The Impact of the Volkswagen Beetle
The Impact of the Volkswagen Beetle

In the late 1930’s, under Hitler’s rule, the concept of the Volkswagen Beetle progressed from the idea of a military vehicle into the dream of a car for the common man. Although the Beetle was developed before WWII, the war effort required a shift in focus away from the manufacturing of the automobile. After WWII, the production of the Beetle became very important to Germany and the world. Volkswagen, getting its name from the translation “people’s car”, was an affordable compact car that would become popular enough to benefit the suffering German economy and shape the production and consumption of automobiles for years to come. Although the production of the Volkswagen Beetle introduced new technology and was very beneficial to Germany’s economy as it struggled after WWII, the most important impact of the Volkswagen Beetle was its effect on the production of automobiles and the increase in mass consumption of automobiles after it became a very popular car across the world.

Only a few years after WWII, Volkswagen was able to recover from the effects a war that crushed many German towns and businesses, and after the recovery, the manufacturing of the increasingly popular Volkswagen Beetles became very successful and was important to the German economy. After being mostly destroyed by the bombings of WWII, the Volkswagen factory, “recovered to such an extent that when Henry Ford II (1917–1987) visited Europe in 1948 he expressed an interest in taking over the business” (“Automobiles” 237). The Volkswagen factory recovered so well after the war that even a successful man like Henry Ford
noticed the company’s financial benefits for not only the private owners, but the also the economic rewards for the country that was the base of the company, Germany. German political leaders also saw “extension of automobile ownership as a way of reviving the German economy”, and they used the Volkswagen Beetle to accomplish their goal of providing the common people with affordable cars (Volti 77). German leaders thought that the more they saw growth in the number of Germans who owned affordable cars like the Volkswagen Beetle, the more improvement in the economy they would see. Volkswagen “employed more than eight thousand people and produced nearly twenty thousand cars per year” by 1948 (Fifties in America 42). As Volkswagen was the employer of a huge number of German citizens and the manufacturer of many exported and locally sold Beetles, Germany depended on the company to give people jobs and keep money flowing into the country. By the end of the 1950’s, “the company sold over 150,000 Volkswagens, and potential buyers had to get on a waiting list” if they wanted one (American Pop, Batchelor). Less than twenty years after WWII ended and real production of the Volkswagen Beetle started, the car was in such high demand that there was a waiting list for it. The huge sales volume and mass production of the Volkswagen put the German people to work and put money back into the economy after WWII had put so much stress on the country. The manufacture and sale of Volkswagen Beetles out of Germany temporarily pushed Germany to the forefront of the automobile industry, and more importantly, helped make sure that the struggling nation did not collapse. Even long after the war, the Volkswagen Beetle remains a popular car across the world. Many people drive newer models of the Volkswagen Beetle today, and some restore older versions. The Volkswagen was very beneficial to the German economy after WWII because it was so highly popular and sold successfully across, not only Germany, but the world.
The Volkswagen Beetle also introduced new technology to the car world. The manufacturers of the Beetle tried unconventional things with their product. The car was unique because

The engine was in the rear, eliminating the need for a driveshaft and putting more of the car’s weight over the driving wheels, an advantage when more traction was needed. The four-cylinder, horizontally opposed engine was air-cooled, eliminating the need for a water pump, coolant, and attendant plumbing. Springing was provided by torsion bars. The mechanical works were wrapped in a unit-construction, streamlined body that increased speed and economy by reducing wind resistance. (Volti 98)

All of these technologies combined formed a reliable, affordable, easy to maintain car. Being air cooled, there was less maintenance needed on the engine. Qualities like these were very important as mass consumerism became popular because all of these were qualities people were looking for in their products. The technologies used in the Volkswagen Beetle made the little car very appealing to not only domestic consumers across the world.

The Volkswagen Beetle not only benefitted the German economy and introduced new technologies but also changed the way people looked at cars and, eventually, the way cars were manufactured. Even before WWII the aim of the Volkswagen Beetle was “to make automobiles available to the German mass public” (Nicholls). This was a new concept for the ordinary German consumer. Previously only wealthy Germans could afford cars. So, even before and immediately after the war, the Volkswagen Beetle was beginning to make a change in how people saw their potential to own a car. Then, thanks to the rebuilding of the Volkswagen factory and the efficient production of the “people’s car”, a few years after the war, “the ordinary
consumer... would be able to afford... a standard model Volkswagen” (“Economic Miracle” 920). Because Volkswagen Beetles were so efficiently manufactured and well made, compact cars, shortly after the war they were actually affordable to ordinary consumers. Its reliability and quality increased the Beetles popularity, not only locally in Germany but across the world. Even people in the United States who formerly believed that no foreign car could be any better than an American car eventually fell in love with the Volkswagen’s affordability, compactness, and reliability. After recovering from WWII, “Between 1945 and 2003, over 21 million Beetles were manufactured. Germany may have lost the war, but its engines won the hearts of millions” (Fay). The Volkswagen was manufactured in Germany, but brought to other countries where they soon were attracted to all its appealing qualities. The Volkswagen Beetle impacted many people’s opinion on cars. Because the Volkswagen Beetle was so different, there “nothing comparable on the market” and “Volkswagen enjoyed a monopoly”(Cross). Since the Volkswagen Beetle was so different from other cars, it couldn’t be compared to anything else. So, people that liked the Beetle had no other choice than to buy it. This led to the Volkswagen getting a lot of easy business, which sparked the interests of other car manufacturers. Other companies wanted to compete for all the business that Volkswagen was getting with little effort because of how unique their product was. Prior to the introduction of the Volkswagen, “Cars...featured high, long tail fins and a lot of ornamentation, but due to the influence of... Germany's Volkswagen, consumers began to prefer simpler, sleeker, more compact cars. In addition, both the number of cars and the number of drivers grew dramatically” (“Automobiles”, Batchelor). The Volkswagen Beetle had an obvious influence on people’s expectations of cars and their opinions of what they should be like. Since people realized they preferred simpler, more compact cars as they were introduced to the Beetle, other car companies across the world
were forced to change their concepts to fit the standards the Beetle had created. The change that the uniqueness of the Volkswagen Beetle forced on the way car companies manufactured their products is an extremely important impact of the Volkswagen bug. The Volkswagen Beetle was very important in shaping the way people see and make cars today.

The Volkswagen Beetle’s effect on the way cars are seen and manufactured today is a more important impact than its introduction of a new combination of technology and the impact it had on Germany’s economy for several reasons. The new combination of technology was less important than the effect on the manufacture of cars because not many cars eventually adopted the new technologies; the new technologies just made the Beetle more appealing and didn’t really affect other cars (you don’t see any bubble shaped cars with air cooled engines in the back today). The impact of the Beetle on the German economy was less important because although long lasting effect of the Volkswagen production was bringing its struggling economy more money, the Beetle only temporarily pushed the country to the forefront of automobile manufacturing; eventually, other countries learned from the Production of the Beetle and made their cars in a different way than they did prior to the invention of the Volkswagen Beetle. However the changes that other car companies made to their car concepts after the obvious popularity of the Volkswagen Beetle were permanent. Because the Beetle was so successful in Germany and across the world, other car manufacturers felt like they had to adapt to compete. We still see the results of these adaptations today. More car companies take the mass production approach to making their cars which in part a result of the success of the mass production technique in the Volkswagen Beetle. Also, the size and shape of many of the cars we see on the road today are partly due to the influence of the Volkswagen bug and its successfulness with consumers across the globe.
The Volkswagen Beetle had many impacts on society as we know it today. It benefitted the German economy and temporarily led them to the forefront of the automobile industry, it introduced a combination of new technologies that made it more appealing to evolving consumers, and it created competition among car companies which lead to changes in both the process by which companies manufactured cars and the way the cars looked when they were finished.
Works Cited


