



Volume 5. Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War, 1890-1918 The Automobile (1913)

Automobile travel was pioneered in Wilhelmine Germany. The sophistication of German technology coupled with entrepreneurial enthusiasm to create many important breakthroughs in the automobile industry, the achievements of which were a source of great national pride.

Automotive technology is currently experiencing its most advanced stage of industrial expansion. This always occurs when an object has reached full “utilitarian maturity.” At this point, there is an optimal balance between supply and demand. On the one hand, we have a technical structure that has reached a state of perfection and is truly customized to everyone’s needs. Its price has fallen considerably, and its operation has also become significantly less expensive due to lower rubber prices and the increased use of gas, a local product, for fuel. On the other hand, we also see a growing regard for the car, a greater trust in its operational safety and performance – a trust that is being spread everywhere by examples and models, a greater familiarity with technical devices [on the part of the populace], along with greater technical know-how, and, finally, the overcoming of prejudices caused by “velocity excesses” in the automobile’s initial years and those of its development. These prejudices prevented expansion for quite some time.

Lower costs alone could not have triggered the astonishing spread of the automobile over the last few years. It was the full recognition of the car’s enormous economic, practical, and general value that first made its price less formidable in the eyes of many. As a consequence, buyers today are prepared to pay amounts that would be inconceivable for *any* other acquisition.

In this phase, automotive technology naturally has few radical and revolutionary innovations to offer. It is now entirely oriented toward production, since manufacturers are currently able to fabricate “standard types.” The typical passenger cars of the present day feature four-cylinder gas engines with electromagnetic ignition, frames of pressed steel, three- or four-gear transmissions, and power transference to the rear wheels via universal joints, drive shafts and bevel gears. Yet apart from the car’s general structure, it is especially important for the sake of operation that all its parts have been developed to function automatically, so that the lay driver is relieved of nearly all operational worries. The parts that still need to be operated and serviced are so accessible that they can be handled with relative ease. Fulfillment of these requirements has not only encouraged broad swathes of the population to use the automobile, it has also led people to take the operation of this complicated piece of machinery for granted. Doctors and businessmen no longer have any fear of traveling alone, since they know that little can happen to them. In case of emergency, they too know how to handle the few “trouble spots.”

There is also no denying the aesthetic reasons for the growing popularity of the car. The much maligned “bone-shakers” of yesteryear now hardly make any noise at all, thereby meeting the strictest demand of the day. [. . .]

An additional aesthetic requirement essential for the automobile's growing popularity is the shape of its body. Developments over the last few years have had a decisive impact on this field. Designers have finally abandoned shapes derived from horse-drawn carriages and have created new, "only automobile" designs, which not only meet the wide range of functional requirements but also look beautiful with their sleek, slender lines. All ornament, faux decoration, and needless trim have been eliminated. The car has been given its own garment. This, it must be emphasized, is a German achievement. Shapes originally designed to meet functional demands have evolved into purely stylish forms, and at the last Paris car show, the German car body was the uncontested – and near envied – standard bearer of good taste.

All things considered, Germany has good reason to feel satisfied with its automotive achievements over the past year. It has seen record exports and growing international recognition of its sturdy, dignified car models. The "American threat" has had less of a negative effect on business than was once feared, since the lower quality of American mass-produced vehicles has become obvious to all. As a consequence, factories are experiencing a tremendous increase in production, which is already causing a certain saturation of the market, partly because of the turmoil of war. For this reason, efforts to target untapped consumer groups with suitable new products are an appropriate strategy. Carmakers are marketing lighter, two-seater models that cost between 3,500 and 4,000 marks, and these will doubtless meet with great demand and sell well. Small 50-HS cars are being built with two seats situated behind or next to each other. The asocial tandem-layout will probably not enjoy popularity for long.

Naturally, the use of utilitarian vehicles is also increasing dramatically, particularly heavy military trucks, fire trucks, transport vehicles for people and equipment, etc. The industry is pinning great hopes on the use of the internal combustion engine for motorized ploughs.

So the car is currently experiencing its best years!

Source: N. Stern, "Automobilbau" ["Building Automobiles"], in *Das Jahr 1913. Ein Gesamtbild der Kulturentwicklung* [*The Year 1913. A Comprehensive Picture of the Development of the Culture*], edited by D. Sarason. Leipzig and Berlin, 1913, pp. 259-61.

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Translation: Adam Blauhut