In a classic formulation, the Communist International defined fascism in power as “the open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinist, and most imperialist elements of finance capital.”[1] As early as 1932, political photomontage artist John Heartfield informed the public of “the real meaning of the Hitler salute” by showing “the little man” asking for “big gifts” with “millions” standing behind him.[2] These Marxist views influenced the academic interpretations of fascism and Nazism for a long time, not only in the communist bloc. Throughout his career, Henry Turner has fought the notion of Nazism as a servant of capitalist interests tooth and nail since, as he has convincingly shown, such claims lack empirical evidence.[3] In his book on Opel, Turner sustains his master narrative by emphasizing the pressure put on the American owners of the firm and by stressing the restricted space that General Motors (GM), which owned Opel beginning in 1929, had to act in the German war economy.

In 1999 GM started a documentation project on its dealings with the Third Reich as an attempt to produce ammunition against pending class action suits on behalf of victims of forced labor. Turner was appointed the director of this initiative and enjoyed unrestricted access to internal records in writing this work, which was completed after the documentation project was brought to an end and without financial support from GM. It responds to accusations that GM executives covertly exercised control over Opel even after Germany declared war on the United States.[4] Its declared goal is to assess the validity of these accusations.

In the first chapter, Turner briefly outlines the expectations of America’s largest automotive producer for an enormous expansion of automobile driving in Germany in the late 1920s. But protective tariffs and high import duties made American models more costly for German consumers than European cars. At the time, Opel was the largest auto manufacturer outside the United States, with a German market share of 25 percent. In March 1929, GM purchased this family-owned firm, one of the first to use American machinery and assembly lines in Germany. That decision entailed a significant commitment of financial resources: the Rüsselheim plant was GM’s largest foreign holding. Unfortunately for these plans, the Great Depression caused falling sales and losses in the years between 1930 and 1932. Antiforeigner rhetoric expanded at the same time that currency exchange controls locked investments in Germany. Nevertheless, GM reacted with a strategy of reinvestment, expansion and modernization: new technology was installed at Rüsselsheim. This action coincided with enthusiastic support for the automobile industry by the Nazi party after its assumption of power: it reduced taxes and promoted the Autobahn. As a result Opel soon surpassed pre-Depression sales levels, and gained a market share of 40 percent in 1934. By the end of 1939, the value of the firm had more than doubled.

The second chapter is dedicated to the strategies Opel and GM used in order to survive the Third Reich. Nazi officials, especially the Gauleiter of Hesse, Jakob Sprenger,
tried to take control of the Rüsselsheim factory early on. So Wilhelm von Opel, the chairman of the firm’s board, joined the Nazi Party quickly in 1933 and served as a patron of the National Socialist Motor Vehicle Corps. In 1934 the corporation’s board consisted of four Americans and four Germans. Nazi functionaries were installed as corporate directors, board members, and chief of the security force. Additionally, cars were given as gifts to Nazi officials and advertising in National Socialist periodicals was intensified. Turner assesses these changes as a strategy of camouflage: GM tried to minimize Opel’s outward appearance of being American subsidiary.

The book goes on to depict Opel’s efforts to participate in the Volkswagen project. Opel had invested in the development of small cars since the 1920s and offered the cheapest models available in 1934. But the German Automotive Association commissioned Ferdinand Porsche, who thereby gained personal access to Hitler, to explore the feasibility of producing small, inexpensive cars. Opel was excluded from the meetings of the Automotive Association in 1936. Increased orders from the German army compensated to some extent: Opel established a new truck factory in Brandenburg that benefited from the rearmament program. In return for this support, the military served as GM’s most reliable ally in the new regime. The subsequent three chapters detail these power struggles. As a consequence of these developments Opel became entangled in Hitler’s preparations for war, not least due to the importance of American know-how to German military technology. A new gear plant was planned without informing GM and Opel decided to manufacture parts in order to supply Junkers, the airplane manufacturer. Opel also produced torpedo detonators for the German navy and munitions for the army.

One highlight of the book is the chapter on attempts by James D. Mooney, the president of the General Motors Overseas Corporation, to stop the Second World War. It reveals a private crusade for peace that met with hostility in the State Department and led to FBI investigations. Many U.S. officials were blind to the criminal nature of the National Socialist regime. Alfred P. Sloan acted consistently against appeasement policy as well. The last American representatives of Opel left Germany in 1941. As a result, GM lost control of the German corporation, but nonetheless harvested wartime profits from holdings that were characterized as enemy property but delivered components to Messerschmidt and Daimler-Benz and produced landmines and the three-ton Blitz (an aircraft tanker), all the while exploiting forced labor.

In his summary of his results, Turner emphasizes that GM contributed only unwillingly to the German war effort. On his view, rather than supporting the German military, GM was an international business with a corporate structure that was not affected by the prevailing political conditions. Thus, according to Turner, the corporation never deviated from the typical practices of the business community, and it was never the object of negative public opinion for failing to divest itself of its German holdings. He emphasizes thatGM’s investment in Opel had been locked in by currency controls established before Hitler gained power. Although the firm saw rising profits during the first years of Nazi rule, Turner sees GM as a hostage of the Third Reich.

Limitations on its wartime room to maneuver notwithstanding, the question remains of whether corporations that hold businesses in foreign countries should continue to conduct those businesses without regard for the local political circumstances. In order to address this question, Turner reconstructs in detail the perspectives of corporate managers, whose thinking was dominated by economic categories. In order to explain these, he stresses the necessity of focusing on economic success and profits. This position is not entirely convincing, insofar as the documentation project itself was motivated not by philanthropy, but by the company’s desire to protect future profits. Even if GM could not divest itself of Opel during the war, some ethical difficulties remain, since GM insisted on collecting its wartime dividends from Opel after the war ended. Turner criticizes this decision in very clear language.

The purpose of the book is to revise the older historiography on Opel, which drew a much more negative picture of the GM management’s implication in the war effort, although or perhaps because it did not enjoy unlimited access to the firm’s documents. This scholarship argued that even after the United States entered the war, the priority of the modern company remained the preservation of a highly productive, profitable subsidiary. Although American managers left Nazi Germany well in advance of the German declaration of war on the United States, some evidence of subsequent contact between GM and Opel was found.[5] Turner appears to have succeeded in accomplishing his desired revision, insofar as the German edition of the book has met with no abrasive criticism from this side of the Atlantic.[6] After all, the Nazi regime did not gain full control of the largest automotive plant in Europe, which remained the property of GM. Even if Opel attempted to capture the propagandistic Volkswagen project, made extensive use
of forced labor, produced key components for the Luftwaffe, and manufactured the Blitz for the German army, it hardly makes sense to condemn American management for these decisions, because it had practically no influence on Opel over the course of Nazi rule.

Turner’s study stands somewhat in contrast to the mainstream of newer business histories dealing with the National Socialist period, which stress the wide range of options available to executives and corporate management in dealing with the challenges of the new regime, rather than emphasizing their powerlessness. This distinction may have a basis in Opel’s status as the special case of an international company whose wartime operations continued largely independent of its American management. This circumstance suggests that conclusions drawn from Opel’s story are unlikely to apply universally to other companies in operation during the Third Reich. A systematic comparison of the entanglements and relative freedom to act enjoyed by multinational companies, including Ford, Coca-Cola, and IBM, remains a challenge for business historians of the Nazi era.

Notes


