.<sup>73</sup> In newspapers and pamphlets, French writers would warn the public about the dangers of American materialism, urging individuals to resist the gradual Americanization of France.<sup>74</sup> Richard Kuisel in his book, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization*, argues that France's relationship with Coca-Cola captures the initial anxiety and eventual seduction of France by Americanization, suggesting: "Perhaps no commercial product is more thoroughly identified with America than Coca-Cola."<sup>75</sup> He goes on to include Robert Woodruff's statement that every bottle of Coca-Cola represents "the essence of capitalism."<sup>76</sup> In connection to French resistance to Americanization, the French Communist party vehemently opposed Coca-Cola. Coca-Cola represented American capitalism at its peak, a culture that they claimed threatened to eliminate the need and desire for delicious French wine.<sup>77</sup> However, opposition to the American "Market Empire" was not limited to France. After the Second World War, other European nations resisted the corporate and cultural expansion of Coca-Cola in their countries. Belgium and Switzerland responded to Coke by developing law suits that questioned the safety of the drink based on its levels of caffeine. Denmark went so far as banning the drink for a period of time. In most European nations, Communist parties usually led the opposition to Coca-Cola on frivolous charges, and as a result, furthered anti-American sentiment throughout Europe.<sup>78</sup> The

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72. Kuisel, 45.

73. Kuisel, 48.

74. Kuisel, 29, 30, 33, 35.

75. Kuisel, 52.

76. Kuisel, 52.

77. Kuisel, 55.

78. Kuisel, 54. The United States was actively involved in the spread of American culture after the War, and Reinhold Wagnleitner discusses the United States' relationship with Austria in his book, *Coco-Colonization and the Cold War: The Cultural Mission of the United States in Austria After the Second World War*. Other good sources on

extent to which writers, intellectuals, and politicians in Europe responded to Coca-Cola shows the degree to which American corporate culture threatened European standards of living. American consumer culture in Europe after the Second World War indeed resembled imperialism as some Europeans responded to the cultural invasion by fighting back.

In addition to resisting drinking Coke, Western Europeans initially resisted driving American cars and embracing American car culture.<sup>79</sup> In the 1950s, that all began to change. For the French, advertisements for cars and other appliances began selling the American life in addition to products.<sup>80</sup> Cars quickly became symbols of success, as those who could afford nice things lusted over a car.<sup>81</sup> Kuisel argues: “The symbol of prosperity was the automobile parked in the working man’s driveway.”<sup>82</sup> The car also served as a symbol of American success, so the car became an international status symbol. In addition to advertising, the 1961 film *La Belle Américaine* showcased the automobile across silver screens in France. The film tells a story of a Frenchman who buys an American convertible and then brings the car back to his small French village. A spectacle in itself, the car quickly becomes the center of the town. Auxiliary characters demonstrate their fascination with this big American car and enjoy rides through France.<sup>83</sup> Kuisel argues that the main character of the film is the car, and it is pretty evident that this is the case. He claims: “The film not only suggests the new prosperity of the French people

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this subject are Richard Pells’ *Not Like Us: How Europeans Have Loved, Hated, and Transformed American Culture* and Sabrina P. Ramet and Gordana P. Crnkovic’s *Kazaam! Splat! Ploof! The American Impact on European Popular Culture Since 1945*.

79. See Richard Pells’ *Not Like Us: How Europeans Have Loved, Hated, and Transformed American Culture* and Sabrina P. Ramet and Gordana P. Crnkovic’s *Kazaam! Splat! Ploof! The American Impact on European Popular Culture Since 1945*.

80. Kuisel, 88-89.

81. Kuisel, 90.

82. Kuisel, 92.

83. *La belle Américaine*, directed by Robert Dhéry, Compagnie Commerciale Française Cinématographique (CCFC), 1961.

but also makes the commonplace identification of Americanization with automobiles.”<sup>84</sup> Cars drove through France and into the hearts of French people; there was little people could do to resist the seduction. Cars represented freedom and were physical expressions of materialistic desire; a French consumer had a difficult time resisting the seductive appeal of the car. In a larger context, Kuisel argues: “Americanization seduced Europeans.”<sup>85</sup> He even compares the process of Americanization to a drug.<sup>86</sup> Cars aided in the process of Americanization for countries like France, but nurtured the cultural transformation of Europe as a whole. While Europeans initially resisted the process of Americanization, they gave in to the gradual transformation of Western Europe at the hands of American consumerism. Not surprisingly, the car was one of the agents driving this transformation.

Throughout the rest of Europe, the car held a significant function in changing European consumer culture. Victoria de Grazia outlines this transformation: “Driving the stunningly rapid change in consumption standards that Europeans would experience starting in the early 1950s was the conflict between the European vision of the social citizen and the American notion of the sovereign consumer.”<sup>87</sup> Western Europeans faced a gradual absorption into the sphere of American consumerism, or they could uphold traditionally European standards on how to live. In expressing the situation, she writes: “Contended for by left and right, they turned uneasily between state and market, and between the security promised by the European welfare state and the freedoms promised by American consumer culture.”<sup>88</sup> In the 1950s, Europeans were at an ideological crossroads, caught between tradition and consumerism. A powerful force, American consumer culture promised a higher standing of modern living:

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84. Kuisel, 103.

85. Kuisel, 114.

86. Kuisel, 124.

87. De Grazia, 342.

88. De Grazia, 343.



True, the “high standard of living” of “Joe Smith, America’s average worker”—with his sturdy build, tidy home, clean blue-jean overalls, shiny tools, and car— was the showpiece of campaigns to persuade European wage earners to work harder, accept unemployment, and defer consumption for the sake of investment.<sup>89</sup>

The car served as a symbol of the ideal American life, a life Europeans strove to emulate.

Europeans held their lives up to their standard of American success, striving essentially to live a life depicted by advertisements and their dreams. As a result, the world recognized West Germany’s success in the 1960s on the basis of how many material goods the average West German possessed: “Practically speaking, by the turn of the 1960s West Germans were no longer either heroes or hagglers; they were becoming known as affluent Europeans with high rates of expenditure on kitchens, automobiles, and holidays.”<sup>90</sup> In the 1950s and 60s, the idea of American wealth became the standard of wealth in Europe. Gone were the days where companies simply sold products; in addition to selling American consumer culture, American companies sold their ideas of wealth. And a huge symbol of that wealth was the car.

Furthermore, the Americanization by the car contributed to what scholars acknowledge as globalization. Globalization in its inception was the Americanization of Europe; today, the distinctions between the Western and Eastern world are blurred, as Eastern nations are successfully engaging in globalization, an effort initiated by the Western world. Benjamin Barber in his book, *Jihad vs. McWorld: Terrorism’s Challenge to Democracy*, argues that American market consumerism has yielded tension within other nations around the world as they fight to maintain their cultures and identity in what he refers to as a “jihad.” “Jihad” has come to adopt a different context after the tragedy of 9/11, but the way in which countries fight to preserve their identity in the face of globalization resembles a jihad-like battle. With respect to cars, Barber acknowledges the important role cars have played in serving as a globalizing agent.

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89. De Grazia, 347.

90. De Grazia, 359.

At the beginning of his book, he concentrates on the automobile industry and the greater marketing implications of automotive sales in relation to globalization. In essence, he argues that in selling cars, car manufacturers sold America:

Historically, there is something prototypically American about the automobile: Henry Ford's commitment to a mass-produced motorized vehicle that would set every American family free has come to be associated with many of the virtues of American lifestyle and not a few of its vices. The internationalization of automobile culture— what George Ball once called “an ideology on four wheels”— as well as of automobile manufacturing is thus actually a globalization of America, no matter who is making the cars.<sup>91</sup>

Fordism, or “Henry Ford's commitment to a mass-produced motorized vehicle” played a significant role in the Americanization of Europe after the Second World War, as it allowed for goods to be manufactured and purchased cheaply.<sup>92</sup> In addition, Fordism became the American model, and regardless of what an assembly line produced, it represented America in the way it was produced. Culturally, the automobile was important in that it represented American life, or as Barber states: “has come to be associated with many of the virtues of American lifestyle and not a few of its vices.” People in their desire for a car focused on the benefits of their vision of American lifestyle, rather than considering the negatives to owning a car. Desire for the American dream drove people into showrooms and out with a new car. However, instead of only focusing on the corporate or marketing practices of automotive sales, Barber includes Secretary of State George Ball's line as cars representing “an ideology on four wheels.” George Ball served as Secretary of State under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson and was an economist who recognized Western Europe's importance in the international political sphere.<sup>93</sup> His line about cars reveals that the United States government acknowledged the power of the car as a device of

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91. Benjamin R. Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld: Terrorism's Challenge to Democracy* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995), 25.

92. De Grazia, 4.

93. Robert D. McFadden, “George W. Ball Dies at 84; Vietnam's Devil's Advocate,” *New York Times*, May 28, 1994.

Americanization. The strategies with which automobile manufacturers sold cars proves historically relevant in a dialogue of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Americanization, but what is more historically significant is the way in which cars sold American culture.

The initial successes of globalization can be attributed to the successful sale of American culture during the 20<sup>th</sup>-century. Barber argues:

With or without resistance, nations with proud traditions of film-making independence like France, England, Sweden, India, Indonesia, and Japan are in fact gradually succumbing to the irresistible lure of product that is not only predominately American but, even when still indigenous, is rooted in the glamour of the seductive lifestyle trinity sex, violence, and money, set to a harmonizing score of American rock and roll.<sup>94</sup>

Today, the appeal of American life that drives global consumerism finds its origins in the seductive lifestyle advertised during the 1950s and 60s. American advertising created an attractive culture that lured consumers to buy American products.<sup>95</sup> Automotive advertisements reflect this trend, as advertisements from the 1950s and 60s maximized sex appeal and glamour.<sup>96</sup> Hollywood also became a driving force of global consumerism as films and other media conveyed an idealistic American lifestyle. This lifestyle was all inclusive and changed the way in which people bought goods, or as Barber suggests: “Hollywood is McWorld’s storyteller, and it inculcates secularism, passivity, consumerism, vicariousness, impulse buying, and an accelerated pace of life, not as a result of its overt themes and explicit story-lines but by virtue of what Hollywood is and how its products are consumed.”<sup>97</sup> This consumer culture transformed American and Western culture for that matter, in that life became centered around what people

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94. Barber, 90.

95. Barber, 88-89.

96. Vintage Ad Browser, “Car Advertisements of the 1950s,” <http://www.vintageadbrowser.com/cars-ads-1950s> (accessed March 31, 2013); Vintage Ad Browser, “Car Advertisements of the 1950s,” <http://www.vintageadbrowser.com/cars-ads-1950s/79> (accessed March 31, 2013).

97. Barber, 97.

buy. With cars serving as significant objects of desire, it is important to consider the car's role as an agent of globalization.

In the post-modern world of today, one observes the effects of globalization everywhere. No longer do people think in East-West terms, as historically Eastern nations are beating the United States in what seems like a race to become the ultimate consumer culture. China, Japan, and South Korea have transformed into thoroughly Western nations as they have adopted Fordism as a manufacturing standard and have been successful at selling goods and Western culture to their citizens and nations around the world. In terms of car manufacturing, these Asian countries are selling cars to the United States and Western Europe at a high rate.<sup>98</sup> At the present, German car manufacturers like Mercedes-Benz, BMW, and Volkswagen are beating the Americans at their own game, establishing successful factories in the American south.<sup>99</sup> But in the 1950s and 1960s, no region quite captured the cultural, ideological, and economic tension between the East and West like Germany. In capturing the environment in Germany today, Barber writes: "Taxi drivers talk about a new "Mauer im Kopf (a wall inside people's heads) that divides East and West more effectively (because without any visible coercion) than the physical wall ever did. Smug westerners boast they can "spot a former East German just by his or her gait," and are buying up old two-cycle Trabant cars that look like toys for their nostalgia collections."<sup>100</sup> The divisions between East and West exist in historical memory, and the Trabant serves as an artifact of East German consumer culture just as the Volkswagen Beetle represents West German consumer culture during the 1950s and 60s. Today, globalization has desensitized people in seeing how cars represent their culture of origin; superficially, a BMW X5 appears just

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98. See Simon Partner's *Assembled in Japan: Electrical Goods and the Making of the Japanese Consumer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

99. See David Kiley, *Driven: Inside BMW, the Most Admired Car Company in the World* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2004).

100. Barber, 265.

as American as a Chevy Tahoe as both are SUVs manufactured in the American south.

However, for Germany in the 1950s and 60s, no object quite captured the cultural differences and similarities of the East and West as did their cars.

Chapter 3: *Fahvergnügen*- Driving Pleasure in West Germany<sup>101</sup>

When people think of West Germany, they think of cars. Few cultures rival West Germany in their embrace of the car. Automotive companies launched prior to the War gained traction as technological innovators, producing some of the most well manufactured automobiles in the world. Today, consumers covet German cars for their prestige, quality, and performance. In the 1950s, consumers bought German cars for the same reasons.<sup>102</sup> Even though today Volkswagen produces cars around the world, their advertisements still proudly advertise the company's German heritage as a mark of quality and innovation. Volkswagen's 2013 Super Bowl Commercial ends with: "That's the power of German engineering," even though the commercial is selling a Volkswagen Beetle that was manufactured in Mexico and is driven by Americans with Jamaican accents.<sup>103</sup>

Car culture in West Germany adopted a different form in comparison with car culture in the United States.<sup>104</sup> Wolfgang Sachs writes:

By 1962 a mere 27.3 percent of German households had their miracle parked in the drive; throughout the fifties the Lloyd advertisement, "Productive in cheer, happy in pleasure," was valid only for the upper reaches of society. But in the course of the sixties, because earning power went up while prices went down, more and more people not only could afford to fulfill their dream, but also saw their assumed right to prosperity redeemed in the possession of an automobile.<sup>105</sup>

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101. *Fahvergnügen* is a German term that literally translates into "Driving Pleasure." Volkswagen used this term in their advertisements during the 1990s. See this video for more information about this term and advertising slogan: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eOnne-90CLI>.

102. Phil Patton, *Bug: The Strange Mutations of the World's Most Famous Automobile* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 98.

103. Volkswagen, "Volkswagen Game Day 2013 Commercial: Get In. Get Happy," YouTube, 1:03, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9H0xPWAtaa8> (accessed March 31, 2013); Jeff Glucker, "2012 Volkswagen Beetle production gets underway in Mexico," Autoblog, <http://www.autoblog.com/2011/07/22/2012-volkswagen-beetle-production-gets-underway-inmexico/> (accessed March 31, 2013).

104. See Rudy Koshar's "On the History of the Automobile in Everyday Life," *Contemporary European History* 10, no. 1 (March 2001) to see the differences between West German and American car culture. Also, Wolfgang Sachs's *For Love of the Automobile: Looking Back Into the History of Our Desires* is an excellent source in defining German car culture in terms of desire.

105. Wolfgang Sachs, *For the Love of the Automobile: Looking Back Into the History of Our Desires* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 66.

The car served as a symbol of materialistic prosperity for West Germans in their quest for reconstruction after World War II. For the West Germans, buying a car was more than just accessing another form of transportation; buying a car was the fulfillment of a dream. Thus, car culture blossomed in West Germany during the 1950s and 60s. Car culture defines Germany today, as Stuttgart is home to Mercedes-Benz and Porsche museums, while Munich is home to the BMW Welt.<sup>106</sup> At the Nürburgring in southern Germany, home to the first Formula 1 World Championship in 1951, BMW and Mercedes-Benz advertise at this famous racetrack.<sup>107</sup> Instead of advertising specific products, they advertise emotion, with BMW's "Freude am Fahren" sign marking the beginning of a lap around the "Green Hell."<sup>108</sup> Translated, "Freude am Fahren" means "Sheer Driving Pleasure." While this advertisement is on display today, this advertisement reflects a culture constructed throughout the 1950s and 60s in West Germany by West German automobile manufacturers and clever advertising.

In order to have cars, roads are first needed. In his demented plans for the expansion and transformation of Germany, Adolf Hitler included the need for a network of "super roads" which would allow Germans to travel easily throughout the country. Hitler's *autobahn*, as it became known, also positioned Germany on an equal level with France and the United States, competing nations with growing automobile populations.<sup>109</sup> *Autobahn* translates to "motorway" or "highway," but as *Eisenbahn* translates to "railway," Hitler's motorways can be seen as new

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106. BMW Group, "BMW Welt," <http://www.bmw-welt.com/en/> (accessed March 31, 2013); Mercedes-Benz, "Mercedes-Benz Classic-Home," [http://www.mercedes-benz-classic.com/content/classic/mpc/mpc\\_classic\\_website/en/mpc\\_home/mbc/home/museum/home.flash.html](http://www.mercedes-benz-classic.com/content/classic/mpc/mpc_classic_website/en/mpc_home/mbc/home/museum/home.flash.html) (accessed March 31, 2013); Porsche Museum, Porsche, <http://www.porsche.com/international/aboutporsche/porschemuseum/> (accessed March 31, 2013).

107. Nürburgring, "1940's and 1950's," Nürburgring, <http://www.nuerburgring.de/en/ueberuns/the-nuerburgring-legend/history/1940s-and-1950s.html> (accessed March 31, 2013).

108. See this website if you would like to see the "Freude am Fahren" sign: <http://www.panoramio.com/photo/48907084>.

109. Patton, 7.

form of travel and a replacement for trains.<sup>110</sup> After all, Hitler claimed: “A nation is no longer distinguished by the length of its railroads but by the length of its highways.”<sup>111</sup> A car enthusiast, Hitler spent a portion of his time in jail during 1923 envisioning an elaborate network of highways that would grow into the autobahn.<sup>112</sup> In addition to dreaming about the autobahn, Hitler enjoyed reading car magazines and learning about automobiles. As Phil Patton writes: “Hitler also read motoring magazines, followed racing, and thought himself something of an expert on automotive engineering. This fascination with automobiles was one of the little bits of tinfoil his magpie mind had assembled among his historical, economic, and racist doctrines.”<sup>113</sup> Yet interestingly enough, he never learned how to drive. While Hitler was a car snob who preferred his Mercedes-Benzenes, he recognized the need for a network of roads that could accommodate the Volkswagen, or “People’s Car.”<sup>114</sup> On a superficial level, having an autobahn would allow Germany to compete with the burgeoning car cultures of the United States and France.<sup>115</sup>

The construction of the autobahn network in the 1930s transformed the way Germans engaged with their environment, and this transformation culminated the 1950s.<sup>116</sup> Engineers designed autobahns to fit into the German landscape and provide drivers with beautiful vistas as they rode in their cars. Engineers and landscape architects worked together to create an environment where Germans could experience the scenic German landscape. Designing and

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110. Thomas Zeller, “Building and Rebuilding the Landscape of the Autobahn, 1930-70,” in *The World Beyond the Windshield: Roads and Landscapes in the United States and Europe*, ed. Christof Mauch and Thomas Zeller (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008), 128.

111. Patton, 8.

112. Patton, 9.

113. Patton, 8.

114. Patton, 9. For more information on this subject, please see Rudy Koshar’s “Cars and Nations: Anglo-German Perspectives on Automobility between the World Wars,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 21 (October 2004): 121-144.

115. Patton, 7.

116. Sachs, *For the Love of the Automobile*.



constructing the autobahn proved to be of tremendous importance to Hitler and the Nazis. While superficially they were engaging in the construction of a network of highways, the autobahn represented more than a group of roadways. The effort of Nazi civil engineers and landscape architects in creating the ideal highway system proves how important the autobahn was in advancing Nazi ideologies. Hitler envisioned a series of motorways that engaged German drivers in a process of German culture building, as drivers could take in the German countryside and take pride in being German.<sup>117</sup>

In the 1950s, German civil engineers reassessed the function of the autobahn and tried to distance the autobahn from its identity of being “Adolf Hitler’s roads.”<sup>118</sup> Because the autobahn had been developed at a time when Germany had a high car to passenger ratio, civil engineers had not anticipated the rise in traffic that the autobahn would witness. West German consumers began buying cars more in the 1950s and 60s, and thus, flooding the autobahn: “Yet in 1950, when the ratio of cars to passengers was 1 to 4 in the United States, in West Germany the ratio was 1 to 104. By 1955 the ratio had dropped to 1 to 31, and only in the early 1960s did the ratio fall to below ten people per car.”<sup>119</sup> West German civil engineers recognized the need to renovate the autobahn to accommodate traffic, applying some of the civil engineering strategies developed by American engineers.<sup>120</sup> With more traffic came higher death tolls, with autobahn-related deaths surging in the 1950s. In addition to finding ways to accommodate traffic, civil engineers also devised methods of reducing the number of deaths on the autobahn.<sup>121</sup> The

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117. Zeller, 132-133.

118. Zeller, 135.

119. Zeller, 135.

120. Zeller, 136.

121. Zeller, 137.

United States also attempted to influence the steps taken to revise the autobahn, either indirectly or directly.<sup>122</sup>

However, to a greater extent, the efforts of West German civil engineers to improve the autobahn proved to be an expression of their competition with East Germany and a manifestation of West Germany's orientation with the United States. Thomas Zeller argues:

West German civil engineers' competitive efforts to maintain and expand a freeway system superior to that of the GDR made the orientation toward Western and especially American values all the more significant and powerful. Social freedom, in this version of the conflict of systems, had to include automotive freedom. As technology, environment, and their interstices were renegotiated and redesigned, landscape as a concept was declining in importance. In order to assert automotive freedom during the Cold War, all speed limits on the autobahn were abolished in 1955.<sup>123</sup>

As Zeller asserts, the autobahn provided automotive freedom for West Germans, culminating in the abolition of speed limits in 1955. Driving in West Germany represented economic and social freedom without the constraints of government. On the autobahn after 1955, people expressed their personal autonomy by driving fast cars. In modifying the physical landscape of West Germany, the autobahn changed the landscape of freedom in West Germany, a freedom linked with driving.<sup>124</sup>

Like the Cadillac and other American models that denoted status in the United States, West Germans luxury cars such as Mercedes-Benz, BMW, and Porsche defined a lot of the West German driving culture during the 1950s and 60s. To provide context of Mercedes-Benz's importance in automotive and German history, Carl Benz patented the first automobile in 1886

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122. Jeffrey M. Diefendorf, "American Influences on Urban Developments in West Germany" *The United States and Germany in the Era of the Cold War, 1945-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 587-594.

123. Zeller, 142.

124. Because West Germany proudly showcased its freedom through its consumption of goods, scholars have discussed West Germany's relationship with consumption during the Cold War. See David Crews' edited collection, *Consuming Germany in the Cold War*.

and with Gottlieb Daimler, developed the Mercedes-Benz brand.<sup>125</sup> Their fledgling automotive company blossomed into a luxury car manufacturer during the 1920s and 30s, and further gained prestige as Adolf Hitler's marque of choice.<sup>126</sup> After the Second World War, aid from the Marshall Plan helped Mercedes-Benz focus on the restoration of their company and the production of new models.<sup>127</sup> In 1951 with the introduction of the 300, Mercedes-Benz took a new direction that relied on the successes of past cars while focusing on providing drivers and passengers with the latest in automotive technology. As a result, Konrad Adenauer and other international heads of state chose the 300 as their car of choice.<sup>128</sup> Furthermore, it was after 1951 that American celebrities began buying 300s and as a result, Mercedes-Benz gained reputation for prestige internationally.<sup>129</sup> At this time, Mercedes-Benz also produced racecars for Grand Prix races, demonstrating the company's role in building West German car culture.<sup>130</sup> While all of these elements added to Mercedes-Benz's prominence in the automotive world, their advertising during the 1950s holds the greatest cultural significance. Mercedes-Benz's advertisements not only sold beautiful cars, but they sold a lush, attractive, Western life. Advertisements maximized on the sex appeal of the car by positioning new models next to attractive women.<sup>131</sup> Unsurprisingly, during the 1960s Mercedes-Benz did not appeal to the generation of youth participating in demonstrations and embracing rock n' roll.<sup>132</sup> It was at this time that Mercedes-Benz cemented its reputation as a car for successful, middle-aged people— an

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125. Beverly Rae Kimes, *The Star and The Laurel: The Centennial History of Daimler, Mercedes and Benz* (Montvale, NJ: Mercedes-Benz of North America, 1986), 36-37.

126. See *The Star and the Laurel*; author's experience at the Mercedes-Benz Museum in Stuttgart.

127. Kimes, 290.

128. Kimes, 291.

129. Kimes, 293.

130. Kimes, 293-294.

131. See ads on pages 312 and 313 in *The Star and Laurel*.

132. Mercedes-Benz was associated with wealthier, older West German drivers. See Rudy Koshar's "Cars and Nations: Anglo-German Perspectives on Automobility between the World Wars," *Theory, Culture & Society* 21 (October 2004): 121-144 for more explanation.

object coveted by traditional West German professionals.<sup>133</sup> Mercedes-Benz represented West German success at the automotive level, but culturally the brand gained a prestigious reputation. Because of this exclusivity, Mercedes-Benz does not fully represent West German car culture.

In addition to Mercedes-Benz, BMW gained traction as a luxurious automobile manufacturer during the late 1950s and the 1960s. While BMW had produced engines since 1916, the company really gained its reputation as a car manufacturer in the 1950s and 60s.<sup>134</sup> Bayerische Motoren Werke GmbH began as an airplane engine manufacturer, producing airplane engines and then motorcycle engines.<sup>135</sup> In the late 1920s and early 1930s, BMW began producing touring cars and sports cars.<sup>136</sup> It was only in 1936 that BMW became a competitor for Mercedes-Benz with its production of the 326 saloon.<sup>137</sup> After the Second World War, BMW reentered the automotive business in 1951, producing expensive, large saloons. BMW failed to garner high sales as the cars proved to be too expensive for the average West German worker and the models could not compare with equivalent models from Mercedes-Benz.<sup>138</sup> BMW's fortunes turned around in 1955 with the introduction of the Isetta, an awkward bubble car that appealed to consumers affected by fuel shortages from the Suez Canal Crisis.<sup>139</sup> After suffering from languishing sales for larger cars throughout the 1950s, BMW board members decided to produce a car that maximized on efficiency and performance, but also reflected a distinctly European design ethos. Board members recognized that BMW could not compete with

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133. Leslie Butterfield, *Enduring Passion: The Story of the Mercedes-Benz Brand* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2005), 155.

134. David Kiley, *Driven: Inside BMW, the Most Admired Car Company in the World* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2004), 52.

135. Kiley, 54-56.

136. Kiley, 58-59.

137. Kiley, 60.

138. Kiley, 65.

139. Kiley, 66.

Volkswagen for sales, so they tried something new with the introduction of the 1500.<sup>140</sup> The BMW 1500 created the niche for sports sedans, something Detroit attempted to emulate in its production of compact sedans in the 1960s. However, the car sold for a steeper price than equivalent compact sedans, creating a niche market for the car.<sup>141</sup> While not as expensive as a Mercedes-Benz, the BMW 1500 marked a different approach to West German automotive engineering. The car proved more compact and performance oriented than other models at the time, yet the car's price made it more exclusive. For that reason, the BMW 1500 cannot capture the extent of West German automotive culture in the 1950s and 60s, but it does represent West Germany's history of automotive innovation.

For Porsche, the story is a little different. After the Second World War, Dr. Ing. h.c. Ferry Porsche pieced together his father's fragmented company to build sports cars. According to his 1976 autobiography, *We at Porsche*, Dr. Ferry Porsche spent the year 1947 putting together plans for a new Formula 1 car while his father remained imprisoned in France.<sup>142</sup> Porsche entered into a contract with Carlo Dusio in 1947 to build a completely new sports car with a boxer engine: "To get back to our project, which was also to be called a Cisitalia, we designed the entire car from end to end— every last nut and bolt— and it surely was the embodiment of the most progressive ideas. We precisely fulfilled Dusio's dream of a Grand Prix car years ahead of its time."<sup>143</sup> The Cisitalia project provided the funds and the vision for Porsche to rebuild itself as a sports car manufacturer. After Dr. Ferdinand Porsche was released from French incarceration in 1947, Ferry began building another car alongside the Cisitalia project: "Concurrently with the Dusio contract, I decided to start building our own sports car.

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140. Kiley, 67-68.

141. Kiley, 68-69.

142. Dr. Ing. h.c. Ferry Porsche and John Bentley, *We at Porsche* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1976), 206.

143. Porsche and Bentley, 208.

The first real Porsche design featured a tubular chassis of our own making, a Volkswagen front axle, and the VW engine and transaxle.”<sup>144</sup> Ferry found himself fitting engine parts together to make a new car, just as he was fitting together the pieces of his father’s engineering success together to make a new company.

The first official Porsche car was given the designation Type 356, as it was the 356<sup>th</sup> Porsche design.<sup>145</sup> The car represented enormous success for Ferry Porsche and put Porsche on the minds of car enthusiasts around the world: “It might be argued that our original goals were very modest, since we could not then see beyond a production run of five hundred of the 356 model. We were later to revise those plans far beyond our most optimistic dreams of 1949. By the time we phased out the 356C Porsche in 1965, we had build 78,000 of the 356 model.”<sup>146</sup> Porsche’s success at the 1951 Le Mans also gained the company further recognition, improving the future prospects of the company. Ferry Porsche believed that racing served as good advertising and automotive companies, as a result, should fund the racing of their cars. In addition, racing had been immensely popular in Germany before the War, and thus post-war racing would signify a return to better times:

Sometime after our first Le Mans in 1951, the question did come up as to whether or not racing, as an activity, was worth the cost to the maker. I believe the theory behind it is clear. Journalists’ reports of races are far more effective and more convincing than most forms of advertising, and they cost little or nothing. Money thus freed from unnecessary advertising can be used to gain valuable racing experience, and the lesson so learn mean that the next year’s model can be a better car. Potential weaknesses become apparent far sooner on a racecourse than during factory bench tests. I think we could say that we successfully pursued this policy of letting the world’s press speak for us and spending advertising money in research and improvements, at any rate up until 1968 or 1969.<sup>147</sup>

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144. Porsche and Bentley, 211. Also, Dr. Ferdinand Porsche was arrested on charges of being a war criminal, however his son’s autobiography and other sources fail to discuss in detail why he was imprisoned in France.

145. Porsche and Bentley, 212.

146. Porsche and Bentley, 218.

147. Porsche and Bentley, 234.

Ferry Porsche's strategy for advertising was built into his dedication to racing his cars. In participating in races, engineers could identify issues with cars and learn from the racing experiences to improve for future models. Likewise, journalists would write about the cars, giving them the press they deserved. But ultimately, participating in races was another way that West German automotive companies cultivated West German car culture in the 1950s and 60s. Automotive manufacturers generated enthusiasm for its products through racing, and Germans became fascinated with cars by observing car racing. Unlike American car companies, Porsche had a direct hand in enhancing his country's car culture because of his involvement in racing. Spectators fell in love with the cars, the teams, and the histories produced by manufacturers like Ferry Porsche, and as a result, they developed a culture and new racing industry that was seduced by cars.

On the opposite side of the automotive and cultural spectrum, the first Porsche car was the Volkswagen Beetle, a car intended to serve as a utilitarian form of transportation for the German *volk* that transformed into a symbol of counterculture for Europeans and Americans. It was a car for the masses that draws parallels to Ford's Model T.<sup>148</sup> German advertisements for the Volkswagen Beetle in the 1960s emphasized the car's efficiency and practicality. In a particular advertisement, a prospective West German customer becomes disgruntled from using the train as his mode of transportation.<sup>149</sup> Allured by the new Volkswagens passing him on the street, he begins to consider a life with a new Volkswagen. To maximize the appeal of the car, the advertisement includes scenes depicting a family packing up for a Sunday trip to the

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148. Patton, 10-11.

149. Bernhard Rieger discusses the Volkswagen's placement at the center of West German industrial policy and how West Germany sought to sell many Volkswagens to West Germans and people around the world. See "The Good German Goes Global: The Volkswagen Beetle as an Icon of the Federal Republic," *History Workshop Journal* (2009).

countryside. The commercial ends by showing a group of different people marveling at Volkswagens on the street, seductively responding to the sight of a Volkswagen by gasping, “Ein Volkswagen.” While showcasing the car’s practicality, the advertisement also maximizes on the sexiness of owning a new Beetle and shows West German citizens falling in love with the car.<sup>150</sup>

West Germany’s relationship with the Volkswagen Beetle sharply contrasted with the United States’ embrace of the Bug. Conceptualized by Adolf Hitler and Dr. Ferdinand Porsche, the Volkswagen Project, Ferdinand Porsche presented the concept of a people’s car to the German people on January 17, 1934. This presentation resulted in a contract with the German government on July 22, 1934 to construct the “People’s Car” or *Volkswagen*.<sup>151</sup> The car was supposed to be cheap to buy and cost no more than 1,000 Reichsmarks. In addition, the car would not include any luxuries– the car was intended to be a bare-boned model of automotive transportation.<sup>152</sup> Originally, all German automotive manufacturers were supposed to join forces to create the Volkswagen, but the German government had different plans.<sup>153</sup> According to the Porsche Archives, the German government made the decision to produce a separate factory for the production of the Volkswagen, making the car a whole other automotive venture.<sup>154</sup>

However, the Porsche Archives fail to acknowledge Adolf Hitler’s role in the production of the Volkswagen. Along with Ferdinand Porsche and his son Ferry, Hitler made the Volkswagen project a reality. At his speech at the Berlin Automobile Show in 1934, Hitler professed: “I would like to see a German car, mass-produced, which could be bought by anyone with enough funds to purchase a motorcycle. Just simple, reliable, economical transportation.

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150. “Early 60s VW Beetle Commercial,” YouTube, 1:37 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lyF3AcQ82HM> (accessed March 31, 2013).

151. Porsche Museum, *Ferry Porsche 100 Jahre* (Stuttgart: Edition Porsche-Museum, 2009), 68.

152. Porsche Museum, 70; Porsche and Bentley, 70.

153. Porsche Museum, 74.

154. Porsche Museum, 74-80.



Few parts to go wrong. Low repair costs. A real people's car— a sort of *Volkswagen*, you might say.”<sup>155</sup> According to Ferry Porsche, Hitler's proclamation came at the right time for the Porsches: “Once again, I suppose, we at the Porsche firm were fortunate. As it happened, we had at that very moment on the drawing board some blueprints featuring exactly what Hitler was thinking of.”<sup>156</sup> The Porsche firm presented its design to Hitler, who proved very receptive to the Porsches' ideas. Ferry Porsche writes: “This much must be said of Hitler. When interested in anything, he could grasp both the fundamentals and the details surprisingly quickly. It therefore didn't take him long to give his nod of assent.”<sup>157</sup> With Hitler's vision as their muse, Ferdinand and Ferry Porsche worked to design the Volkswagen to fit into Hitler's plans for German transportation reform. In 1935, Hitler remarked:

I'm happy to tell you that due to the capabilities of that brilliant engineer Ferdinand Porsche and his staff, the German Volkswagen is rapidly becoming an accomplished fact and the first cars will have undergone thorough testing before this summer is out. It is an entirely practical idea for us to mass-produce a German car that will provide the people with reliable transportation at a low cost in fuel and maintenance. Little higher, in fact, than the average-sized motorcycle.<sup>158</sup>

However, with the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, the Volkswagen project was shelved and the Volkswagenwerk factory was converted to produce military vehicles and tools.<sup>159</sup> Hitler had championed the Volkswagen project, but his vision for a “People's car” was postponed. He alleged that it was a result of his declaration of war; however this was not the truth. Wolfgang König argues: “In his plans and visions of mass motorization and mass consumption, Hitler's model was the United States.”<sup>160</sup> Unlike Henry Ford, Hitler did not pay

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155. Porsche and Bentley, 68.

156. Porsche and Bentley, 68.

157. Porsche and Bentley, 69-70. For more information about the Volkswagen Project, please read Ferry Porsche's autobiography from pages 68 through 131.

158. Porsche and Bentley, 80.

159. Porsche and Bentley, 131.

160. Wolfgang König, “Adolf Hitler vs. Henry Ford: The Volkswagen, the Role of America as a Model, and the Failure of a Nazi Consumer Society,” *German Studies Review* 27 no. 2 (2004), 256.

his *Volkswagenwerk* employees enough to own a Volkswagen. Thus, the Volkswagen project failed as the car was too expensive for ordinary *volk* and people who had ordered Volkswagens did not receive delivery of them prior to the War.<sup>161</sup> Nonetheless, Hitler's influence on the development of what would become the most popular car cannot be minimized; with Ferdinand and Ferry Porsche, Hitler developed a revolutionary car— one that would change the landscape of car culture in Germany and abroad.

In the 1950s and 60s, a car that was intended to answer the calls for utilitarian transportation for the German public transformed into a cultural icon in Europe and the United States. Because of its popularity during this era, the Beetle, or Bug as it came to be known, became the most popular car in the world.<sup>162</sup> After the war, the Volkswagen factory was supposed to be transformed into a repair center for military vehicles. However, Major Ivan Hirst of the Duke of Wellington's Regiment in the British forces drove a Volkswagen prototype after British occupation in 1945 and ordered "20,000 vehicles to serve local troops and officials and insured that at least for a four-year grace period the plant would not be dismantled."<sup>163</sup> The factory was soon producing thousands of cars and became a shining example of the denazification of West Germany. Heinz Nordhoff, a former Opel employee who saw the prototype for the Beetle in 1938 became CEO of the Wolfsburg Volkswagen plant in 1949.<sup>164</sup> Published in 1954, an article in the *Reader's Digest* profiled the Volkswagen factory and touted it as an example of successful West German recovery: "Such stories built up the myth of Volkswagen as the industrial dynamo of the new free West Germany, lifted out of the ashes by

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161. König, 259.

162. Patton, 2.

163. Patton, 81.

164. Patton, 84.

the West to produce a democratic car for a democratic society.”<sup>165</sup> For Americans unfamiliar with the Volkswagen Beetle in the 1950s, the car was a product of post-war Western recovery— a recovery made possible through capitalism. For West Germans in the 1950s, the Volkswagen Beetle represented something else:

But the Germans loved cars too well to be content with the Beetle for long. In the first years after the war, when the only cars available were a couple of Mercedes and BMW models and a motley assortment of “bubble cars,” three-wheel Messerschmitts and odd Gogomobils, the Beetle looked like a real car. But its lack of heat, its noise, its tendency to grow holes in its floor near the battery, all became legendary national gripes. For many Germans the car was inextricably linked with the years of recovery and was something to be put behind them as soon as possible.<sup>166</sup>

In the 1950s, the Volkswagen Beetle represented the long road to recovery for West Germany, but Americans were already generating a fascination with this car.<sup>167</sup> This fascination turned out to be all that was needed to spark an automotive revolution.

Instead of focusing on success within the West German market, Volkswagen executives turned their sights toward the United States. However, Volkswagen struggled in the United States during the 1950s: “Volkswagen sales in the U.S. did not begin their dramatic rise until the second half of the 1950s. From 1953 to 1959, they grew from 2,000 to 150,000— through the efforts of avid local dealers and favorable publicity in magazines from *Popular Mechanics* to *Reader’s Digest*— but without national advertising.”<sup>168</sup> Americans learned about the Bug through their friends. The Bug, in comparison with other American cars at the time, represented a different sort of American values. Phil Patton argues: “While Detroit under the sway of Harley Earl tapped into the American values of power, speed, flight, and luxury, VW emphasized

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165. Patton, 84-85.

166. Patton, 85.

167. See Paul Degrassia’s *Engines of Change: A History of the American Dream in Fifteen Cars*, especially chapter 4.

168. Patton, 91-92.

another set of American values, simplicity, durability, and economy.”<sup>169</sup> Because the Bug served as an example of Western capitalistic success, it was easy for consumers to make the jump in accepting the Bug as the embodiment of certain American values. The Bug provided American drivers with an alternative to the selection of bloated American cars that saturated the automotive marketplace, and because the Bug was different, the Bug was successful. As a result, the Bug soon became associated with countercultural movements in the 1960s, becoming a symbol of modernity. Thomas Frank writes in *The Conquest of Cool*: “The VW was the anticar, the automotive signifier of the uprising against the cultural establishment.”<sup>170</sup> With this idea, the Bug became an American statement of counterculture. Once more, American consumers used the car as an accessory, but this time a major accessory to American counterculture was a West German car. Phil Patton captures this phenomenon: “The Bug was the underdog, the spiritual sibling of Chaplin’s tramp and the heir to the Model T. In ads embracing American values, the car showed up like the immigrant who becomes more patriotic than the native.”<sup>171</sup> At the height of Volkswagen Beetle-mania, the Bug starred in the 1969 Disney production of *The Love Bug*, a story of a Volkswagen Beetle that comes to life as Herbie. Herbie is a courageous little racecar that wins races in various rallies. Audiences fall in love with Herbie as he faces challenges and achieves victory.<sup>172</sup> Proving Benjamin Barber’s thesis that all cars, regardless of their country of origin, are American, the Bug became more American than certain American cars.

Despite its American popularity, the Bug was still distinctly German. Advertisers still maximized on the Bug’s “German-ness” to sell cars: “For many Americans, German technology still meant precise, prestige products like Leica cameras and Mercedes-Benz automobiles, Braun

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169. Patton, 92.

170. Patton, 103; Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997).

171. Patton, 105.

172. *The Love Bug*, directed by Robert Stevenson, Walt Disney Productions, 1969

electronic equipment and razors. People also associated it with formidable weapons— Tiger tanks and Messerschmitt fighters....Meanwhile, Hollywood discovered the Beetle’s cousin, the Porsche, the car in which James Dean raced and in which he was killed.”<sup>173</sup> The Bug’s origins as the *Volkswagen* appealed to American consumers who placed value in its simple, German design. West German engineering produced technologically advanced objects, and even though West Germany was a foreign country, West Germans subscribed to a very American flavor of market capitalism. Analyzing this concept through Victoria de Grazia’s terms, West Germans were obedient citizens and contributors to the United States’ “Market Empire.” As the Volkswagen Beetle became a sales success in the United States, Europeans began falling in love with the Bug as well. In the 1960s, West Germany achieved unprecedented levels of per capita automobile ownership, creeping up to the levels of automobile ownership in the United States. Phil Patton states: “It was a symbolic turning point, but the Bug itself had already approached the pinnacle of sales and popularity in West Germany and was being perceived by shrewd observers such as critic Reyner Banham as past its prime. People bought the Beetle for symbolic reasons, he argued.”<sup>174</sup> The Beetle’s symbolic significance drove sales in Europe, rather than a focus on the car’s technological advancements. The Bug became an icon in the United States and Europe and a symbol of twentieth century consumer culture, more than an icon for automotive technological achievement.

The Volkswagen Beetle’s historical significance is immense. Phil Patton captures the historical and cultural legacy of the Bug:

The Bug’s history is not just the story of a single model of car, or even of the automobile in general, one of the two or three most profoundly influential pieces of technology to reshape daily life, but a parable of how the things we buy reflect the character of the culture. The Bug stands as a proof that images and ideas swing through culture as if by

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173. Patton, 98-99.

174. Patton, 107.

their own power, evolving, adapting to new environments, latching on to new human champions, infecting human beings with enthusiasm. In some places and at some times, the Bug wore a self-deprecating mode of the servant, in others the personality of the émigré, the visitor, the friend and adopted guest.<sup>175</sup>

The Beetle captures the roller coaster that was twentieth century Western life. The car is on one hand the brainchild of world's most genocidal dictator, and on the other, a symbol of the American countercultural movement of the 1960s. The Bug was engineered by one of the world's most prestigious automotive engineers who built exclusive sports cars for wealthy clients, but envisioned to be an affordable and utilitarian sedan for the German masses. The Volkswagen was by birth German, but by adoption American, representing German engineering standards and American cultural trends. In its historical context and everyday simplicity, the Volkswagen Beetle is the world's most remarkable car.

Analyzing West German car culture reveals the differences and similarities with American car culture, as both West Germany and the United States worked together after the Second World War in the restoration of Europe. Both nations were aligned culturally, politically, economically, and socially, and the extent to which they embraced the automobile in their respective cultures reflects their overall allegiance. However, in looking at West German car culture, one needs to look at the manufacturers and their roles as generators of automotive culture within West Germany. Automobile companies sponsored events and distributed ads that cultivated a particular automotive culture in West Germany— a culture that still defines German life today. West Germans identified themselves with the brands they bought, something Americans had done since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century. A Mercedes driver differed from a BMW owner, just as a sports car enthusiast chose a Porsche 911 over a Volkswagen Beetle. In one sense, West German automotive culture reflects the cultural Americanization of Europe after

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175. Patton, 3-4.

the Second World War, but in another sense, German cars transformed American automotive culture during the 1950s and 60s to a tremendous degree.

## Chapter 4: The Trabi Culture

In comparison with its brother in the West, the German Democratic Republic provides a startling juxtaposition in terms of culture, economic matters, and politics. Geographically, it might have been located right next to West Germany, but as a Communist dictatorship, East Germany was a world apart.<sup>176</sup> However, despite being a socialist state, the German Democratic Republic did not differ from the Federal Republic of Germany in matters of desire. Cars serve as symbols of this desire— a desire that crossed the boundaries established by Iron Curtain from the 1950s up until 1989. While West Germans prided themselves in their Volkswagens, BMWs, and Mercedes, East Germans had to make due with two car models: the Wartburg and the Trabant. The Wartburg was a sedan with a metal frame, intended for use by government officials and lucky consumers who could afford a real car. The Trabant, on the other hand, was a quirky, plastic compact car intended for the average East German. Due to metal shortages, the Trabant had to have a plastic chassis, but the Socialist Unity Party (SED) portrayed this adaptation of contemporary automobile frame design as “a statement of modern design.”<sup>177</sup> Also, SED officials fought to fit the Trabant into the standards of Communist life. For example, the SED framed the Trabant’s use of a plastic chassis as indicative of East Germany’s priorities in light of Western, capitalistic excess. Jonathan Zatlin writes: “To the population, however, who referred to the Trabant as the *Rennpappe*, or cardboard race-car, the dangerously pliable body was an excellent example of the SED’s tendency to try to meet needs the population did not have while ignoring the ones it did have.”<sup>178</sup> In many ways, the Trabant’s production represented the failings of Communism in not satisfying the desires of consumers within the GDR. Zatlin

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176. See Mary Fulbrook’s *The People’s State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* and Mike Dennis’ *The Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1990* for outlines of East German life.

177. Jonathan Zatlin, “The Vehicle of Desire: The Trabant, the Wartburg, and the End of the GDR,” *German History* 15, no. 3 (1997): 359.

178. Zatlin, 359.



ultimately argues: “The perceived contrast between western plenty and eastern penury, combined with insufficient quality, politicized discontent; desire intensified by its frustration drove the East German population to insurrection.”<sup>179</sup> The Trabant represents the inadequacies of East Germany in comparison with West Germany, as it was a vehicle of many engineering flaws. But, East Germans loved their Trabants. An inferior car by Western standards, the Trabant symbolizes both the materialistic failings and copings of the GDR more than any other East German consumer object.<sup>180</sup>

However, the Trabant as a whole does not represent Communism, despite scholarship framing the socialist car as something entirely different from a Western car. This distinction, while valid, is flawed. For example, Luminita Gatejel in her essay, “The Common Heritage of The Socialist Car Culture,” essentially argues that cars produced in Communist countries are distinctly socialist, representing the demands and desires of Communist cultures. She writes: “From the 1950s onward, socialist societies one by one entered the age of mass motorization. And cars, no longer seen as luxury items, became increasingly available.”<sup>181</sup> In the 1950s, cars became modes of transportation, and as a result, could be easily molded into Communist system. Cars did not necessarily have to be produced for luxurious or leisurely purposes; they could simply serve as utilitarian forms of transportation.<sup>182</sup> Regardless of the intention of Communist leaders to produce a classless society with automobiles that served solely as forms of transportation, class still existed within the framework of Communism and cars, as a result, represented class. Gatejel writes:

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179. Zatlin, 359.

180. For more information about consumer culture in East Germany, look at Judd Stitzel’s “Shopping, Sewing, Networking, Complaining: Consumer Culture and the Relationship between State and Society in the GDR.”

181. Luminita Gatejel, “The Common Heritage of the Socialist Car Culture,” in *The Socialist Car: Automobility in the Eastern Bloc*, ed. Lewis H. Siegelbaum (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 145.

182. See Lewis Siegelbaum’s introduction to *The Socialist Car: Automobility in the Eastern Bloc*.

Cars in socialist countries are simply means of transport and bear no signs of social distinction.” This assertion was one of the commonplaces of socialist consumption discourse: objects should be cherished for their use value and not as status objects. However, reality looked somewhat different. In the Soviet Union of the 1950s the locally produced car models were arranged into the following hierarchical pyramid: at the bottom of the list stood (or rather crawled) the tiny Zaporozhets, built especially for disabled persons, followed closely by the small Moskvich, destined for the average buyer. Next on the scale was the middle-class Volga, the wheels for the nomenklatura. One position higher stood the Chaika limousine in which the high party and state functionaries were chauffeured, and on top, the ZIL, used exclusively during summits. Instead of just one car for everybody, we find one model for each class, ordered along a strict hierarchy. The reason for this arrangement was simple: seeing cars passing by, one would immediately know who sat inside. Social status and car ownership were directly linked.<sup>183</sup>

Despite the efforts of Communist officials to make cars represent their transportation functions and not status, as cars in America denoted, cars within the Soviet Union still signified class.

While I will cover Soviet car culture in the next chapter, the presentation of Soviet car culture is relevant to the East German case. Gatejel continues: “The organization of automobile production in the GDR followed the same principles: one model for each car class and car classes reduced to an absolute minimum. The only things missing were the luxury brands. The GDR manufactured the small Trabant, along with the middle-class Wartburg for more distinguished clients.”<sup>184</sup> Gatejel’s presentation of class in its reflection through car ownership is used to demonstrate the uniqueness of socialist car ownership. Class served as a significant but unspoken division in socialist societies, but socialist car ownership failed in being truly socialist as cars became status symbols. In East Germany, perhaps the car culture would have been more egalitarian if the Wartburg did not exist. The Wartburg provided the elite with a more luxurious mode of transportation, just as the Chaika limousine provided Soviet officials with more exclusive transportation. Because the Wartburg served as an alternative to the proletarian

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183. Gatejel, 147.

184. Gatejel, 147.

Trabant, cars in East Germany became status symbols and not simply transportation— a trend that had already defined car culture in the West.<sup>185</sup>

Gajetel ultimately argues that the process of car ownership and the car culture in Communist countries aided in making socialist-produced cars socialist, as the process by which Communists acquired cars contrasted significantly from the process of automobile ownership in the West. In comparing socialist car culture with Western car culture, Gatejel argues:

Moreover, this socialist path never proved capable of offering a viable alternative to Western models. But to regard it as merely a bad imitation of the latter would be a mistake. It produced far too many idiosyncrasies to simply regard it condescendingly as an inferior copy of Western car culture. It is true that only Western transfers made a socialist car culture possible. Nevertheless, how these foreign elements were adapted to the preexisting local conditions demonstrates the particular, and in a sense peculiar, nature of socialist automobility.<sup>186</sup>

What Gajetel refers to in mentioning the “idiosyncrasies” of car ownership is the car culture that developed as a result of ordinary Communist citizens desiring cars of their own. In order to integrate the Western notion of personal car ownership within the rigid boundaries of Communism, East Germans had to overcome many obstacles, or what Gajetel refers to as “idiosyncrasies,” to make personal car ownership a reality. This process of waiting for a car and then owning a car in East Germany indeed produced a distinctive car culture.<sup>187</sup>

East Germans had to wait for their cars for many years, filling out order forms for their Trabants, and in one case, receiving their car 13 years later.<sup>188</sup> When an East German would turn 18, they would be permitted to fill out an order form for a Trabant at their local IFA-Combine.

Jonathan Zatlin argues: “The planning apparatus seems to have believed it could employ the

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185. See Stade’s “Designs of Identity: Politics of Aesthetics in the GDR,” *Ethnos* (1993) for more information on how class and consumer design were linked.

186. Gajetel, 155.

187. Waiting for goods within socialist states defined the people who lived in those states. See Staab’s “Testing the West: Consumerism and National Identity in Eastern Germany,” *German Politics* (1997) and Cook’s “Good Bye, Lenin! Free-Market Nostalgia for Socialist Consumerism,” *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies* (2007) for more information about this phenomenon.

188. Zatlin, 369.

registration system to inhibit the desire for a commodity whose production did not fit into its political priorities, while simultaneously channeling the backed-up demand for cars resulting from the low levels of production into an orderly but delayed gratification.”<sup>189</sup>

Registering for a Trabant provided a unique cultural experience for East Germans, as the SED believed that they could suppress desire for cars by allowing people to fill out registration forms for cars that they might receive in 13 years time. Another “idiosyncrasy” that East German car owners had to endure were the high prices when it came time to purchase that Trabant years later. Gajetel writes: “It has to be mentioned here that car prices were kept artificially high, roughly the equivalent of a two-room apartment, in order to temper the rising demand, a strategy that obviously did not work.”<sup>190</sup> Zatlin writes:

As with most consumer goods the SED had decided were non-essential, the price structure of automobiles reflected an attempt to provide a powerful disincentive to those wishing to purchase them...In 1989, the average monthly income was around 800 East German marks. A roll cost 5 pfennigs and a haircut 1.90 marks, but the cheapest two-stroke Trabant cost 12,000 marks. The cheapest version of the last Wartburg, which came with a four-stroke engine, cost 30,200 marks.<sup>191</sup>

The prices for a Trabant or a Wartburg required that East Germans make a significant investment towards owning a car. And despite the expense of car ownership, a significant number of East Germans bought cars. From 1976 to 1989, over 100,000 people took delivery of new cars.<sup>192</sup>

The ownership of used cars was a different story, as black market sales of cars rose throughout the Eastern Bloc. While illegal, the sale of cars on the black market in East Germany was highly profitable, as the East German demand for cars was high.<sup>193</sup> Regardless of whether the cars were

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189. Zatlin, 368.

190. Gajetel, 153.

191. Zatlin, 367.

192. Zatlin, 364.

193. Zatlin, 371.

purchased legally or illegally, buying cars in East Germany proved to be an arduous feat— a feat that generated a car culture distinctive to a Communist country like the GDR.

In addition to the eccentricities of car purchasing in the GDR, owning and maintaining a car in East Germany proved just as unique. Often, drivers had to carry large canisters of fuel with them as there were few gas stations in East Germany. In addition to a shortage of fuel stations, drivers suffered from fuel rationing. Police officers also displayed a general hostility toward automobile owners, ultimately reflecting the mood of the SED toward car ownership. Gajetel does include a positive with regard to Communist car ownership, as a shortage of mechanics and an absence of many automotive repair shops generated a camaraderie, or *comraderie*, between men when fixing their cars. East German men bonded over the repairing of their cars, often bringing their sons into their hobbies. East German drivers valued their cars immensely from the amount of effort they put into buying and maintaining their cars, a thought most Western drivers would not consider. Also, driving and maintaining their cars provided East Germans with an escape from the Stasi's constant surveillance.<sup>194</sup> It is for this reason that Luminita Gajetel argues that socialist cars were uniquely socialist:

The uneasy relationship with the West was one of its main features. So were shortages, privileges, waiting lists, high prices, a certain type of sociability around the car, and the special role mechanics occupied in this system, to mention a few examples. In this sense the car culture of the USSR, the GDR, and Romania was both genuine and socialist.<sup>195</sup>

The way in which East Germans went about buying and maintaining their cars differs from the practices of Westerners, but the passion Westerners and Communists held for their cars is of the same degree. Because the desire and the passion that drove East Germans to purchase cars despite all of the obstacles resembles the desire of an American teenager to purchase a

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194. For more information about the extensive East German police state and the invasion of the Stasi in East German life, see Anna Funder's *Stasiland*. For more information about the car as an oasis of privacy within East Germany, see Staab's *National Identity in Eastern Germany* pp. 103-105.

195. Gajetel, 156.

Volkswagen Beetle in the 1970s, it is wrong to make a distinction between a “Western car” and a “socialist car” on the basis of the universality of desire. As demonstrated by the East German case, desire for the car transcends all boundaries, but automotive desire forms a car culture defined by the boundaries in place.

One example of the blurring distinctions between a “socialist car” and a “Western car” is the way in which roads helped define the purpose of the car. During the 1950s, East German authorities attempted to ignore the need for the expansion of the autobahn in the GDR, and promoted public transportation as a favorable alternative to automobile ownership. In 1958, the SED began to reconsider the function of autobahns and planned for the integration of autobahns into Communist life.<sup>196</sup> While Communist officials did not favor the individuality that automobile transportation afforded East Germans, they viewed the expansion of the autobahn in the GDR as a way to show East Germany’s economic strength in competition with West Germany. The autobahn, as a result, became a symbol for East Germany to compete with the West, showing that the influences allowing for automotive transportation in the GDR were not always inherently socialist.<sup>197</sup>

In towns, the planning of roads within city centers forced socialist engineers to conceive of ways to integrate the car, as a symbol of personal autonomy and independence, into the order of a Communist society. Elke Beyer discusses the importance of city planning and architecture in the rebuilding of socialist landscapes. In her essay, “Planning for Mobility: Designing City Center and New Towns in the USSR and the GDR in the 1960s,” Beyer argues:

The construction of new housing estates in the periphery and a gradual reduction of working hours contributed to an increase of everyday and leisure mobility, furthered by a

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196. Axel Dossman, “Socialist Highways? Appropriating the Autobahn in the German Democratic Republic,” in *The World Beyond the Windshield: Roads and Landscapes in the United States and Europe*, ed. Christof Mauch and Thomas Zeller (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008), 146.

197. Dossman, 147.

slowly proceeding automobilization. These new demands on traffic planning received considerable attention in the theory and practice of urban planning in the USSR and the GDR from the late 1950s, part and parcel of the claim to organize life according to rational, scientific principles.<sup>198</sup>

The growing automobilization of the USSR and the GDR provided city engineers with a great task, as they had to find a way to incorporate cars and traffic into the planning of ideal, socialist towns. The car provided a source of great concern for city planners, as traffic threatened to reduce the peace of cities and take away from the leisure of city dwellers. Beyer continues: “Architects and planners reclaimed more professional control of the urbanization process and demanded more political attention for their concerns, instead of ad hoc interference. They sought to reframe urban design as a science rather than an art, also in order to gain authority in the political process.”<sup>199</sup>

The planning of a city was closely integrated with the political agendas of Communist officials, and architects, as a result of this ethos, used their skills as scientific city planners to gain recognition in the political sphere. In the planning of the 1972 Marzahn project in East Germany, architect Roland Korn drew inspiration from Le Corbusier on how to plan the ideal city.<sup>200</sup> The design for the Marzahn project was intended to provide residents with a utopic living environment: “Like Le Corbusier’s design, Marzahn was more than just a housing settlement; it was a total concept, with every conceivable need of the citizens planned in advance for the most rational and well-functioning form of living possible– the definition of the socialist system for the urban planners and architects, as well as the Politburo members, in the ascendant

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198. Elke Beyer, “Planning for Mobility: Designing City Centers and New Towns in the USSR and the GDR in the 1960s,” in *The Socialist Car: Automobility in the Eastern Bloc*, edited by Lewis H. Siegelbaum (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 73.

199. Beyer, 85.

200. Le Corbusier influenced American design as well. Refer to Marshall Berman’s *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*

Honecker era.”<sup>201</sup> This obsession with the ideal city defined Communist planning during the 1950s up through 1989, as planners and SED officials desired to provide citizens with an alternative to what they considered the liberal disorganization of cities in the West. These architect’s plans did not anticipate the popularity of the automobile, as roads did not occupy a large space in their plans.

In integrating the car within city centers, Communist planners struggled. The popularity of the automobile threw a wrench in the plans of East German architects and government officials, as drivers and their cars could not be as easily controlled. According to historian Eli Rubin, architects who drew from traditionally Corbusian ideals did not have a framework for how to accommodate cars and traffic, as Le Corbusier viewed the car as an accessory to a lifestyle, and not one of the driving features of lifestyle. Rubin writes:

The old model of streets with houses and shops lining them was a vestige of the preautomobile city, according to Le Corbusier, when the slowness of travel necessitated a spatial connection between the residence and the travel capillaries and arteries. This had now led to several unfortunate things– the noise and air pollution of automobiles in the crowded city streets, the danger of accidents, and the fetishization of automobiles, parked as they often were in driveways or along the curb in front of a house or building, signifying the class and taste of the owners of the property. Le Corbusier proposed instead living towers, separated by wide swaths of natural green space, and with the places of work far removed. Working, driving, and living would be separate.<sup>202</sup>

According to Le Corbusier, cars led to the contamination of the city through pollution and traffic, as Rubin points out. The Corbusian notion of separating “working, driving, and living” proved immensely appealing for socialist city planners, as people would not be able to denote their status through the parking of their cars in front of their residences.

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201. Eli Rubin, “Understanding a Car in the Context of a System: Trabants, Marzahn, and East German Socialism,” in *The Socialist Car: Automobility in the Eastern Bloc*, edited by Lewis H. Siegelbaum (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 132.

202. Rubin, 133.



However, not all Communist planners drew from Le Corbusier directly. Most architects and planners drew from Bauhaus designs or Soviet designs, whose roots, according to Rubin, can be traced back to Le Corbusier's designs.<sup>203</sup> In an ideal Corbusian city, or Communist city for that matter:

People would encounter one another as pedestrians, safely and without traffic jams, rude drivers, double-parkers, and so on to poison the general sense of humanity in the city. The smell of fresh air, rich with the greenery defining the overwhelming majority of the surface area of the City of Tomorrow, and the pleasant hellos and good-byes would draw people out of their polluted, isolated, unhappy shells.<sup>204</sup>

Because the car was viewed as an object that contaminated the perfection of city life and polluted people's communal interactions, city planners were at war with the car. Planning a city around roads and automotive transportation was anathema to socialist planning; part of the appeal of Communist living was the absence of the traffic and chaos of consumer-driven pollution that marred Western city life. The car and roads, regardless of the attempts to make them more socialist, were intrinsically linked with Western life—a lifestyle incompatible with the ideal socialist life.

While the Trabant is a relic of the materialistic and economic failings of the GDR, and a symbol of the experiences of Communist drivers, the Trabant as a cultural artifact represents the influence of the West in East German life.<sup>205</sup> East Germans had relationships with their Trabants that resembled the relationships developed between American drivers and their cars. Like Americans, East Germans used their cars to get away from cities, as devices of leisure, and as symbols of individuality. All of these activities represent a desire for freedom, as they draw

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203. Rubin, 133.

204. Rubin, 133.

205. Daphne Berdahl also makes this claim in her essay, "Go, Trabi, Go! Reflections on a Car and Its Symbolization over Time," *Anthropology and Humanism* 25, no. 2 (December 2000), 131-141.

from one's desire to go anywhere and do anything. The Trabant, in essence, served as a vehicle of freedom for East Germans.

Advertisements and videos promoting the Trabant document this use of the Trabant as a device of freedom. An extended advertisement of the Trabant, posted in January 2013 on the American car enthusiast website [jalopnik.com](http://jalopnik.com), demonstrates the function of the Trabant as an accessory to East German life.<sup>206</sup> The clip is fascinating as it reveals much about East Germany's relationship with the Trabant, and how East Germany wanted to convey the Trabant to the rest of the world. It begins with a scene of the Trabant driving around a rally circuit, a leisurely activity developed in the West. As the scene progresses, observers will recognize the appearance of a BMW 2002 on the rally circuit, implying that the featured Trabant is capable of competing with the best of West German rally cars. The scene ends with the line: "Numerous international rally victories prove you can rely on this car." Transitioning into the next scene, viewers are given a glimpse of the automotive production of the Trabant in the Zwickau plant, and are provided with an explanation for the use of the modern plastic chassis. The clip returns to the rally scene, and then follows the brief rally scene with footage of the Trabant in the city. From the video, it appears as though the Trabant fits into the order of Communist city life, a vision SED authorities would most likely seek to convey despite the truth of cars interfering with Communist city planning. At two minutes and 15 seconds, the clip then shows the Trabant as an accessory to consumers. The advertisement spends a minute showing East German drivers as they fill their Trabants with copious amounts of goods, projecting a false image of East German

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206. "Trabant 601 Werbefilm 70er Jahre- Englisch," YouTube, 6:38, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XrsQeDwiSDI&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XrsQeDwiSDI&feature=player_embedded) (accessed April 1, 2013); Máté Petrány, "The Commies Were Serious About Selling Trabants To The West," *Jalopnik*, entry posted January 21, 2013, <http://jalopnik.com/5977617/the-commies-were-serious-about-selling-trabants-to-the-west> (accessed April 1, 2013).

abundance. Perhaps East German advertisers or the SED envisioned that Western consumers would be able to relate to this scene, as the consumer culture defined Western life. The video transitions to the next scene, showing the Trabant driving through mountain roads on the way to a vacation. Note, the video once more shows the Trabant outside of the centers of Communist life— cities. This scene shows the capabilities of the Trabant in serving as an accessory to East German life, and an accessory to an East German individual’s freedom to engage in leisure activities. American viewers might even compare the landscape conveyed in the East German video to that of Appalachia, further reinforcing that this scene does not convey a sense of East German or Communist culture. For a few minutes, the narrator describes the capabilities of the Trabant against the backdrop of scenes depicting East Germans on holiday with their Trabants. Finally, the video ends with scenes of the Trabant driving across the East German landscape in either a conventional or rally-driving context. The narrator utters: “Robust, powerful, lively, stable cornering, equal to any occasion, you can rely on the Trabant 601 from Zwickau,” reminding viewers that this quirky car is not a joke and can compete with Western models. While equivalent West German models proved superior by automotive engineering standards, the Trabant could compete with Western models in terms of their cultural significance. However, what this advertisement and other similar advertisements show is that while the Trabant was a Communist car, it served as a vehicle of freedom for the average East German consumer.<sup>207</sup> Like American and West German cars, the Trabant was an accessory to a lifestyle born out of desire.

A final way in which the Trabant reflected Western automotive culture was the extent to which owners modified their Trabants. Kurt Möser, in his essay, “*Autobasteln*: Modifying,

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207. See these Trabi advertisements for more examples of this claim: “Trabant Commercial,” YouTube, 0:28, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xYhbQcVoHMs> (accessed April 1, 2013); “Trabant 601 Commercial from 1965,” YouTube, 11:45, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSCPb5rsgRQ> (accessed April 1, 2013).

Maintaining, and Repairing Private Cars in the GDR, 1970-1990,” argues that the modifications of Trabants in East Germany represents the desire of drivers to use their cars as badges of distinction, modeling Western car culture where customization is rampant.<sup>208</sup> Moser writes:

Photographs of the Trabants crossing the Berlin border in 1989 show many of them sporting special fog headlights, special wing mirrors, or special color schemes— in fact many more radical consumer modifications than were made to West German vehicles. Most modifications did not aim primarily at better usage but had a common trend: they aimed at emulating the features and silhouettes of Western cars.<sup>209</sup>

In the West, particularly in the United States, owners modified their cars and still modify their cars today to make their cars original. Modifying one’s car is an extension of the individualistic nature of consumer culture, as consumers often assert their independence in a sea of conformity by buying unique objects. Consumer culture is largely conformist as from the beginning of time people have coveted their neighbors’ goods, but people have asserted their individualism by putting their unique stamp of ownership on their goods. This phenomenon is often seen in schools where students have to wear uniforms. A uniform’s purpose is to promote equality and ensure that no particular student stands out in her appearance. However, as students are still individuals regardless of wearing a uniform, they assert their distinctiveness by wearing different accessories (a different watch, shoes, hair accessories, etc.), just as drivers in East Germany asserted their individualism by modifying their uniform Trabants.<sup>210</sup> Once again, this activity of what Kurt Möser refers to as *autobasteln*, or the modification of cars in East Germany, explains the failures of the GDR to satisfy the materialistic desires of its citizens. He concludes his article by writing: “To summarize, activation of car users by tinkering was two-pronged: it promoted a

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208. Kurt, Möser, “*Autobasteln: Modifying, Maintaining, and Repairing Private Cars in the GDR, 1970-1990*,” in *The Socialist Car: Automobility in the Eastern Bloc*, ed. Lewis H. Siegelbaum (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 169.

209. Möser, 168.

210. Author spent 13 years of his life in Catholic schools wearing uniforms to class everyday and is very familiar with how people modified their uniforms to be “different.”

close man-machine relationship, but it was also a symptom of some of the insufficiencies of the Eastern Bloc car culture.”<sup>211</sup> The extent to which East Germans adopted the Western method of customizing their cars shows their desire to desperately break out of the conformity of Communist life. As Moser states, West Germans by comparison did not modify their cars as much, even though modification was common in the West. Modifying Trabants provided a way for East German drivers to further Westernize their cars— cars that were already Western in the way that they offered freedom and an escape from Communism.

Because of the experiences shared by East Germans in acquiring and maintaining their Trabants, it is easy to conclude that the Trabant was a Communist car. However, in essence, the Trabant represented the West as it provided East Germans with the opportunity to escape Communist life, the experience of owning of a luxury good, and the ability for people to assert their individualism materialistically. East Germans did not need their Trabants; the SED and other Communist planners provided alternatives to automotive transportation in recognition of the symbolic significance of the car. Cars represented the West, and the Trabant proved no different. From analyzing East German history, the Trabant serves as the ultimate artifact of *ostalgie*, nostalgia for the East or *ost*, as the Trabant symbolizes both the idiosyncrasies of East German life and the desire of East Germans to participate in their vision of Western life. A quick Google image search of *ostalgie* today turns up many images of the Trabant, along with images of other cultural artifacts. *Ostalgie* prevails as an important cultural sentiment, and as a result, in 2009 two German companies sought to bring back the Trabant experience in the production of an updated, highly stylized electric car referred to as the Trabant nT. An article by Stephen Williams in *The New York Times* appeared to disregard this concept car by stating: “the Trabant was a symbol of East German industrial failings for more than three decades before the

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211. Möser, 169.

production of the unreliable car ceased nearly 20 years ago.”<sup>212</sup> For an automotive journalist who has written about the cultural significance of cars in many articles, Williams seems to overlook the cultural appeal of the Trabant and the potential cultural appeal Trabant nT. The Trabant nT has not reached production after four years since the debut of the concept car, and no plans have been raised recently to revitalize the project.<sup>213</sup> However, the Trabant was more than just an unreliable car. The Trabant was the manifestation of a dream for hundreds of thousands of East Germans that they could be Westerners and could escape Communist life by just going for a drive.

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212. Stephen Williams, “Electric Trabant nT Breaks Cover,” *New York Times*, September 16, 2009

213. Trabant nT, “The Idea,” Trabant nT, <http://www.trabant-nt.de/364/en/the-idea.aspx> (accessed April 1, 2013).

## Chapter 5: The Soviet Dream

The word “America” has well-developed grandiose associations for a Soviet person, for whom it refers to a country of skyscrapers, where day and night one hears the unceasing thunder of surface and underground trains, the hellish roar of automobile horns, and the continuous despairing screams of stockbrokers rushing through the skyscrapers waving their ever-falling shares.

We want to change that image.

-Ilf and Petrov

Sometimes the best interpreters of a culture come from outside of that culture. Or sometimes, foreigners impose their visions of a culture onto the definition of that culture, not capturing all of the experiential nuances necessary to define that culture. Both of these interpretations are prevalent in the Soviet understandings of America, as evidenced by Alexei Yurchak’s phenomenon of the “Imaginary West,” and Ilf and Petrov’s travelogue of their road trip throughout the United States. Alexei Yurchak’s thesis captures the mood of the Soviets as they grew more materialistically obsessed with American goods and culture, and argues that Soviet citizens’ imaginations of the West proved just as alluring as the actual West, as people experienced the West through what they bought or what they wore.<sup>214</sup> Ilf and Petrov’s experiences with the West draw largely from their 1935 road trip throughout the United States, whereby they sought out to discover the real America, not the America presented to them through Soviet propaganda or from a short trip through New York City. Both of these interpretations of the West provide insight into the allure of the automobile for Soviet citizens, as the automobile was the ultimate materialistic object a person could acquire. In addition, Ilf and Petrov’s account of the United States shaped Soviet perception of America back at home:

The book was a popular success and remarkably influential: the architectural structures of *Odnootazhnaia Amerika*— its skyscrapers, staircases, one-story bungalows— reappear in some significant literary and cultural monuments of the 1930s and 1940s, namely

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214. See Sergei Zhuk’s *Rock and Roll in the Rocket City: The West, Identity, and Ideology in Soviet Dniepropetrovsk, 1960-1985* for a discussion about the ways in which Western life influenced and seduced Soviet citizens.

Mikhail Bulgakov's novel about the Devil's eventful visit to Moscow, *The Master and Margarita* (on which he worked in fits and starts from 1928 until his death in 1940), and Sergei Eizenshtein's essays on montage.<sup>215</sup>

As Anne Nesbet presents, Ilf and Petrov's worked proved enormously important back home in the Soviet Union, and their perception of America influenced other literary works. As Lewis Siegelbaum presents in his monograph, *Cars for Comrades: The Life of the Soviet Automobile*, people within the Soviet Union associated the car with the West, or more directly with America, and people coveted cars despite their associations with bourgeois capitalism. The car plays a central role in the understanding of the Soviet Union's relationship with the United States, as the car served as one of the mediums through which the "Imaginary West" became realized.

The story begins with curiosity. In his book, *Russia's Sputnik Generation: Soviet Baby Boomers Talk about Their Lives*, Donald J. Raleigh interviewed eight Soviet "baby boomers" about their lives and their experiences as Soviet citizens. In each interview, he posed some form of the question: "Please tell me about your attitudes toward the West at that time."<sup>216</sup> All of the interviewees expressed some sort of interest in the West, and all did not display a sense of hostility for the West.<sup>217</sup> Most people showed some form of curiosity. One person stated: "I was really curious. I never thought that they lived better in the West. I can say that with assurance. Basically, I pay very little attention to such things in my life, both now, and back then."<sup>218</sup> With regard to the West, another interviewee expressed: "I was very interested, all the same, in seeing

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215. Anne Nesbet, "Skyscrapers, Consular Territory, and Hell: What Bulgakov and Eizenshtein Learned about Space from Ilf and Petrov's America," *Slavic Review* 69, no. 2 (Summer 2010), 377.

216. Donald J. Raleigh, trans. and ed., *Russia's Sputnik Generation: Soviet Baby Boomers Talk about Their Lives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 66.

217. Raleigh, 36, 38, 66, 80, 98, 128, 139, 166, 206, 234, 243. In addition, Nordica Nettleton discusses people's positive attitudes towards Western consumerism and cars in "Driving Towards Communist Consumerism," *Cahiers du monde russe* (2006).

218. Raleigh, 66.



how other people live. Cause what I saw, well, it made an impression and somehow seeped through.”<sup>219</sup> One individual’s curiosity grew after traveling abroad:

Of course, this occurred for the most part when I began to conduct research, because before then I hadn’t been anywhere. I had but seen Western automobiles. What else could I think? Nothing else. But when I began to read scholarly articles and began to figure out what’s what and to understand what directions each was going in, at that point I seriously begin to think that society was somehow rotting but, as they said, smelled very good [laughing].<sup>220</sup>

For people growing up in the Soviet Union during the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, the West eventually offered an alternative to Soviet life.<sup>221</sup> Initially, not all people embraced Western life as better than the Soviet condition, but eventually people began to see the limitations of Soviet life. This curiosity also demonstrates independent thought about the West; people within the Soviet Union did not simply absorb and regurgitate Soviet propaganda about the Western world. The cliché, “The grass is greener on the other side,” does not fully capture the relationship Soviet citizens held with the West either. At the beginning, they acknowledged Western life as an alternative to what they experienced, but they did not fully reject Communism. Toward the end of the Soviet Union, it became more difficult to ignore the disparities between the West and East. However, for the most part, the Soviet “baby boomers” were curious about Western life, which was enough to generate change.

It was precisely curiosity that nurtured people’s imaginations about the West. Alexei Yurchak, in his book *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, introduces readers to the concept of *zaganitsa*, a term meaning “beyond the border,” in his fifth chapter, explaining it to readers as such: “*Zaganitsa* lay at the intersection

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219. Raleigh, 128.

220. Raleigh, 243-244.

221. See Sergei Zhuk’s *Rock and Roll in the Rocket City: The West, Identity, and Ideology in Soviet Dnepropetrovsk, 1960-1985* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010) for more information about how the West eventually became an alternative to Soviet life.

of these two attitudes toward the wider world, signifying an imaginary place that was simultaneously knowable and unattainable, tangible and abstract, mundane and exotic.”<sup>222</sup>

*Zagranitsa* was the Soviet term used to describe another world, one different from the world of Communism. Throughout the 1970s and 80s, talk about *zagranitsa* became more prevalent:

These narratives and jokes, of which there were many in late Soviet times, depict *zagranitsa* as a Soviet imaginary “elsewhere” that was not necessarily about any real place. The “West” (*zapad*) was its archetypal manifestation. It was produced locally and existed only at the time when the real West could not be encountered. We will call this version of the elsewhere, the Imaginary West (Yurchak 2002b).<sup>223</sup>

The concept of the Imaginary West describes the Soviet action of envisioning the West as an escape from Soviet life. It was not a real place, however the “Imaginary West” was real in the minds of many Soviet citizens who constructed it based off of their interpretations of the West. According to Yurchak, people drew from films, music, images, products, and other artifacts to build this imagined world, a world that eventually inspired other individuals’ perceptions of the West.<sup>224</sup>

Largely, Soviet citizens constructed this world based off of their participation in Soviet consumer culture. Through the objects they bought, individuals could construct their own cultural identities within the framework of Communism, as the goods they bought represented their cultures of origin. Yurchak writes:

The materiality of these objects, and the fact that they were unmistakably “Western” in origin, endowed them with great power for doing this work of linking. The link they established was simultaneously real (the objects were right here) and abstract (the “elsewhere” to which they linked was imaginary). In this way they injected an imaginary dimension into the space of one’s room, reinterpreting and deterritorializing the meaning of that space.<sup>225</sup>

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222. Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 159.

223. Yurchak, 159-161. Zhuk argues the same thing in “Religion, ‘Westernization,’ and Youth in the ‘Closed City’ of Soviet Ukraine, 1964-1984,” *The Russian Review* (2008).

224. Yurchak, 161.

225. Yurchak, 195.

People could purchase an Elektronika device which played the game “Nu, Pogodi!” in 1984, but they could envision themselves playing a Nintendo Game & Watch console which was introduced in the West two years prior.<sup>226</sup> Objects like the Elektronika allowed people to participate in a part of Western life, or their imagined West. Similarly, Yurchak argues that cultural activities such as watching Western films or listening to Western music allowed people to further cultivate their individual “Imaginary Wests.” He writes: “As with music, the situation with Western films was also ambivalent. In the postwar years, American and German films became Soviet box office hits, thereby introducing new styles of music, dress, language, and behavior to Soviet life.”<sup>227</sup> Western cultural forms began influencing the cultural landscape of the Soviet Union, through artistic means and through the media. Buying Western products, or Western-like products, and watching films, Soviet people were able to be Western. Furthermore, because consumer culture had been established in the 1950s as one of the defining features of American culture, by seeking the purchase of goods Soviet citizens were trying to out do the Americans in being consumers.<sup>228</sup>

It is well-known that Soviet consumers had a hunger for American consumerism, but equally long-lived was the fascination with American cars and automobility. Two Soviet writers, Ilya Ilf and Evgeny Petrov, drove throughout the United States in 1935. For their journey, they bought a Ford ventured across the country taking pictures. Their reason for

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226. Bela Shayevich, *Made in Russia: Unsung Icons of Soviet Design*, ed. Michael Idov (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2011), 130-131.

227. Yurchak, 167.

228. See Julie Hessler’s “Cultured Trade: The Stalinist Turn Towards Consumerism,” *Stalinism: New Directions* ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick for a description of the Stalinist vision of materialistically overcoming the United States. The rise of consumerism in the 1950s was arguably an extension of that vision, as Stalin sought to beat the United States in terms of materialistic splendor.

traveling by car: “traveling in your own car is the cheapest way to travel in the United States.”<sup>229</sup>

Their reason for traveling: “Then we decided to act in an organized fashion: to travel the entire country by car, to cross it from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific and to return by another road along the Gulf of Mexico, reasoning that indeed somewhere we’d be sure to find America.”<sup>230</sup>

They sought to discover America and to document their travels in photographs published in the Soviet equivalent to *Life* magazine—*Ogonek*.<sup>231</sup> In short, Ilf and Petrov found America. In driving throughout the country, they studied American people. Apart from the glitz of cities like New York and Chicago, they discovered what it meant to be American:

It goes without saying that in America there are many exemplary people. There are class-conscious workers. There is a radical intelligentsia. There are good writers and poets. We’re talking about that provincial, petit-bourgeois, semi-proletarian mass of working and out-of-work people with whom we often came into contact on American roads and in small towns.

We’re talking about the ones who like to settle down somewhere along the street on Sundays and read the paper. The paper, movies, and church: this is the entire spiritual sustenance that capitalism gives the people.<sup>232</sup>

They discovered the ordinary American citizen—the person ignored in Soviet dialogues about the West. Ilf and Petrov also discovered the diversity of America: “A Spaniard and a Pole worked in the barbershop where we got our hair cut. An Italian shined our shoes. A Croat washed our car. This was America.”<sup>233</sup> In driving through South Carolina, they recognized the racism that plagued life in the South: “It was the lowest level of poverty, a naked, hopeless poverty, in comparison to which the poverty of the Indians would seem the height of prosperity, even luxury. And this was in the American South, one of the most fertile places on earth.”<sup>234</sup> It is no surprise that Ilf and Petrov were able to relate to these people and understand them. Because of

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229. Ilya Ilf and Evgeny Petrov, *Ilf and Petrov’s American Road Trip: The 1935 Travelogue of Two Soviet Writers*, ed. Erika Wolf (New York: Cabinet Books, 2007), 1.

230. Ilf and Petrov, 1.

231. Ilf and Petrov, ix.

232. Ilf and Petrov, 27.

233. Ilf and Petrov, 41.

234. Ilf and Petrov, 116.

the artistry of Ilf and Petrov's pictures, it is reasonable to conclude that they fell in love with Americans. In seeing America's strengths and flaws, their relationship with America was deeper than infatuation as they captured the nuanced beauty of the American heartland.

In capturing what they referred to as "one-storied America," which is what a collection of these photographs were titled in its publication in 1937, they made insights about American culture.<sup>235</sup> They observed: "America is primarily a country of one- or two-story buildings. This is the primary unavoidable condition with which you will have to reconcile yourselves, comrades, if you want to see the energetic, smiling, yet at the same time sickly and oversensitive face of the United States."<sup>236</sup> To see the real, or "one-storied America," Ilf and Petrov had to traverse the landscape in a car. In driving across the country, they observed the importance of the car in American culture. They wrote:

Here is a typical American city out West. It has none of those basic features that give a city character. There is neither distinctive architecture nor a crowd of people on the street. The sidewalks are empty. Instead, the road is full of automobiles. At first, we found this circumstance striking. Then we quickly got used to it. Even in Washington, there are almost no pedestrians. It's impossible to say whether they're sitting at home or hidden away in their automobiles— gas stations, repair shops, and Ford or Chevrolet dealers— are what give a town character.<sup>237</sup>

Ilf and Petrov correctly observed that the United States was a car culture, and went even so far to say that cars and the life surrounding automobile ownership "are what give a town character." In observing this, Ilf and Petrov assert that cars are a defining element of the "one-storied America" or the real America— the America outside of the cities. For an ordinary picture of a gas station at the intersection of two country roads, Ilf and Petrov suggest a caption: "We would like to use this caption for this picture: 'This right here is America!'"<sup>238</sup> What they derived is that America was

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235. Ilf and Petrov, x, 15.

236. Ilf and Petrov, 15.

237. Ilf and Petrov, 16.

238. Ilf and Petrov, 13.

not the big city full of businessmen or the wealthy citizens who lived in mansions. What Ilf and Petrov concluded was America was a country gas station with a few cars in the distance.

America was a place of ordinary people who lived in simple towns and drove cars. Cars defined the authentic or “one-storied America,” and this culture fascinated Ilf and Petrov. In the case of Ilf and Petrov, sometimes you have to drive to the ends of the world to find what you are looking for, and perhaps it took two writers from the other side of the world to find America and the roads that weave its culture together.

It was just a matter of time until American culture permeated Soviet culture in the form of automobiles. When looking at car culture, one often neglects to consider Soviet car culture, as it did exist but in a very reduced form. However, that is not to say that Soviets did not love their cars as much as the Germans and Americans to their West. In reward for good work, Soviet officials rewarded Grigory Petrovich Neposedov, a plant manager and member of the Communist party in the 1930s and 40s, with a car. Interestingly enough, the Soviet government resorted to the capitalistic behavior of rewarding good work with material objects: “As a reward for our factory’s achievements, the People’s Commissariat of Forestry sent us a motorcar, an M-1, for the director’s transportation. Neposedov’s happiness was indescribable. He had long dreamed of having an automobile— now his dream had come true.”<sup>239</sup> Neposedov’s fascination with the car was immense; he drove family members around the car and devoted much of his time to learning about and maintaining the car.<sup>240</sup> His love for a material object demonstrates the extent of material desire in the Soviet Union. Here the allure of the automobile bewitched a Communist Party member and plant manager to such an extent that he “neglected all of his

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239. Gennady Andreev-Khomiakov, *Bitter Waters: Life and Work in Stalin’s Russia*, trans. Ann E. Healy (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 57.

240. Andreev-Khomiakov, 57.

factory duties and occupied himself solely with the car.”<sup>241</sup> On paper he was a good Communist, but in every other sense he was like an American or German: completely captivated by his car. The description of this fascination follows: “Unable to conceal his feelings, Neposedov openly rejoiced in the car, like a child who has received a long-wished for, absorbing toy. People at the plant laughed at Neposedov, and sometimes they became indignant because his car so absorbed him that he was referring visitors with all manner of business to the technical director.”<sup>242</sup> Indeed, it is surprising that a Communist plant operator fell so in love with a material object, something a good Communist generally would avoid.

Lewis Siegelbaum, in his monograph *Cars for Comrades: The Life of the Soviet Automobile*, describes the relationship Soviet drivers had with their cars and the ways in which Soviet automotive technology drew from American innovation. Stalin drove Soviet engineers and laborers to model Fordist labor methods, however he warned comrades of the downsides of American production. Siegelbaum writes: “Stalin warned his audience about the danger of American efficiency ‘degenerating into narrow and unprincipled practicalism’ if it were not combined with Bolshevik élan. But he didn’t say how such élan would compensate for these deficiencies.”<sup>243</sup> In terms of automobile production in the 1930s, the Soviets directly competed with the Americans, but once more they added what they considered to be improvements to American innovations. As a result, Soviet cars were often bloated and difficult to drive, as engineers adapted American designs or innovations for Soviet use. In the case of the “Soviet Buick” or ZIS-101, the car weighed much more than a comparable Buick: “What a beast the ZIS-101 was! It weighed over 2.5 tons, some six to seven hundred kg more than analogous

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241. Andreev-Khomiakov, 57.

242. Andreev-Kohmiakov, 57-58.

243. Lewis H. Siegelbaum, *Cars for Comrades: The Life of the Soviet Automobile* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 15.

foreign models.”<sup>244</sup> To sell this car, the Soviets advertised its American-ness, claiming that it was “like the best American models [such as the] Buick and Packard.”<sup>245</sup> At the height of the Stalinist era, Soviet engineers were conscious of American engineering and modeled the production of their cars off of American designs. However, the scale of Soviet production paled in comparison with Detroit, and as a result cars were not as prominent in the Soviet 1930s landscape.<sup>246</sup>

In the 1950s and 60s, cars culturally became more associated with America. Lewis Siegelbaum points out Ruth Brandon’s quote to frame the cultural significance of cars within the Soviet Union: “‘Cars,’ as Ruth Brandon recently noted, ‘are one of the two great symbols of the post-war United States— the other, of course, being rock n’ roll...For postwar America, and for all those non-American millions whose imaginations Hollywood formed, the car was desire on wheels.’”<sup>247</sup> And it was indeed a desire to fuel their imaginations about America that helped inspire Soviet citizens towards car ownership. Within the Soviet Union, there was a fascination for Detroit and the automobiles produced there. Despite Detroit’s significance as one of the great American centers of capitalism, thinking about Detroit elicited a sense of wonder for Soviets:

Detroit’s magic did not go unnoticed in the Soviet Union. In 1956, the journal of the Ministry of Automobile Production published an article by Konstantin Sharapov, then working at the Academy of Science’s Engine Institute, on that year’s American cars. The article, replete with graphs, charts, and photographs, evaluated the performance of new engine designs, commented on the new elongated spark plugs, referred to new gadgets such as Chrysler’s record player offering forty-five minutes of uninterrupted music on seven-inch disks, and surveyed experimental cars such as Buick’s Centurion, Oldsmobile’s Golden Rocket, and Chevrolet’s Impala sports sedan.<sup>248</sup>

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244. Siegelbaum, 23.

245. Siegelbaum, 23.

246. Siegelbaum, 23-27.

247. Siegelbaum, 65.

248. Siegelbaum, 65-66.



Soviet writers resembled American teenage boys at an auto show, inspecting every detail about the American cars with great wonder and then reporting on them with precision. This detail shows the extent to which Soviet citizens paid attention to cars, and how important cars were for Soviet officials.

In addition to simply marveling over cars, Soviet citizens participated in leisure activities surrounding the automobile. These activities resembled Western events, as comrades participated in automobile rallies across the Soviet Union during the 1920s.<sup>249</sup> One rally was particularly extensive:

Two years later, a more ambitious All-Union Automobile Rally—divided like the predecessor into separate competitions for cars, trucks, and motorcycles—was held under the joint auspices of the Moscow Automobile Club and the Commissariat of Transport's Board of Road Transport (Glavdortrans). This time, eighty-three cars traveled from Leningrad to Moscow and thence to Tiflis before returning to Moscow, a distance of forty-seven hundred kilometers.<sup>250</sup>

Events like these positioned the car as an accessory to leisure, not simply as a utilitarian form of transportation. Unlike how the East Germans initially tried to fit the car into the framework of Communist utilitarian transportation, Soviets recognized the cultural and leisurely appeal of the car and thus designed events showcasing the car as something other than simple transportation. Car ownership also opened up Soviet citizens to the prospect of unrestricted travel, as drivers could travel anywhere at any time. Siegelbaum writes:

With the privilege of owning or at least having the use of a car went possibilities previously undreamt of. Among these was automotive tourism. Why, after all, should the likes of George Counts and other foreigners be the only ones to travel the highways and byways of the country? (Actually, by the summer of 1935, when the authorities

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249. Tracy Nichols Busch, "Women and Children First? Avtodor's Campaigns and the Limits of Soviet Automobility from 1927 to 1935," *The Russian Review* 70, no. 3 (July 2011), 405-406; Interestingly enough, Ilf and Petrov's novel, *The Golden Calf* (Rochester: Open Letter, 2009), was even set in a rally around driving, see Busch, 406.

250. Siegelbaum, 187.

began to promote auto tourism, foreigners were no longer being permitted to make such trips.)<sup>251</sup>

In 1935 when the Soviet government promoted auto tourism, people in the West were experiencing the Great Depression and participating in auto tourism fell on their list of priorities. But for Soviet citizens, auto tourism provided the prospect of traveling throughout the Soviet Union at one's leisure—experiencing the country from the road.<sup>252</sup> In the mind of Soviet comrades, the car served as more than transportation; the car was a vehicle for leisure, a concept that originated in America.

However, in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, Soviets struggled in making the Soviet Union a car culture equivalent to that of the United States. Siegelbaum writes: “Stalin himself famously had said that the Soviet Union had to catch up to and overtake the advanced capitalist countries or else it would go under. The Soviet Union did do a lot of catching up over the next several decades, but hardly by riding in passenger cars.”<sup>253</sup> After Stalin and Khrushchev, the Soviet Union had not fully decided on the nature of its relationship with the car, for while there was fascination with the automobile, the car held Western, bourgeois connotations. Siegelbaum observes:

Half a century after automobiles had profoundly transformed American society and its culture they began to insert themselves into the lives of Soviet citizens, thrusting the country willy-nilly into the “gasoline age.” The progressive intrusion of passenger cars into everyday life engendered not only a “car-driver” matrix— to cite John Urry’s term— but conflicts and adjustments that often blurred the boundaries between private and public (or, in Soviet terms, personal and social) spheres. It had unanticipated consequences for the state and for relations among individuals. In expanding opportunities for car ownership but leaving the provision of infrastructure and services to semilegal or illegal “second economy” activity, the state under Leonid Brezhnev found itself engaged in a Faustian bargain over a notoriously individualistic mode of

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251. Siegelbaum, 205.

252. See Colin Thurbron’s Book, *Where Nights are Longest: Travels by Car Through Western Russia*, about driving through the Soviet Union.

253. Siegelbaum, 212.

transportation. For better or for worse, motorists from abroad like Hans Koningsberger would not have the roads to themselves for very much longer.<sup>254</sup>

The Soviet Union was transforming into a car culture, albeit slowly. The responsibilities and complexities of car ownership required that owners purchase goods legally and on the black market in order to maintain their cars. In addition, few gas stations existed within the Soviet Union, making the physical act of driving difficult.<sup>255</sup> Drivers also found difficulty in the simple act of parking their cars, as Moscow drivers had to park their cars outside as residences often lacked garages.<sup>256</sup> As Siegelbaum points out, the car was slowly transforming the Soviet Union into a car culture, despite the car's "individualistic mode of transportation" opposing and undermining Brezhnev's Communist political economy.

What aided in driving this gradual acceptance of a car culture was the Soviet's fascination with the car and with American life. Magazines and other media showcased American life to Soviet citizens, and at the center of this materialistic showcase were American cars. More than just magazines, the Soviet government and ordinary life provided citizens with a glimpse into American life:

For its part, the Ministry of Automobile Production made available information—albeit not nearly as flattering—about U.S.-made cars. Direct contact with U.S. and other foreign cars remained quite rare, although in this and so many other respects, Muscovites were relatively privileged. As one automobile enthusiast recalled from his youth in the early 1960s, "parking spaces at embassies, buildings where diplomats lived, and the hotels Metropol' and Natsional'—these were our automobile showrooms." And then there was the U.S. Trade and Cultural Fair. Held in Moscow's Sokolniki Park in the summer of 1959, the exhibition displayed a Cadillac De Ville, Chevy Impala, Ford Thunderbird, and eighteen other Detroit beauties.<sup>257</sup>

Cars provided Soviet citizens with a glimpse into American life, and the process of learning about American cars in the Soviet Union resembles the general process of learning about

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254. Siegelbaum, 213-214.

255. Siegelbaum, 212.

256. Siegelbaum, 232.

257. Siegelbaum, 223.

American culture within the framework of a Communist state. The Soviet Union failed to provide its citizens with a large picture of American life, however Soviet citizens were able to catch a glimpse of American life in small ways, only furthering their desire to know more about America.

It is no coincidence that at after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia transformed into a full-blown car culture. With the Soviet boundaries for knowledge about the West broken, Russians embarked on their quest to catch up with Western material culture. The “Imaginary West” became reality in 1991, for better or worse, and Russians participated in their dreams of being Westerners or Americans by buying cars in droves.<sup>258</sup> The surge in car ownership during the 90s and the early 2000’s in Russia reflects its burgeoning material culture– a culture inspired by America. As Lewis Siegelbaum stresses in *Cars for Comrades*, cars hold a special significance in Soviet History and in Russian life, as they were more than transportation. From an analysis of Alexei Yurchak’s chapter on the “Imaginary West” and Ilf and Petrov’s travelogue, it is clear that cars provided Soviet citizens with a link to the West, through comrades’ dreams of car ownership or by providing the transportation for two Soviet journalists who succeeded in finding America.

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258. Siegelbaum, 254-257.

### Conclusion: Why Cars are Seductive

Why are cars seductive? There is no other way to explain this love affair people have had with cars— an affair that began with the arrival of the Ford Model T in the United States, continued with the Volkswagen in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, developed in the German Democratic Republic with the Trabi, and endured throughout the 1950s and 60s in the Soviet Union. In each of these cases, the car transformed into something other than an object of transportation. The car became an object of a desire, something that seduced consumers around the world. As a result, these different forms of automotive seduction reveal much about the landscape of 20<sup>th</sup>-Century consumer culture in the United States, Europe, and the Soviet Union.

In this statement, Benjamin Barber aptly sums up why the American seduction by the automobile is relevant:

Historically, there is something prototypically American about the automobile: Henry Ford's commitment to a mass-produced motorized vehicle that would set every American family free has come to be associated with many of the virtues of American lifestyle and not a few of its vices. The internationalization of automobile culture— what George Ball once called “an ideology on four wheels”— as well as of automobile manufacturing is thus actually a globalization of America, no matter who is making the cars.<sup>259</sup>

The car, in fitting perfectly within the parameters of American life, has evolved into the greatest accessory to American life and has thus become a telling artifact of American culture. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup>-Century, cars seduced people with the allure of the freedom to travel at one's leisure. In the 1950s, cars offered Americans the opportunity to participate in the developing suburban lifestyle, and in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the opportunity to escape from social conformity. Cars allowed Americans to showcase their individualism as consumers, and also provided the canvas for wealthy Americans to display their wealth by the type of model they

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<sup>259</sup>. Barber, 25.

drove. Cars transformed the cultural landscape of the United States, influencing writers, artists, filmmakers, and musicians, but they also transformed the physical landscapes of cities. As a result of the car's all-consuming seduction, the 1950s and 60s, roads knitted the fabric of America together with drivers as the weavers, bringing the country closer together. Over the 20<sup>th</sup>-Century and especially during the 1950s and 60s, America had transformed into a car culture, changing American life and elevating the car's role as a historical agent of change.

In addition to the car's role as a significant element of 20<sup>th</sup>-Century American culture, market consumerism defined the post-war American life. Because of the appeal of materialistic opulence, American marketers achieved success in selling a seductive vision of the American life in the products they sold, at home and abroad. During the 1950s and 60s, marketing abroad transformed into influence, a practice Victoria de Grazia identifies as the "Market Empire." De Grazia argues that the United States gained dominance during the 20<sup>th</sup>-Century in the way that American marketers sold America through material goods, and she also asserts that European consumers embraced the American way of life in their consumption of these goods. As a result, European consumers adopted this way of life by purchasing American goods, and became more American in the process. Richard Kuisel discusses the European relationship with American consumerism in more depth, arguing that this process of material Americanization resembled seduction. He presents the ways in which French people resisted the agendas of American companies to sell products in France during the 1950s and 60s, and talks about how the French gradually embraced the consumption of American products in their country. However, while he describes this process as seduction, he fails to go into detail how this process resembled seduction. The only seductive example he provides is that of French people falling in love with American cars, and he describes the American car's seduction of French people in the film *La*

*Belle Americaine*. For the other examples he provides of French people accepting Americanization, he does not fully describe how the French fell in love with American products. But, seduction is evident in the history of the Americanization of Europe during the 1950s and 60s, as European consumers were seduced by the allure of American goods representing an alternate lifestyle, and while the purchase of these goods threatened to eclipse the established European material culture, American advertising lured consumers toward a vision of America. Purchasing a car, the utmost symbol of American material culture, served as the consummation of this seduction, as the European landscape did not cater to automotive congestion and cars were often not necessary for transportation in European urban environments. Yet, Europeans fell in love with their cars during the 1950s and 60s, representing their ever-evolving seduction by American consumerism.

After a defeat in the Second World War and international shame for the Holocaust, Germany rebuilt itself as two nations, both with separate visions for the future. The Federal Republic of Germany aligned itself with the United States, the United Kingdom, and France and developed a capitalist society; where as the German Democratic Republic in the East aligned itself with the Soviet Union and grew into a Communist state. Central to both of these nations' reconstruction was their seduction by the automobile. Adolf Hitler had called for the development of the *autobahn* to allow for Germany to compete with other nations, particularly the United States, in terms of automobilization. This shows that Germany did not need cars as a form of transportation; rather, Hitler found the automobile culture of the United States appealing and sought to develop a series of highways that would inspire a similar automobile culture in Germany. After the war, West Germany expanded upon Hitler's plans for the automobilization of Germany and West German auto manufacturers developed luxury and sports cars to cater to

this growing automotive culture. Unquestionably, West Germany was more than seduced by the automobile (perhaps romanced is a better word) as the car culture nurtured during the 1950s and 60s has come to define German culture today. The extent to which West Germany was seduced by car culture is evident in the way it, in turn, became the seducer. With the Volkswagen Beetle, West Germans began beating the Americans at their own game, as the Beetle became the most popular car in the world only when Volkswagen began successfully marketing the car in America. As planned, the Volkswagen Beetle became the German version of the Ford Model T, a cheap, fun car that everyone could afford to buy, only Volkswagen marketed the Beetle around the world as the “the people’s car.” In the 1960s, Americans were once more seduced by the car— this time by a German bug. As bizarre as it sounds, the Volkswagen Beetle became the ultimate American car, the *Love Bug*, in all of its West German-ness.

The automotive seduction proved to be even more powerful in East Germany with the Trabant, showing that a desire for material objects can transcend even the strongest ideological barriers and permeate a Communist state. Because of this desire, East German citizens forked over large sums of their money to buy these statistically pathetic cars and waited years for their delivery. They did not need cars for transportation; the GDR provided citizens with public transportation in accordance with their vision for creating an ideal Communist state. Cars, in their association with Western freedom and capitalism, represented everything that East Germany opposed. Through the Trabant, Americanization eventually spread to East Germany, although in a second-order form, as the East Germans received all of their knowledge about the West from West Germany, a country that had been thoroughly Americanized. Initially, the production of the Trabant, was an attempt for the GDR to fit cars into the plan for the ideal Communist state. But for East German consumers, the Trabant represented the West and



allowed people to participate in the ownership of a luxury item. Much like in the way cars served as an accessory to a lifestyle in America, the Trabant became an accessory to East German life. The Trabant proved to be the East German Model T or Volkswagen Beetle— a car that made the joys of driving available to ordinary citizens. East Germans did not need their cars; they were seduced by their Trabants and by what their Trabants represented. And what their Trabants represented were freedom and anti-Communism, two very strong components of America's Cold War image of itself.

Even in the Soviet Union, the ultimate Communist and superficially anti-American state, people were seduced by cars and through cars, America. The influence of American consumer culture seduced Eastern Europeans, as Soviet consumers embraced their “Imaginary West” in their consumption of Western, or imitation of Western, goods. Ordinary Soviet citizens were curious about America. Unlike the Communist officials who spread anti-American propaganda throughout the Soviet Union, ordinary Soviet citizens were fascinated by America. Their fascination with America extended into their relationship with cars. For Soviet officials and ordinary citizens, cars represented America as Soviet automotive manufacturers looked to American models as the standards of automotive excellence. In addition, it was through driving that two Soviet writers, Ilf and Petrov, fell in love with America and conveyed that love to generations of Soviet readers. Ordinary Soviet citizens were seduced by America through the car, whether through their imaginations or literally. An investigation of Soviet car culture during the 20<sup>th</sup>-Century reveals that desire transcends all boundaries, regardless of ideological sentiment.

I have used the word *fahvergnügen* (driving pleasure) and the phrase *Freude am Fahren* (sheer driving pleasure) to demonstrate people's expressions of love for cars. However, I feel

that one expression resonates most within the context of this project: “dream car.” The term “dream car” serves as more than just a hyperbolic expression of an individual lusting for a car. A dream car is the manifestation of a dream in a car, either an attainable dream or a dream of a desired lifestyle that proves inaccessible. As evidenced by this study, people’s relationships with their cars reveal much about the society in which they live. They reveal information about their desires, their cultures, and their history. Most importantly, car culture reveals a lot about people’s dreams, and in the German and Soviet cases, drivers sought to engage in the American dream during the 1950s and 1960s. This is why cars are more than just forms of transportation. Cars are dream cars, seducing drivers to cross all boundaries and experience new places.

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