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# Das Auto: The Germans, Their Cars and Us

By Dominic Sandbrook

**MUSIC:**

by Dusty Springfield  
# In the cool of the evening  
# When everything is  
getting kind of groovy... #  
The Mini - supreme symbol  
of British style, design  
and ingenuity.  
In 2012, more than 300,000  
were sold around the world.  
# I've got some plans for tonight  
# And then I stop... #

**CAR SKIDS:**

And the great thing about it  
is that more than 50 years  
after the first Mini  
rolled off the assembly lines,  
they're still made here in Oxford  
at the Cowley plant -  
the place the Mini was born.  
It's a global phenomenon, and one  
still proudly made in Britain.  
But you know the irony?  
You know who actually owns  
this great British icon,  
built in a plant 100 years old?  
The Germans.

**MUSIC:**

by Visage  
We are living in  
an age of German empire.  
Amid extraordinary turmoil  
in the capitals of Europe,  
Germany commands more raw power  
than at any time since  
the Second World War.  
This is an empire of German  
engineering, German expertise,  
and German exports -  
built not on the Panzer,  
but on the Polo and the Passat.

A new order, symbolised by  
the speed, power and beauty  
of the automobile.  
Buying a car in Germany is not  
just a grubby transaction,  
it's engaging in an immensely  
serious, culturally-rich,  
and occasionally rather  
beautiful and moving event.  
This isn't just a story about cars,  
it's about economic power  
and political clout,  
because in today's Europe,  
it's Germany that calls the shots.  
And as we confront the new  
challenges of the 21st century -  
an age of cut-throat competition  
on a dizzyingly global scale -  
what can we learn from  
our failures and their successes?  
What did we get wrong and  
what did the Germans get so right?  
# We fade to grey... #  
DING!

**MUSIC:**

by ELO  
# Sun is shining in the sky... #  
When I was growing up in the '70s  
and '80s, my dad had a Rover -  
the quintessential British car.  
So did his father.  
# It's a beautiful new day... #  
But although I think of myself  
as pretty patriotic,  
I don't drive a British car today...  
I drive a German one.  
# Mr Blue Sky is  
living here today... #  
And I'm not alone. A few months ago,  
a poll asked people what brand  
of car they'd most like to drive.  
Now, number one was Volkswagen -  
they're German.

Number two was Audi -  
they're German.  
Number three was Mercedes -  
they're German.  
Are you beginning to spot the trend?

**MUSIC:**

by Gary Numan  
I haven't driven  
another... type of car -  
it's been Volkswagens,  
Audis or Mercedes,  
The fit and finish of the car -  
in a German car -  
for the comparable car  
is a lot better.  
Well, I went off to buy a new Rover  
and they told me I had to wait  
about six months for delivery -  
this was 30 years ago.  
And this was in the garage opposite.  
Well, not this one, but the new BMW  
was in the garage opposite,  
so I bought the BM  
and I've bought them ever since.  
Germany exports more cars to Britain  
than to any other country  
in the world.  
So why don't we buy British?  
Well, how could we?  
What is a British car?  
Bentley, for instance,  
is owned by the Germans.  
Rolls-Royce? German.  
Jaguar? Indian.  
Land Rover? Indian.  
MG Rover belongs to the Chinese.  
And even James Bond's  
favourite car - the Aston Martin -  
is owned by the Kuwaitis  
and Italians.  
Only a handful of tiny,  
specialist car-makers remain.  
Does this matter, though?

Isn't a car just a means  
of getting from A to B?  
In many ways, the motor car  
has usurped the role  
of the work of art  
in our modern age.  
In that it represents  
collective yearnings,  
it represents, you know, desire.  
It represents an idea of progress,  
of faith in technology,  
and there's no-one who's got that  
more correct and more powerful  
and made it more articulate  
than the German motor industry.

#### ELECTRONIC MUSIC

The first car I ever bought didn't  
come from an iconic British factory  
like Cowley or Longbridge,  
but from the German heartland  
of Lower Saxony.

Welcome to Wolfsburg,  
the home of Volkswagen -  
a factory the size of Gibraltar.  
VW has come an awfully long way  
since it was set up in 1937  
under the Nazis,  
to build "people's cars" -  
Volkswagen for Germany's masses.  
Here in Wolfsburg, they've even  
set up this "Autostadt" -  
a theme park dedicated to the car,  
visited by more than  
two million people every year.  
It's a temple not just  
to the automobile  
but to the technological glamour  
of German modernity  
and to the success of  
Germany's economic model.  
With its gleaming,  
futuristic towers,  
this "Car City" is  
German capitalism incarnate.

And as VW's steely  
commander-in-chief puts it,  
they want to leave their stamp  
on every country on earth.

**TRANSLATION:**

strategy called "Strategy 2018".

In the year 2018, we want to  
become the world's number one.

The number one in volume,  
with more than ten million cars,  
the number one in  
customer satisfaction,  
the number one in  
employee satisfaction  
even the number one in making money.

Under the generalship  
of Herr Winterkorn,  
VW are inching ever  
closer to their goal.

Last year they made a record  
profit - a cool 9.7 billion.  
But the irony is that just as the  
Mini has now become a German story -  
so Volkswagen's post-war success  
began as a British story  
and its hero was the most  
unlikely person imaginable.

His name was Ivan Hirst  
and he was a major  
in the Royal Electrical  
and Mechanical Engineers.  
And in August 1945, a few weeks  
after the fall of the Third Reich,  
Major Hirst arrived here  
in Wolfsburg  
with orders to secure this factory  
on behalf of the victorious Allies.

MODERN CLASSICAL MUSIC

Much of Germany's industrial base -  
once the most impressive  
infrastructure in Europe -  
had been destroyed.

In the ruins, millions of starving

survivors scavenged for food.  
And with the country divided  
into four occupied zones,  
Germany's revival - let alone  
its rise to mastery in Europe -  
seemed a very remote  
prospect indeed.

When Ivan Hirst  
arrived in Wolfsburg,  
things were worse than  
he had ever imagined.  
In the factory itself,  
the conditions were very grim.  
In the press shops, for instance,  
the roof was off.  
And we had to sling tarpaulins  
over each press...  
on wooden poles,  
to keep the snow off.  
And yet it was at this moment -  
at Germany's lowest ebb -  
that Ivan Hirst laid the foundations  
for the triumph of  
the German automobile.

Many of Hirst's superiors  
thought there was no point  
saving the factory.  
"You think you're opening  
a car plant here?"  
said the British car magnate  
Sir William Rootes.  
"Then you're a bloody fool. "  
But Ivan Hirst could see  
the potential here.  
And he thought that the Germans  
should be given a chance  
to reshape their future as  
a prosperous, peaceful nation.  
His priority was to restart  
production of a car  
originally designed in the 1930s  
by the Nazis.  
This car, he thought,  
would be the key

to getting Germany back on its feet.  
And today, we call it the Beetle.

**MUSIC:**

by Bing Crosby with The Andrews Sisters

There was nothing very radical or  
exciting about the little Beetle -  
it was round and it was cute.

But by March 1946, the factory,  
at the limits of its capacity,  
was producing 1,000 Beetles a month  
for the occupying forces  
and for Germany's public services.

VW were on the road to recovery.

# Accentuate the positive... #

My chief, Colonel Charles Radclyffe,  
said, "I think we've got  
a world-beater here,  
"it's another Model T".

And he spotted that  
as early as 1948.

And yet the early Beetles  
were far from perfect.

We always think of German cars  
as ultra reliable.

But the interesting thing  
about the original Beetle...  
is that it wasn't.

As one of VW's  
top executives put it,  
it had "More faults than a dog  
has fleas" but they fixed it,  
and they went on fixing it.  
And it was that obsessive  
attention to detail,  
that determination  
to put the customer first,  
that lifted Germany's car-makers  
well ahead of their British rivals.

**RAGTIME MUSIC:**

People asked us, did we not think  
we were damaging British interests  
by developing Volkswagen,



but our job was to help get the  
German economy back onto its feet -  
for political reasons, of course -  
and that was what we were doing.  
By the time Hirst left VW,  
the company already  
had global ambitions.  
And its first conquest would be -  
of all places - America.  
Have you ever wondered  
how the man who drives a snowplough  
drives to the snowplough?  
This one drives a Volkswagen.  
So you can stop wondering.  
Thanks to a canny  
marketing campaign,  
thousands of American drivers -  
tired of their massive, macho cars -  
began to fall in love  
with the Beetle.  
They were persuaded  
that small was beautiful.  
And by 1968, when this cheeky film,  
The Love Bug, hit the screens,  
the Americans had taken  
the Beetle to their hearts.  
Jim, that's water!

**MUSIC:**

by Peter Kraus  
Meanwhile, Germany itself,  
or at least the western half,  
now cut off from the  
Communist east, was booming.  
Unemployment was down,  
production was up.  
Ordinary Germans were now richer  
and more comfortable than ever.  
They called it the  
"Wirtschaftswunder" -  
the Economic Miracle.  
The traumas of the past  
were forgotten.  
Technicolor consumerism would

sew up the wounds of wartime.  
The priority was to look forward,  
to buy new homes, new appliances  
and, of course, new cars.  
This was a crucial period  
in Germany's modern history.  
By the end of the 1950s,  
they hadn't just staged  
an extraordinary recovery,  
they had done the groundwork  
for what is today  
one of the most productive and  
powerful economies on the planet.  
But you might well be wondering,  
where was Britain in all this?  
After all, we had won the war.  
Surely we had a head start,  
didn't we?

**NEWSREEL:**

Highness the Duke of Gloucester  
'opened the first post-war  
motor show at Earls Court,  
'with congratulations to the industry  
on its magnificent achievement  
'of 100 million worth of cars  
exported since the war ended. '  
'50s Britain had never  
had it so good.  
We were now making and  
selling more cars than ever.  
At the start of the decade,  
we were behind only the Americans  
in the league table of  
world car-exporters.  
But things weren't quite  
as rosy as they seemed  
in the English country garden.

**HORN BEEPS:**

We always think of the 1970s  
as the decade when things started  
to go wrong for British industry.  
But I don't think that's right.

By then it was already too late -  
the rot had set in earlier.  
I think it was in the affluent,  
comfortable '50s  
that the problems really began.  
We were, I think, a bit TOO  
affluent and comfortable,  
a bit TOO complacent -  
utterly oblivious to  
the rise of our competitors.  
Here she is, a wee Scots lassie.  
Yes, it's Molly Weir. So, you're  
a Morris Minor fan too, Molly?  
Och aye, our Minor takes all the  
family and our luggage in comfort.  
It's very economical too,  
but, you see, it's a Morris.  
We might have had a big car industry  
but size isn't everything.  
The men running Britain's  
car companies were getting old.  
And by the jet-age 1950s,  
their autocratic, amateur spirit  
looked increasingly old-fashioned.  
The English idea of  
gentlemanly behaviour...  
It involves a certain amount  
of self-deprecation,  
a certain bit of casualness,  
we sort of distrust  
seriousness and professionalism  
in some ways  
but not in our motor cars,  
and the Germans  
were able to provide us  
with magnificent tokens of  
professionalism and seriousness,  
which our native manufacturers  
could not.  
They also worked rather better.  
We did still make good cars like the  
Morris Minor that I'm driving now,  
but we didn't market them  
as successfully as the Germans,

we didn't push them  
aggressively enough overseas.  
You know how many  
Morris Minors we sold?  
Over a million.  
But do you know how many  
Volkswagen Beetles the Germans sold?  
20 million.  
The real problem was that we were  
blind to the expanding market  
right on our doorstep -  
Europe.  
More than two thirds  
of our car exports  
STILL went to the  
British Commonwealth.  
One of the biggest mistakes  
we ever made as a country  
was to overestimate  
the importance of our Empire.  
In those crucial two decades  
after the Second World War,  
our politicians and  
our businessmen thought  
that we didn't really need  
to worry about Europe  
because Britain had wider horizons.  
Our car-makers, they thought,  
would always be able to rely  
on the captive markets  
of our old colonies.  
To put it bluntly, we'd always  
be able to flog them our dregs.  
The Standard Vanguard  
was designed for export.  
Its naval name was meant to recall  
the great days of Britain's Empire.  
There was only one problem -  
the suspension.  
When the Vanguard's proud new  
owners took it out for a spin,  
the car began to fall apart.  
Good evening.  
The Suez Canal is a name

familiar to everyone.  
I've come to talk to you tonight  
about what's happened there  
in the last few day  
and what it means to us.  
And Britain's Empire, too,  
was on the brink of collapse.  
In 1956, Britain made a desperate  
bid to recapture the Suez Canal -  
the vital artery  
for Middle Eastern oil.  
But when the operation backfired,  
petrol prices went through the roof.  
Sound the trumpets.  
Beat the drums.  
Wave the flags.  
British flags...  
for the fabulous twins - the Austin 7  
and the Morris Mini Minor.

**MUSIC:**

by Burt Bacharach  
As a result, designers for  
the British Motor Corporation  
came up with a new car  
that was smaller  
and needed less petrol.  
They called it the Mini.  
We got to make a car - a very  
small car - for the housewife,  
which is economical to run  
and has lots of  
shopping space inside  
and therefore it doesn't  
need a big boot.  
Everything stows away  
so neatly and easily.  
Four happy people  
in a big, big, little car.

**MUSIC:**

by The Kinks  
The Mini is probably the most  
celebrated car in British history.

But while the Beetle  
was the cornerstone  
of Germany's 21st-century empire,  
the Mini was a result of  
Britain's imperial decline.  
The Mini had been designed for  
ordinary working-class families.  
But by the late '60s,  
it was being driven  
by models, actors and pop singers.  
Even its marketing was  
less Coronation Street,  
more Carnaby Street.  
The Mini - cheap on petrol.  
British made!  
Small on the outside.  
Big on the inside.  
Don't just wave the flag, drive it.  
The Mini was stylish,  
but it was also cheap.  
A basic model cost just 350.  
But as a rival firm discovered,  
the British Motor Corporation  
were losing 30 for  
every Mini they sold.  
Ford are very good at costing  
what a car cost to make,  
and discovered that they must  
be making it for a loss,  
they couldn't see  
how it was possible.  
So, they actually sent  
their report to the chairman  
and said, "We think you need  
to be charging more for this. "  
And... it was ignored  
and I think this pervades  
a lot of the story  
of the post-war British car industry.  
Arrogance pervaded it.  
There was a feeling, you know...  
Britain had won the war,  
it still had...  
It was coming out of its Empire..

It very often knew best,  
or thought it did.  
And they felt, "Well, we don't  
need to be told by Ford  
"what we're doing right  
and what we're doing wrong. "  
But, in fact, they were  
doing it very wrong.

**MUSIC:**

by Chicory Tip  
# Moulded, I was folded  
I was preform dried  
# Son of my father  
# Comanded, I was branded  
in a plastic vac  
# Surrounded and confounded  
by statistic facts... #  
Far from being  
a symbol of '60s cool,  
the Mini was really  
a symbol of something rotten  
at the heart of the '60s economy,  
a brilliantly-designed metaphor  
for a managerial industry crippled  
by a complacent leadership,  
dreadful salesmanship and a fatal  
culture of self-satisfaction.

**SONG:**

Are You Being Served?"  
Today, we're used to the idea  
that when it comes  
to manufacturing -  
from your kitchen fridge  
to your bathroom shower -  
nobody does it better  
than the Germans.  
But, at the time,  
Germany's economic revival  
brought back bad memories.  
Guten Morgen, mein "Herr-ing".  
There you are, then.  
Another load of Kraut chitfers.

That's 100 hats with  
shaving brushes on the side.  
We'll never sell them,  
you know, Captain Peacock.  
It is not for us to  
reason why, Mr Humphries.  
Young Mr Grace, in his wisdom,  
has seen fit to mount a sales  
campaign to push German goods.  
Well, it's difficult enough  
to sell English goods,  
without a lot of rubbish  
from the damned Boche.

SOFT-ROCK MUSIC

But the battle for  
drivers' hearts and minds  
was about to move onto  
the home front.  
As the Germans prepared to  
launch their invasion of Britain,  
they had a new weapon  
up their sleeve -  
The Volkswagen Golf.  
It was a hatchback, which was still  
something of a novelty at the time,  
so it was far more practical -  
a Mini did not have  
a hatchback at all.  
It was a very clever move  
by Volkswagen as well  
because it had  
Volkswagen engineering  
but it had Italian style.  
The bodywork was designed  
by a company called Italdesign -  
a very well-known designer  
called Giugiaro.  
It was just a stunning sort of  
angular and very efficient  
and practical car.  
The Golf - in every test,  
one of the best.

SOFT-ROCK MUSIC

British drivers didn't get their



hands on the Golf until 1974.  
But in its way, it was  
an enormously symbolic moment.  
Remember, we'd only  
joined the Common Market,  
what became the European Union,  
a year earlier.  
But we were becoming a much more  
self-consciously European country.  
We went on Spanish holidays.  
We drank French wine,  
we ate Italian food.  
And now, more and more of us  
were driving German cars.  
The ugly whine of foreign engines  
rent the peaceful autumn air  
of the English countryside.  
All ready, one traitor in eight  
has traded with the enemy.  
Are you one?  
Have you bought foreign?  
What about you, sir, could I ask  
why you're driving a foreign car?  
Well, this particular model is  
because I find it very reliable...  
good performance and...  
I've had it for three years now and  
I had no trouble whatsoever with it.  
You've had some bad experiences  
with British cars?  
Yeah, Ford - the bottom dropped out with  
rust after about nine months or something.  
Have you tried British cars?  
Yes, I had a Jag before that,  
and Fords before that  
and it was the usual trip down  
to the garage every fortnight.  
It really did hit home when my  
brother came home with an Audi...  
That was quite a shocking thing cos  
he had owned British cars forever  
and then he bought an Audi but it  
was an astoundingly different car.  
Leading the blitzkrieg,

was Volkswagen's hatchback.  
VW sold 800 Golfs in the first year  
and 20,000 in the second.  
To British motorists,  
its reliability seemed  
simply extraordinary.  
Even today, if you don't  
own a Golf yourself,  
there's bound to be one  
in a drive near you.  
He's off in that new car again.  
Hmm. Wouldn't catch me  
in a Volkswagen.  
What's wrong with a Golf?  
Well, it's not exactly big, is it?  
Actually, it's bigger than it looks.  
He'll never get that lot in there.  
Anyway, I don't like  
rear-engine cars.  
The engine's in the front -  
it's water-cooled.  
The back seats fold down too.  
What was it that the Golf did  
that British cars didn't?  
It worked, for a start.  
It was a very, very practical car,  
so I think people could see it  
as a car that they could use, we  
could get working with straight away.  
Lift up the back, put our  
shopping in, fold the seat down.  
For most British buyers  
that was great,  
but it also helped that it was  
a Volkswagen, so that means  
that it's related to the Beetle  
and that was the beginning  
of our love affair  
with cars which weren't British  
which did work.

**MUSIC:**

by Slade  
1974, the year

the Golf was launched,  
was a great year to be German.  
On the football field, they won  
the World Cup at home in Munich.  
We didn't even qualify.  
# I said, "Mama, but we're  
all crazy now... " #  
And while Slade's lurid costumes  
were getting rather old hat,  
the German synth-pop band Kraftwerk  
were reaching for the future,  
with their breakthrough  
album Autobahn.

**MUSIC:**

by Kraftwerk  
Nothing better captured  
modern Germany's infatuation  
with the machine -  
their love affair with "das Auto".  
Britain's motorway system  
was only 16 years old.  
But the autobahns -  
mostly free from speed limits -  
dated back to the '30s.  
Here was the supreme symbol  
of Germany's commitment  
to power, speed,  
and modernity itself.  
The autobahn was just such  
a symbol of the German character,  
in that it looks utterly rational  
and they're magnificently  
engineered, wonderful roads...  
But they look rational  
but they're also vaguely  
mysterious and romantic,  
It's not just transport, it's...  
It's, you know, it's philosophy  
and religion as well.  
For many people in Britain -  
especially those who  
remembered the war -  
the Germans' new-found success

was deeply disturbing.  
You know how me dad feels  
about the Germans -  
won't even accept a lift  
in our Audrey's Volkswagen.  
So what was the secret  
of the Germans' success?  
How did they do it? It wasn't  
just about the design and branding.  
There was something deeper -  
something that goes to  
the very heart of the story  
about why British  
manufacturing declined,  
whereas our German competitors  
went from strength to strength  
and are still going strong today.  
Ever since the '50s,  
German firms have been renowned  
for their excellent labour relations  
and tremendous productivity.  
Even today, they make extraordinary  
allowances for their workers,  
as the top union negotiator  
Stephan Wolf explains -  
very quickly.

**TRANSLATION:**

a clear agreement with the company  
that employees can switch off their  
smartphones after working hours,  
so they can enjoy their spare time.  
This initially was  
a contentious issue  
between the company  
and the work councils,  
but we managed to push  
our opinion through,  
as the company profits from employees  
who are able to relax  
and recover after work.  
So if you work for Volkswagen,  
you clock off,

**and after 6:**

no danger of getting a call,  
an e-mail, or even  
a text from the office,  
until just before  
your shift the next day.  
Somehow, I can't imagine  
many British businesses  
agreeing to that one.  
In all major German companies,  
the workers representative  
is provided with the staff car  
and an executive office.  
And despite the management  
trappings of his office,  
he's very much a union man.  
German law has long required  
that every firm has  
its own works council.  
And that, instead of  
fighting the management,  
they work together,  
in a spirit of mutual trust.  
They even hold board meetings  
with VW's management,  
discussing the future  
of the company.  
Again, hard to imagine many  
British firms signing up to that.

**MUSIC:**

by T-Rex.  
Now this is the key  
to the difference  
between the Germans and us.  
And it's all a question of class.  
Post-war Britain was a society  
drenched in class consciousness  
all the way from the factory floor  
to the wood-panelled boardroom  
and the men who led our car unions  
saw themselves as class warriors,  
standing up to the bosses  
on behalf of the workers.

But their German counterparts  
were very different,  
they saw themselves as partners,  
working with the management,  
and responsible, not just to their  
members, but to the national good.  
We want deeds not words, you see,  
otherwise we're coming out.  
I will not yield to threats  
by politically-motivated scum.  
Ah! I don't think my members  
would appreciate that, nomenclature!  
Well, that's what they are,  
isn't it? Marxist scum.  
Oh, yeah. Reds under the handbags -  
I'll flush 'em out!  
Right, we're all coming out then.  
You're all sacked.  
Right, you bastard!  
Inside Britain's  
troubled car factories,  
there wasn't much talk  
of the national good.  
In 1968, our remaining  
car-makers had been merged  
into one gigantic company...  
British Leyland.  
With 48 factories  
and 190,000 workers,  
this would be our secret weapon  
to fend off the foreign invaders.  
Instead of having the scattering  
of Rover agents, Triumph agents,  
BMC agents,  
Leyland agents and so on,  
we'll be able to provide  
a tight, compact organisation,  
which will enable you to  
get parts, service and sales  
anywhere throughout the world.

**MUSIC:**

by Todd Rundgren  
Right from the start,

BL ran into trouble.  
Almost every week saw more strikes,  
led by a new generation  
of union militants.  
Immediately the decision for action  
is endorsed by the membership.  
All of those in favour, please show.

**ALL:**

We'd have preferred  
not to have gone on strike.  
We had no alternative.

**NEWSREADER:**

the motor industry is,  
of course, the big employer.  
But recently, well, it's been  
going through a pretty bleak time.  
Last month, for the first time ever,  
foreign car-makers grabbed  
half the British market.  
Of course, there were strikes  
in German car plants too.  
But you could count them  
on the fingers on one hand  
and still hitch a lift  
home in a new Golf.  
It's easy to blame Leyland's woes  
on a handful of union extremists.  
But Britain's car workers  
didn't just want more money...  
they often wanted more  
professional respect.  
The problem that we've had  
in the country for so many years  
is that being an engineer  
or being a mechanic  
is not a respected profession,  
it's seen as somebody who bashes  
a hammer against a piece of metal -  
it's not credited with  
any skill at all and not regarded.  
Whereas, in other countries,  
and Germany in particular,

you will find they're all  
professors and doctors  
and they are so highly qualified.  
While Britain's car workers,  
sick of their primitive conditions,  
were fighting the class war,  
Germany's factories were  
being radically modernised.  
David Buckle worked  
on the steel press line  
in the Cowley plant in the mid-'70s.  
On behalf of his union,  
he went on a fact-finding mission  
to VW's Wolfsburg plant in 1977.  
And what he saw there blew his mind.  
Unlike here, where we worked  
on individual cars,  
they had a huge round table  
and there was a car door  
on each point of the crucifix...  
that was one set of car doors.  
While one operator  
was working on one door,  
robots were working on the other.  
We hadn't had robots  
in this factory,  
we knew nothing about robots. Right.  
Today, Cowley's Mini plant has  
more than its fair share of robots.  
Of course, we could have installed  
robots earlier if we'd wanted.  
The tragedy, though, was  
that British Leyland shrank  
from radical modernisation -  
not least because they knew that  
the unions would never stand for it.  
Meanwhile, the Germans  
were racing ahead.  
Mercedes, for example, were already  
working on cruise control,  
airbags and anti-lock braking.  
You could even buy  
a bulletproof Mercedes 600.  
British Leyland's cars



weren't even rustproof.  
'This was our answer...  
'the Austin Allegro.  
'Unfortunately, the ads were  
the best thing about them. '  
# Allegro has vroom for five  
# Allegro has vroom for five... #  
By now, British Leyland had become  
the embodiment of what the Germans  
were calling "the British disease".  
Every year, cars like this one,  
the infamous Austin Allegro,  
with it's square steering wheel  
and Spanish Rose interior,  
were making thumping losses.  
Every week there were more strikes.  
And what made  
the Allegros failure so resonant  
was that across much of British  
industry it was the same story -  
complacent management,  
chaotic production,  
militant workers,  
and yet more strikes.  
Indeed, if there's one statistic  
that speaks volumes  
of the difference between  
Britain and Germany in the '70s,  
it's this one.  
In 1978, for every day  
that German manufactures  
lost to industrial action,  
we lost ten!

#### **DISCO MUSIC:**

#### **STEPHEN BAYLEY:**

commitment, we lack the discipline,  
and we lack the interest in  
being industrially competitive.  
My honest feelings is  
it's not in the English soul  
to mass-produce motor cars.  
Whereas the mass-produced

motor car is, I think,  
the most complete expression  
of the German psyche.  
And while cars like the Mercedes 600  
were testament to  
Germany's new ambitions,  
British cars were notorious for slow  
delivery and shoddy workmanship.  
Who can forget this wedge-shaped  
beauty? The Austin Princess.

**MUSIC:**

by Supertramp  
That wedge shape that it has  
was very much in vogue in the '70s.  
It was THE car to have.  
God, you're beautiful.  
Oh, what finish, what style.  
# Cos you're the joke  
of the neighbourhood... #  
What undermined it was,  
I think there a strike  
almost straight away  
and then there were a couple of...  
significant quality issues  
that came about  
because it hadn't been  
sufficiently well engineered.  
One was - and it  
sounds rather dramatic,  
and in a way it was -  
the rear suspension...  
would collapse.  
New car, George? Certainly is.  
Much room inside? Mustn't  
grumble, you know - average.  
Goes well, does it? Well... average.  
'When British Leyland  
launched the Princess in 1975,  
'the slogan ran -  
"not the car for Mr Average. "  
'That was a shame. Because  
the key to the Golf's appeal  
'was that Mr Average

rather liked it. '

**SONG:**

Desperate to save the company,  
the government brought in a new  
man to run British Leyland -  
a ruthless South African  
called Michael Edwardes.

**INTERVIEWER:**

for some time about taking the job?  
One of the decisions  
I had to make was  
whether the job was doable at all.  
And I came to the conclusion  
that somebody could do it.  
And that maybe I could do it.  
So, could Michael Edwardes  
really turn British Leyland around?  
These are newly-declassified  
documents from the first months  
of Margaret Thatcher's  
new administration in 1979  
and they give you a real sense  
of the despondency at the top  
about British Leyland's prospects.  
Now, BL were asking for an extra 130  
million from the taxpayer in 1980/81  
just to keep going,  
and this is a memo  
from Thatcher's Cabinet Secretary,  
Sir Robert Armstrong,  
in which he says, "Every year  
things get worse, instead of better.  
"The productivity is atrocious.  
"Their market share  
has slumped from 33% in 1974  
"to just 16% in the last two months.  
"It begins to look as if  
the illness is terminal. "  
Now, if you think that's bad,  
this one is from her Chief  
Policy Advisor, Sir John Hoskins.  
And he says British Leyland's

prospects are,  
"nearly zero", but they have to give  
British Leyland the money, he says,  
because the public demands  
support for Edwardes.

It's an intriguing sign of the  
sheer importance of the car industry  
in the public mind in the 1980s  
that even Margaret Thatcher,  
the arch privatiser,  
shrank from cutting it  
or closing it down,  
because the car industry was seen an  
indication of our national virility.  
If the car industry went, we would  
be impotent on the industrial stage.

1980s POP MUSIC

But British Leyland  
had one card left.

A car they'd been working  
on for almost a decade -  
modern, competitive, young, sexy...  
and heavily subsidised  
by the taxpayer.

The Mini Metro.

Launched in 1980-

"A British car to beat the world. "

Some of you may have noticed  
that for the past few years  
Britain has been invaded  
by the Italians, the Germans,  
the Japanese and the French.  
Now we have the means to fight back.

**SONG:**

The new Austin Metro.  
A British car to beat the world.

**MUSIC:**

by ABC  
The Metro cost 3,000  
and BL sold more than a million.  
It became almost fashionable.  
Even Prince Charles's fiancée,

Lady Diana Spencer, drove one.  
But although the Metro was one of  
the best-selling cars of the 1980s,  
it was never going to be enough  
to fend off the German competition.  
My parents had a Mini Metro,  
a lot of people did.  
It was, on the surface,  
it looks like quite  
a successful car, but was it?  
The sales figures predicted for it  
were wildly optimistic.  
They really did think they were  
going to sell 300,000-400,000 a year  
and it never came  
anywhere near that.  
I think they sold,  
in the first year, 174,000.  
The Metro was up against  
the Volkswagen Polo  
and it was up against  
the Ford Fiesta,  
so the Metro was, in a way,  
an afterthought -  
it was something  
that came very late.  
Now, Alan, you're going to have to  
trade down your Rover 800  
for a smaller car. Go on.  
I picked up these brochures  
for the new Metro.  
It's... It's a lovely car.  
Lynn... And if you do...  
Lynn, I'm not driving a Mini Metro.  
But you do have to make  
substantial savings.  
Lynn, I'm not driving a Mini Metro.  
But if you do,  
you can keep Pear Tree Productions  
with a skeleton staff of two.  
There's no point finishing the sentence,  
because I'm not driving a Mini Metro.

**MUSIC:**

by The Human League  
The truth is that the Mini Metro  
never really stood a chance.  
British Leyland had fallen into  
the trap of fighting the last war,  
not the current one.  
Their adverts harked  
back to the past,  
when they should have  
been looking forward.  
And crucially, they never really  
understood the importance  
of an up-to-date brand.  
It was in the 1980s that  
we really began to define ourselves  
by what we bought...  
and what we drove.  
This was the decade of Levis,  
the Walkman, Nike and Armani.  
The decade when ad men  
sold us designer sunglasses  
and a motor to match.  
In Germany, one car-marker  
more than any other,  
realised that for people  
making money in the 1980s,  
and there were lots of them,  
the priority was to look good.  
And to look good, you needed  
the right badge on your motor.  
Now, you wanted your car  
to have sex appeal  
but you also wanted it  
to be reliable.  
It is, after all,  
quite hard to look good  
when you're standing  
by the side of the road  
waiting for the German  
equivalent of the AA.  
This is the Munich headquarters  
of the Bavarian Motor Works - BMW.  
It's their equivalent  
of Volkswagen's Autostadt.

They call it "Die Welt" - the world.  
An appropriate hub for  
a company with global ambitions.  
This is where young Bavarian  
families come to worship  
at the altar of the automobile.  
And that's the point.  
This is where BMW suck you in.  
This is where they get you.  
A gigantic tribute to  
the allure of the brand.  
All the German manufacturers,  
they've built these cathedrals,  
these temples to themselves.  
It's somewhere between  
a department store and a museum.  
And a cathedral.  
You go there to visit...  
and to desire,  
or you can go there to purchase.  
It's again, it's another...  
It's again, more emphasis  
on seriousness.  
I mean, buying a car in Germany  
is not just a grubby transaction  
which involves transferring money  
from one account to another.  
It's engaging in  
an immensely serious,  
culturally rich, and occasionally  
rather beautiful and moving event.

**MUSIC:**

by Donna Summer

The car that really made BMW's name  
was their iconic 3 Series.  
It was slick, sporty and stylish.  
Along with the German-made Porsche,  
it was THE car of the '80s.  
But the key to its appeal wasn't  
the engineering - it was the idea.  
When you bought a BMW,  
you were buying into that archetypal  
'80s concept - a lifestyle.

What does having a BMW mean to you?

Comfort. Status.

Yes, I suppose so, yes.

Status? Sounds awful, doesn't it?

So, it's status? I suppose

it does - status. Yes, success.

One of BMW's thrusting

young salesman put it this way,

The BMW, he said,

was not just a capitalist's car,

it was an entrepreneur's one -

a risk-taking, ambitious

individual's way of saying

that they were doing rather well.

A Saab, he said, was

a socialist dentist's car.

Volvos were for

dabblers in antiques.

A Mercedes belonged

to the company secretary.

An Audi suggested

that you didn't quite have

enough money for a Mercedes.

And a Rover was a cry for help.

In Margaret Thatcher's Britain,

the BMW badge

became a status symbol -

as one young salesman discovered.

Now, this is where

a dashing young salesman

called James Ruppert

enters the story.

Because you were a BMW salesman on

Park Lane, I think? That's right.

It really was when

the yuppie was born

and you would have people

coming from, from the city

and they would, sort of, make

a pilgrimage up to Park Lane

in their lunch hour or after hours

and drive a car and want to buy it.

I delivered more cars

to the centre of the city



than any other place.  
I can remember that so... Almost  
every day I'd be driving a car.  
Early morning I'd pick it up,  
drop it off  
and another banker very happy  
indeed - with his braces.  
'But as the Welshman behind  
BMW's marketing freely admits,  
'a brand is all in the mind. '  
In the premium segment,  
we're clearly selling  
an emotional product.  
You know, it comes  
with a strong brand,  
but you know, what is a brand?  
A brand is effectively  
a promise, you know,  
it's a promise of innovation.  
It's a promise of  
outstanding design.  
it's a promise of  
fantastic materials.  
It's a promise of  
technology on board.  
It's a promise of safety.  
Of course, it is still JUST a car.  
But that's not what  
BMW want you to think.  
They're selling an idea,  
an illusion that the right car  
will make you happy.  
But there is genuinely  
good engineering beneath the hype.  
And behind the wheel of a BMW, even  
grumpy old men can get carried away.  
Honestly, I haven't  
driven anything...  
this, sort of, perfect since...  
I don't know, since the  
original Golf GTI, in fact.  
But the real story of the 1980s  
wasn't just the triumph of  
individual German car brands.

It was the rebranding  
of Germany itself.  
Thanks largely to  
the success of its cars,  
the land of sausages,  
sauerkraut and lederhosen  
was now becoming distinctly "cool".  
Even the German language,  
so often dismissed  
as "guttural and ugly",  
was now a potent weapon.  
Every year, the Schmidts,  
the Mullers and the Reinharts  
drive to their holiday villas.  
The Schmidts' car  
is slow and rather noisy.  
The Vorsprung Technik campaign  
is one of the cleverest  
advertising campaigns... ever.  
The Mullers drive a big, thirsty car.  
It allowed us to mock the Germans.  
The Germans always have  
tried to be first on the beach  
and the Germans always...  
You know, they're domineering,  
bossy people.  
The Reinharts drive an Audi 100.  
But at the same time,  
they quietly acknowledged  
that Germany was also  
a source of excellence.  
And the moral of the story is...  
if you want to get on  
the beach before the Germans,  
you'd better buy an Audi 100.  
"Vorsprung durch Technik",  
as they say in Germany.  
British Leyland has announced  
a loss of over 150 million  
for the first half of the year -  
more than the loss  
for the whole of last year.  
By now, British Leyland were dead.  
The company had been split up

and sold off, and in 1994,  
the last heir to British tradition  
of mass car production,  
the last company to make the Metro,  
the Rover Group,  
passed into the hands of...  
Well, of all people, the Germans,  
as part of BMW's expanding empire.  
But you know the really  
humiliating thing -  
that not even the Germans  
could turn Rover around.  
It carried on losing money  
and after just six years...  
they got rid of it.  
Of course, the fact that BMW  
had bought Rover AT ALL  
was enormously revealing.  
For, by the 1990s, our factories  
were becoming offshore outposts  
of Germany's automotive empire.  
Now, not even Britain's  
greatest hero  
could resist the allure  
of a German motor.

**Q:**

First, your new car.  
BMW - agile, five forward gears,  
all-points radar.  
Self-destruct system and naturally,  
all the usual refinements.  
And as the supreme symbol of  
their continental ambitions,  
the Germans were all too keen  
to embrace Europe's  
new single currency - the Euro.  
With trade barriers down and their  
neighbours borrowing and spending  
as though there'd be no tomorrow,  
Germany's manufacturers were  
laughing all the way to the bank.  
Of course, there'd be a sting  
in the tail for the Spanish,

the Greeks, and all the rest -  
a whopping great bill.

But by then, the only people  
who could bail them out  
were the Germans!

AMBIENT ELECTRONIC MUSIC

The Euro has been good  
for the Germans.

They've never sold  
so many Audis to Athens,  
so many Mercedes to Madrid.  
But as their ads suggest,  
Germany's car-makers now have  
genuinely global ambitions.

**MAN:**

Cool!

Eight out of ten German cars  
are actually sold outside Germany.  
Now, not just to their traditional  
customers in Europe and America -  
which incidentally  
have carried on growing -  
but to some of the most dynamic,  
developing countries in the world -  
Brazil, Korea, India, Russia.

Last year, you know, they sold  
half a million cars just in China.  
Now here's the interesting thing.

What are some of  
the most prestigious brands?

They're British Brands.

Take BMW, when they  
got rid of Rover,  
they did something very, very  
clever - they kept hold of Mini  
and in 2001 they relaunched  
Mini to tremendous acclaim.  
We took on Mini, which, in essence,  
was a small car, you know -  
great character.

Was over 40 years old  
and had a history in the...  
Effectively the growing up

of many, many people,  
and not just in the UK,  
all around the world.  
But more importantly,  
we turned it into a brand.  
And now there are  
seven members of a family,  
but very, very clearly  
under the brand of Mini.  
In just 12 years,  
BMW have sold over two million Minis  
in more than 100 countries.  
But the Germans  
didn't stop with Mini.  
BMW own Rolls-Royce, too.  
Even Bentley, perhaps the most  
prestigious of all British brands,  
answers to Volkswagen's  
steely commander-in-chief.

**TRANSLATION:**

a good example of how  
it's still possible in your country  
to make beautiful cars  
and sell them for a profit.  
And the Crewe factory is an example  
of how to fire up  
your workers for a car.  
I often go to Crewe,  
where we make a beautiful car,  
and the people there  
have a real passion for cars.  
They are very productive  
and they make great cars,  
with great quality leather,  
really nicely designed.  
And that's a good lesson  
for Great Britain  
in how to save  
British industrial jobs.  
You could hardly want  
a more dispiriting symbol  
of how things have changed,  
than a German chief executive

patting Britain's car workers  
on the head.

We've all come a long way  
since the days of Ivan Hirst.

#### ELECTRONIC MUSIC

What Crewe and Cowley  
and the other surviving  
British car plants prove  
is that there was never anything  
inherently wrong with our workers.  
We always had the skills.

What we didn't have, though, was the  
right management, the right unions,  
the right branding,  
or the right instincts.

And in the end, we paid the price.  
Of course, there is a bright side.  
We do still make one and a half  
million cars a year,  
most of them for export.

And thanks not least to the Germans,  
thousands of people  
do still have jobs  
in Britain's remaining  
car factories.

But there's no escaping the fact  
that we are making cars  
for our old rivals -  
the profits lining the pockets  
of Germany's economic titans.

What an irony.

Once our car industry was one  
of the Germans' chief competitors,  
now, it's one of  
their biggest assets,  
an essential prop of  
Germany's new economic empire.

But, you know,  
I rather admire them for it.  
They were down on the knees  
and they worked their way back.  
For more than 50 years,  
they got things right and we didn't.  
And now, from their car showrooms

to their national finances,  
the Germans are  
the envy of the world.  
And that is why, like so many  
of the cars on Britain's roads,  
Europe's 21st century may well  
end up being made in Germany.  
Still, at least one driver's  
back in a British-made car.  
We're changing vehicles.

**MUSIC:**

by Monty Newman and John Barry  
And if you can't quite run to a  
vintage Aston Martin, don't worry,  
there's always the Golf.