

Volkswagen connections to Nazi Germany and Uyghur Region (Xinjiang), China

November 2024 update

After ten years of operations in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, Volkswagen is to sell its plants in Xinjiang and end its complicity with Uyghur forced labour and abuses committed against the Uyghurs and other Turkic groups.

This was "a long overdue step which showed that human rights are not negotiable," said Janne Werning of Volkswagen investor Union Investment¹.

Earlier this year, [new evidence](#) provided by Dr. Adrian Zens, directly implicated Volkswagen in forced labour: The SAIC²-The Volkswagen test track in Turpan, Uyghur Region, was built using transferred "Uyghur labourers" in military drill uniforms, where they were subjected to indoctrination, biometric data collection, assimilation and surveillance.

This entity not only employed transferred Uyghur labourers through so-called "poverty alleviation" projects, but also actively participated in government work teams monitoring Uyghur families, in arranging and hosting assimilatory "ethnic unity" activities, exhorting Uyghur children to diligently study Chinese, and in facilitating the transfer of Uyghur surplus labourers to state-arranged workplaces.

These findings implicated a Volkswagen-controlled entity not only in activities aiding state atrocities but also in subjecting its staff to forced labour, assimilation, surveillance and indoctrination.

Background

Volkswagen operations and Uyghur forced labour

- Volkswagen has been operating in the People's Republic of China since 1984 and today has 33 plants across China. It has three Joint Ventures with Chinese motor corporations with varying degrees of ownership (between 25%-50%).
- In 2012 Volkswagen set up a plant in Urumqi, the heart of the Uyghur Region, as an equal Joint Venture with the state-owned company Shanghai Motor Corporation (SAIC) (part of the state-driven Great Western Development Strategy). The plant has 600 workers and produces up to 20,000 vehicles a year.
- According to the Chinese Automotive Associations (CAAM), when referring to Volkswagen, the contract demands "patriotic education" and "military training" for the employees. Volkswagen does not deny the existence of this agreement but states that there has been no military training.³ There is other evidence for high-level Chinese government involvement in Volkswagen's activities in China e.g. Chinese officials must have offices in each factory.

¹ [VW buckles after years of pressure to sell up in Xinjiang | Reuters](#)

² SAIC Motor Corporation Limited is a China-based company principally engaged in the research and development, manufacturing and distribution of whole vehicles and auto parts.

³ <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/china-cables-vw-verantwortung-xinjiang-uiguren-1.4696626>

- In 2020, the company's CEO Group in China, Stephan Wollenstein, [defended Volkswagen's presence in Xinjiang's capital, Urumqi](#) "What happened in the Nazi times was something that happened in our factories where we had forced labour, people producing Volkswagen cars," he said, "This certainly is an unacceptable situation. Therefore, we are making sure that none of our production sites have forced labour, and this is something that we specifically checked in Urumqi and I can assure you, we do not have forced labour."
- But when asked whether he could be certain of that claim and give an assurance that none of the Urumqi workforce - of which around 25% is made up of Uyghurs and other minorities - had been in a camp, Dr Wollenstein said he could not.
- Additionally, a Volkswagen display and component supplier – [Hefei Highbroad Advanced Material Co. Ltd](#) (possibly under subsidiaries of Hefei Fuying Photoelectric Co. Ltd or BOE Technology Group Co. Ltd) - is using thousands of Uyghur forced labourers in their factories as a part of their “poverty alleviation” programmes.

1930s and 1940s Nazi Germany

- Volkswagen was founded in 1937, as part of Nazi leader Adolf Hitler's vision to enable German families to own their first car. During the Second World War, the Wolfsburg-based firm manufactured vehicles for the German army, using more than 15,000 slave labourers from nearby concentration camps.
- The company operated four concentration camps and eight forced-labour camps on its property, where it used both Jewish and non-Jewish forced labour, primarily from eastern Europe.
- Volkswagen was also among the first companies to take advantage of the forced labour of Soviet prisoners of war.
- The company actively sought out forced labourers from the concentration camp system. One Volkswagen plant engineer travelled to Auschwitz and selected 300 skilled metal workers from the massive transports of Hungarian Jews in 1944. In addition, 650 Jewish women were transferred to assemble military munitions.

THANK YOU to all our supporters who have participated in our actions to raise awareness over Volkswagen's operations in the Uyghur Region, who have written their MP or directly to Volkswagen leadership raising their concerns.



Rabbi Dr Barbara Borts and Benny Ross,
Council member at Newcastle Reform Synagogue

About René Cassin

René Cassin is a UK human rights charity (Reg No 1117472), named after the French-Jewish co-author of the UN's 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. René Cassin works to promote and protect universal rights drawing on Jewish experience and Jewish values. René Cassin works:

- within the Jewish community – by building support for human rights values amongst British Jews.
- in the wider community – by bringing the authority of a Jewish perspective on issues that resonate with Jewish experience.