

Mercedes in Peace and War: German Automobile Workers, 1903-1945

Bernard P. Bellon

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Bernard P. Bellon : Mercedes in Peace and War: German Automobile Workers, 1903-1945 before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Mercedes in Peace and War: German Automobile Workers, 1903-1945:

0 of 2 people found the following review helpful. not essentialBy PaulThin on history, long on rhetoric.3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. A wonderfully detailed account of workers' livesBy C. StraussWith an attention to detail that is both warmhearted and exhaustive, Bernard Bellon recounts the history of Mercedes workers over the course of four pivotal decades (1903-1945). "Mercedes in Peace and War" opens with a chronicle of the company's beginnings, coupled with a thorough characterization of the skilled workforce necessary to make these highly prized luxury automobiles at the turn of the century.We are given a remarkable glimpse into at least a slice of the workers' lives. Occupation, skill levels, wages, education, marital status, age, and newspaper-reading habits are included among the wealth of raw, otherwise dry demographic information the author is able to weave into a compelling narrative. (There are also excellent descriptions of the struggles over piece-rate versus hourly wages for the workers, as well as the length of the workweek, and these run like threads throughout, helping to unify the book.)On one level, we are presented with a solid labor history that encompasses everything from the character and habits of Mercedes' Swabian workers, to a compact account of the evolution of German trade unions and how the Soviet revolution impacted worker consciousness (hence labor relations).But it is the sensational nature of the author's findings about the worker

slaves and concentration camp inmates used by the company during World War II that one might expect -- or even wish -- to dominate the book. Dr. Bellon is too evenhanded and sincere to fall into this trap, however. The Nazi era is fitted into its proper context at the end of the book, and I am glad I refrained from jumping to this section, though there were moments when, knowing what lay ahead, I was tempted to do just that. The steady, measured pace drawing the reader towards these terrible revelations makes the fact of them even more jarring. The author is at his best here, supplying much-needed color to lives lived in the shadows of enslavement and brutality. I found the photographs of the nameless Russian workers forced to toil for no pay especially haunting in this context. The humanity of these forgotten laborers shines through in both image and word. And it is this warmth for the humanity of all his subjects that may be the author's greatest achievement, above even his thoroughgoing research; people are never demonized in his account, although exploitation and cruelty are certainly treated with the opprobrium they deserve. From the founders of Mercedes and its skilled craftsmen to the untrained machine operators and the women who joined the work force during World War I -- and ultimately to those concentration camp inmates who built the motors that powered the Luftwaffe -- we are drawn into their worlds and, thanks to the author, find much that is recognizable in each. I would recommend this highly readable academic book not only for trained historians or students of European labor history, but to anyone who considers himself a student of humanity.

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Great Labor History By A Customer My review is somewhat biased, as the Author is my 2nd Cousin. Yet his work speaks for itself. It is a very detailed account of German automobile factories and the workers during the early part of the 20th century. He does go into detail of how the factories responded during WWI and WWII. The only reason I did not give it 5 stars is that the book, on whole is geared towards the academic community, not for the average person, so it might seem a bit slow and cumbersome to non historians. Despite this it is a great work of history worth reading, especially if you like labor history. My only regret is that Bernard passed away from Lou Gherigs disease shortly after the book was published. The history community lost a great and dedicated historian. Nevertheless, his legacy lives in his work, which I feel you will find very informative.

Bernard Bellon combines a detailed study of the daily lives of factory workers at Daimler-Benz with a broader discussion of the role of the automobile industry in the economic and political development of Germany from 1903 through the end of World War II. Bellon was allowed access to previously closed company files detailing the company's labour practices during the Nazi period. His account of the close ties of Daimler-Benz officials with the Nazi leadership, and of the management's enslavement of prisoners of war and inmates of concentration camps is an important contribution to the ongoing debate concerning the role of German industry in the Nazi regime.

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About the Author
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