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Ford & the Nazi War Efforts

Henry Ford was no Oskar Schindler

by Joshua Karliner, CorpWatch

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The Ford Motor Company's commercial-free sponsorship of NBC's airing of **Schindler's List**, the epic movie about the Holocaust, was a class act. Nevertheless, it would be remiss of us here at CorpWatch, not to point out Ford's contribution to Nazi war efforts.

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The following is excerpted from a report printed by the United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary in 1974

The activities of General Motors, Ford and Chrysler prior to and during World War II are instructive. At that time, these three firms dominated motor vehicle production in both the United States and Germany. Due to its mass production capabilities, automobile manufacturing is one of the most crucial industries with respect to national defense. As a result, these firms retained the economic and political power to affect the shape of governmental relations both within and between these nations in a manner which maximized corporate global profits. In short, they were private governments unaccountable to the citizens of any country yet possessing tremendous influence over the course of war and peace in the world. The substantial contribution of these firms to the American war effort in terms of tanks, aircraft components, and other military equipment is widely acknowledged. Less well known are the simultaneous contributions of their foreign subsidiaries to the Axis Powers. In sum, they maximized profits by supplying both sides with the materiel needed to conduct the war.

During the 1920's and 1930's, the Big Three automakers undertook an extensive program of multinational expansion. By the mid-1930's, these three American companies owned automotive subsidiaries throughout Europe and the Far East, many of their largest facilities were located in the politically sensitive nations of Germany, Poland, Rumania, Austria, Hungary, Latvia, and Japan. Due to their concentrated economic power over motor vehicle production in both Allied and Axis territories, the Big Three inevitably became major factors in the preparations and progress of the war. In Germany, for example, General Motors and Ford became an integral part of the Nazi war efforts. GM's plants in Germany built thousands of bomber and jet fighter propulsion systems for the Luftwaffe at the same time that its American plants produced aircraft engines for the U S Army Air Corps.

Ford was also active in Nazi Germany's prewar preparations. In 1938, for instance, it opened a truck assembly plant in Berlin whose "real purpose," according to U S Army Intelligence, was producing "troop transport-type" vehicles for the Wehrmacht. That year Ford's chief executive received the Nazi German Eagle (first class).

The outbreak of war in September 1939 resulted inevitably in the full conversion by GM and Ford of their Axis plants to the production of military aircraft and trucks. On the ground, GM and Ford subsidiaries built nearly 90 percent of the armored "mule" 3-ton half-trucks and more than 70 percent of the Reich's medium and heavy-duty trucks. These vehicles, according to American intelligence reports, served as "the backbone of the German Army transportation system."

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After the cessation of hostilities, GM and Ford demanded reparations from the U S Government for wartime damages sustained by their Axis facilities as a result of Allied bombing. Ford received a little less than \$1 million, primarily as a result of damages sustained by its military truck complex at Cologne.

Due to their multinational dominance of motor vehicle production, GM and Ford became principal suppliers for the forces of fascism as well as for the forces of democracy. It may, of course, be argued that participating in both sides of an international conflict, like the common corporate practice of investing in both political parties before an election, is an appropriate corporate activity. Had the Nazis won, General Motors and Ford would have appeared impeccably Nazi, as Hitler lost, these companies were able to re-emerge impeccably American. In either case, the viability of these corporations and the interests of their respective stockholders would have been preserved.

Extracted from Bradford C. Snell, *American Ground Transport: A Proposal for Restructuring the Automobile, Truck, Bus and Rail Industries*. Report presented to the Committee of the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Antitrust and Monopoly, United States Senate, February 26, 1974, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1974, pp. 16-24.

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