



Professor Porsche's Wars: The Secret Life of Legendary Engineer Ferdinand Porsche Who Armed Two Belligerents through Four Decades by Karl Ludvigsen.

Barnsley, UK: Pen and Sword, 2014. Pp. ix, 286. ISBN 978-1-78303-019-4.

Review by Mark Walker, Union College (walkerm@union.edu).

Journalist Karl Ludvigsen, who specializes in the history of the automotive industry, has written a thorough chronological survey (1914-45) of the vehicles and weapons designed and built by Ferdinand Porsche's firm for the Austrian and German Empires and subsequently for the National Socialist state. *Professor Porsche's Wars* will inform students and specialists about the critical role of military technology in the German war economy, with an emphasis on entrepreneurs and engineers. The detail of its narrative will satisfy both automobile and weaponry enthusiasts. Unfortunately, the book is severely flawed by a lack of source citations for direct quotations and other information. It also betrays an ignorance of the relevant historical work on the Third Reich.

Porsche emerges here as an exceptionally gifted, industrious, and innovative engineer, as well as an imperious figure who set high standards and rarely let anyone contradict him. Ludvigsen highlights Porsche's personal relations with Adolf Hitler and his deep involvement with the Nazi Volkswagen (People's Car) project; he nonetheless portrays him as an apolitical technocrat who bore no responsibility for the crimes of the Third Reich. But, problematically, he relies too heavily on statements by Porsche family members at crucial points. For example, he quotes Porsche's son's claim that "At most, half a dozen men in all of Germany dared to speak their minds openly before Hitler, and my father was one of them.... For my father it [contributing to the Third Reich's war effort] was solely a matter of keeping the firm intact" (123, 131). In fact, as Ludvigsen's narrative clearly demonstrates, Porsche served the German state at war with conviction and enthusiasm.

Despite all its descriptions of military technology, this book is not really about war. Describing Porsche's work on the V-1 "buzz bomb," an early cruise missile, the author writes that "It is not our mission here to describe the sorry state of the lives lost to, and damage caused by, this deplorable yet at the same time undeniably innovative weapon in Britain or on the continent" (234). He also enthusiastically describes another novel weapon manufactured by Porsche:

Another opportunity for the KdF-Werke [Volkswagen plant] was a new device that came into its own at the mid-point of the war. Introduced in July 1943, the hand-held Panzerfaust anti-tank weapon proved sensationally effective. Cheap to make and easy to carry, the 13 lb. Panzerfaust was wielded not only by dedicated teams of tank hunters but also by ordinary soldiers and members of the Volkssturm [People's Storm] home guard, greatly bolstering both their menace and their confidence. (244)

Nothing here, then, about the ethics of sending the home guard, mostly men too old and boys too young for military service, into battle against Soviet tanks, nor the dire consequences for German civilians when invading Red Army forces understood that children and the elderly might be deadly assailants.

Ludvigsen's criticisms of Porsche's role are often ambiguous, as in the following passage on the use of forced and slave labor:

The workforce [at the Fallersleben Volkswagen works] was composed largely of Italians, Russians, Poles, and Frenchmen, held there against their will. As early as 1943 only one auto worker in eight in the plant was German.... By the end of 1944 some 8,500 would be working at St. Valentin, the majority Austrians but of many other nationalities and, at the end, more than 1,000 concentration camp inmates. (146, 162)

These revelations are mitigated (or obfuscated) by anecdotes suggesting Porsche tried to improve the working conditions of his laborers. The author also mentions that forced labor was used in World War I, as well, and contrasts Porsche's humane attitude with Hitler's ruthlessness.

That November [1941] Porsche met twice with Hitler.... [T]o one of these meetings Porsche brought a portfolio of photos that showed the undernourished conditions of the 850-odd Russian prisoners who were part of his workforce at Fallersleben.... Just as he had at Austro Daimler in the First World War, Porsche urged better arrangements for nourishment of the Russians. His intervention with Hitler led to the issuance of instructions to the Reich Food Ministry for the "pampering-up" of those prisoners who were thought to be capable of working well. (151-52)

So, when Porsche spoke his mind to Hitler, it was not to oppose using forced or slave labor, invading other countries, or waging war.

The best contribution of this book to our understanding of the Third Reich is Ludvigsen's self-contradictory discussion of Porsche's part in the desperate search for "Wonder Weapons" in the last years of the Second World War. He quotes Porsche's words in 1941 suggesting he did not favor an emphasis on exotic technology: "I am more convinced than ever that success lies in the direction of weapons and war materiel made as simply as possible. We should turn away from the mania of wanting to produce always more complex and sophisticated equipment" (169). But he later notes that Porsche's "continued advocacy of exotic drives, engines, and suspension for tanks at a time when Germany needed mass production rather than the ultimate in sophistication earned Porsche a 'mad scientist' reputation in some circles, including [Armament Minister Albert] Speer's" (195).

Besides an amphibious Volkswagen "Schwimmwagen" (amphibious vehicle), Porsche's most spectacular World War II designs were two very large tanks. Only a few prototypes of the "Maus" model tanks were constructed, but a good number of the slow-moving Ferdinand model were built, only to be misused tactically by Hitler in the massive tank battle of Kursk in summer 1943. The Allies' postwar assessment was that these exotic tanks represented a technical achievement, but consumed resources that should have gone to produce more conventional tanks. Though Porsche certainly spoke his mind in technical discussions, once an order had been placed, he worked very hard to fulfill it, whether or not he thought a given design was a good idea.

Ludvigsen is at his most perceptive in analyzing the consequences of the foolish search for wonder weapons in the war's last years.

For better or worse—largely the latter for Europe—the Führer's knowledge of these weapons under development was his main sustaining force as the war progressed. When challenged by colleagues about the war's prospects he was quick to assure them that the *Geheimwaffen* being created by his brilliant scientists and engineers would soon turn the tide. This placated them while, tragically, underpinning Adolf Hitler's blind determination to continue the fighting to its bitter end.... The Führer cited both [the Ferdinand and the Maus] in his pep talks to his generals, persuading them that these were battle-winning machines that would turn the tide in Germany's favor. That he was able to make reference to such new developments bolstered Hitler's own confidence in the future. Accordingly they deserve some credit—or blame—along with the other *Wunderwaffen* for Germany's endurance and persistence in battling on to the very end of an unwinnable war. (230, 270)

Karl Ludvigsen's final appraisal of Porsche is that he "contributed to the war effort of the Third Reich and had been rewarded, financially and in honors, for that contribution.... It was not Porsche's fault that the dictator who took charge of Germany in 1933 had long admired his work and was a fellow Austrian who had every confidence in his ability" (268-69). This conclusion represents a squandered opportunity to more accurately place Ferdinand Porsche and his career squarely in the true context of National Socialist ideology and practice.