

The Autobahn – Narrator’s Text

Narrator

0:05

A German dream in blue and white: the arrow indicates the way to the paradise of boundless speed: to the autobahn

Frankfurt Junction - which nowadays 320,000 vehicles pass daily. Here began the illusion of rapid and unhindered mobility which was to make the German autobahn into a legend

0:32

Original sound: Wolfgang Westermann

Chamber of Trade and Industry, Wuppertal, former lorry driver

For me speed has nothing to do with freedom, but of course it’s great if you can do without restrictions on the autobahn and if you don’t have a speed limit, if you want to drive faster and can do 240, I also drive at that speed along the federal autobahn, that’s the thrill of high speed.
0:49

Narrator

0.51

The intoxication of high speed, a lure to which the Germans seem to be particularly prone. But even though there is still no general speed limit on the German autobahn network, the boundless mobility for free citizens has increasingly come to a standstill - on the very concrete roads whose foundations were laid in National Socialist Germany.

1.28

Archive footage, *Deutsche Wochenschau*

“The bold plan of the *Führer* to create work has far-reaching implications. The construction of the *Reichsautobahnen* which, when completed, will be 6000 kilometres long began at several sites simultaneously.”

1.53

Original sound Marianne Hesse

Eye-witness of the construction of the *Reichsautobahn*

The road between Darmstadt and Griesheim was cut through by the construction of the autobahn. When the autobahn was being built the *Arbeitsdienst* here by Darmstadt dug out the earth by hand. A chap stood up at the end with a whole row of men from the *Arbeitsdienst* in front of him and he always cried, “Heave” and then the spades went up and with them the earth went flying, it was really funny.

2:21

Original sound Ludwig Hormel
Former worker on the *Reichsautobahn*

After my apprenticeship I was unemployed and then in '33 Hitler came and it became known that an autobahn was to be built, an autobahn from Darmstadt to Frankfurt passing through Mörfelden. That was to be a sort of representative stretch of autobahn. And so we were then requested by the labour exchange and told to report to the autobahn with the remark: join the SA. So we joined the SA and then went to work.

Narrator

2:57

The construction of the autobahn promised to give work and wages to the more than 6 million unemployed.

3:06

Original sound Heinrich Hormel
Resident

And when the time came to turn the first sod the unemployed marched up, each received a new spade and together they then marched out to Niederrad, and there was Adolf.

3:18

Archive footage, *Deutsche Wochenschau*:

“The great significance of the project is most evident in the fact that the *Führer* himself has turned the first sod.”

3:25

Original sound Hitler:

“And before 6 years are past, an enormous work will attest to our will, our industriousness, our ability and our determination. German workers: get to work!”

3:40

Sprecher

3:41

But there were never to be more than 250,000 unemployed who went to work on the construction of the roads of the *Führer*, even after 1935 when

the *Reichsarbeitsdienst* was compulsory. Equally fictitious is the claim that Hitler thought up the autobahn. The dual carriageways which had long been demanded by industry and commerce had at first been staunchly opposed by the Nazis. Long before Hitler there had already been work on plans for the construction of "roads solely for cars".

4:14

The Avus in Berlin: already in the Twenties racing cars attempted to break records on this multi-lane test track.

The systematic groundwork for the construction of the autobahn, however, was done by HaFraBa, a society which by 1926 had already planned in detail the route from north to south - later commenced by the Nazis - connecting the Hanseatic cities with Frankfurt and Basle: the HA-FRA-BA.

4.40

The first German autobahn between Cologne and Bonn was officially declared open in 1932.

It was the Lord Mayor of Cologne who opened the high-speed road which had likewise been built by unemployed workers. His name: Konrad Adenauer

But the Nazis' propaganda called the autobahns "Roads of the *Führer*".

5:03

Original sound Ludwig Hormel

Former worker on the *Reichsautobahn*

And the work had started in the middle of the forest, a section had been cleared in order to get to the soil, and then we were detailed to a section and had to dig away at the earth, but only part of the soil, the so-called topsoil, that we had to bring to the wheelbarrows, then we had to get out the sand and that was then collected over at that end where the autobahn starts. 5:31

Narrator

5:31

The collective trial of strength was effectively portrayed by the Nazis

5:40

Original sound Ludwig Hormel

Former worker on the *Reichsautobahn*

This work had a certain urgency, we had to put on a spurt as the news leaked out that for publicity reasons Adolf wanted this section from Darmstadt to Frankfurt soon.

5:54

**Original Sound Alfred Wegstein
Former Metal Worker and Eye-Witness**

And they moved around the place with sand and gravel in their waggon as far as Darmstadt, where they brought the stuff and emptied it, and then they brought the workers there and so on.

Narrator

6:04

As a sixteen year old apprentice in metal-working Alfred Wegstein became a participant in Hitler's gigantic project.

6:12

**Original sound Alfred Wegstein
Former metal-worker and eye-witness**

And so, the boss came and said, I've got a large order for constructing railings on the autobahn bridges, and so we got going. The iron then arrived, 10 or 12 cm u-iron bars, and these were then welded together and transported and here at the bridge we got the railings up hoisting them up by ropes approximately 7 metres, the bridge was already finished, and then we installed the railings one by one, first on one side of the bridge then on the other, filling in and concreting, sealing with lead because of rust and moisture, and that was left for approximately 3 weeks, and then the railings were finished.

6:57

**Original sound Ludwig Hormel
Former worker on the *Reichsautobahn***

And in the forest masts were erected and lamps installed for night work. And I was detailed to go up the mast with crampons each time in the evening and connect the lamps so that they shone where the men were working.

7:18

Original sound Hitler

After completion of the *Reichsautobahnen* Germany will have the most modern road network in the world, a enormous testament to peaceful modernization

Narrator

7:31

Peaceful modernization as a ploy, concrete roads as architecture designed to impress.

7:44

The unusual concrete material of the road surface and above all the road width of 24 metres confronted planners and workers with difficulties hitherto unknown. In addition during the construction of these highways without crossroads every road, stream and river had to be traversed. After a construction period of 20 months the first section is opened in May 1935:

8:05

**Original sound Heinrich Hormel
Resident and Eye-witness**

The opening had naturally been planned a long time before, and on the day itself all the organizations were there with us the Hitler Youth and so on occupying the bridge, the *Jungvolk* was at the bridge, the SA from Walldorf was there, everybody was stretched out along the whole route and then, in addition, there were lots of people here who had come by bike or on foot with the whole family...

Narrator

8:27

Propaganda Minister Goebbels portrays it as a major event in world history:

8:31

**Archive footage, *Deutsche Wochenschau*
Original sound Goebbels**

It is a matter close to my heart to thank the tens of thousands of unknown workers who have worked on these roads and who for their part have ensured that the National Socialist regime has brought forth achievements which will endure for centuries.

Narrator

9:00

Perfectly stage-managed: the self-portrayal of the regime as an heroic mass movement

9:07

Original sound Marianne Hesse

Eye-witness of the construction of the *Reichsautobahn*

The slope was crammed full with people sitting or standing and then we all flocked there and watched and waited until Hitler came past with the SS marching in double-time alongside the car, and then in a flash he had gone past.

9:27

Original sound Alfred Wegstein
Former metal-worker and eye-witness

You just saw the car driving past, too many people were standing there, and he swept past, that was it, they all shouted “Heil”, over, the whole thing was finished.

Narrator

9:40

But early on the mobilization of the masses also led to opposition, as not all shared this enthusiasm.

9:49

Original sound Heinrich Hormel
Resident and eye-witness

During the night Communists or opponents had scralled something on the bridge: “RFB *Rotfrontbund* lives”, “banned but not dead”, “never again war” or something like it. They never found out who it was and they covered it up with white paint, but at midday before Hitler came the sun was shining again so that the white paint faded a bit and you could see it from a long way off.

10:14

Narrator

10:15

Fritz Todt, the General Inspector of German Roads who had been appointed by Hitler and who was loyal to the *Führer* pushed forward with the construction of the *Reichsautobahn*.

10:24

Archive footage, *Deutsche Wochenschau*
Original sound Fritz Todt

Three great routes from north to south as well as three from east to west, and alongside these main routes a series of connecting links will be built so that all commercial, transport and political centres can be reached via the broad-meshed network of *Reichsautobahnen*.

Narrator

10:46

At the same time the linking up of the towns was meant to open up a gate through which the German motorist could get to know the beauty of his German homeland.

In contrast to the handmade craftsmanship propagated by the Nazis modern machines were used when rivers and gorges had to be crossed: The legendary Mangfalltal bridge, in those days a technical sensation with its steel girder frame.

11:16

In order to offer the driver spectacular views, it was not always the technically most sensible route that was chosen during the planning phase for the "sweeping roads".

11.29

Archive footage, *Deutsche Wochenschau*

"In contrast to conventional road building completely new methods have been adopted, the new roads harmonizing with the German landscape both in the lowlands and the hills.

Narrator

11:42

But was the *Reichsautobahn* designed just for the enjoyment of the countryside?

11:46

Original sound Marianne Hesse

Eye-witness of the construction of the *Reichsautobahn*

Lots of people believed that Hitler built the autobahns so that he could move his vehicles during an invasion or military attack.

Narrator

11:55

But it is doubtful whether Hitler combined military objectives with the construction of the autobahns.

12:01

Archive footage, *Deutsche Wochenschau*
Original sound Hitler:

The new German autobahn network is not only in its construction the greatest feat of its kind on earth, the most exemplary achievement, it will also more than anything else help to link up the German regions, the German lands with each other and press them into a unified whole.

Narrator

12:20

Unification enforced – but considerate:

12:23

Voice of the *Wochenschau*:

“But the woodland animals have to be protected, and therefore there are these signs warning motorists to drive carefully where wild animals have their paths, especially at dusk, and at night these signs light up in the beam of the car headlights.”

Narrator

12:38

Federal autobahn number 2, between Dortmund, Hanover and Berlin, here at the “dual filling station” Rhyern.

The last original filling station in the very Germanic building style demanded by the National Socialist ideology.

In the Thirties the necessary infrastructure for the long-distance bypasses had yet to be built.

Alongside petrol stations and service areas along the route it was above all maintenance depots that were important in order to ensure that the roads were passable all year round.

13:24

Original sound Marianne Hesse
Eye-witness of the construction of the *Reichsautobahn*

Driving along the old autobahns was strenuous because it was always bumpy on the concrete blocks, and what with these expansion joints, there was always a jump, you could practically count how many metres you had driven because there was always a jolt.

13:45

Original sound Ludwig Hormel
Fomer worker on the *Reichsautobahn*

Yes, it had become known that Rosemeyer was making his record attempts there, and that was of course of interest for us, so we rushed up there and saw him making his test runs.

13:59

Narrator

14:02

Records under the swastika – in 1938 the German sport idol Bernd Rosemeyer seeks to win the world speed record for Autounion against Mercedes.

At a speed of over 400kph he is caught by a gust of wind and killed, just as he attempts in the words of the Nazi propaganda to make “the *Führer*’s roads into the fastest in the world.”

14:30

Original sound Ludwig Hormel

Former worker on the *Reichsautobahn*

We could see the wreckage only from a distance and that was really the high point of my memories of the autobahn.

14:42

14:43

Original sound Marianne Hesse

Eye-witness of the construction of the *Reichsautobahn*

In Darmstadt we were bombed out in 1944, and the American and British planes mostly used the autobahn as a bearing, and I think that when they bombed Darmstadt it was with this help.

Narrator

15:02

Along the *Führer*’s roads – German soldiers on their way into captivity. Postwar.

15:09

Voice of the *Wochenschau*

The Wolfsburg car works are producing 1,200 Volkswagen each month – one third for the occupying forces, one third for export and the remaining 400 cars for the home market.

Narrator

15:20

Rebuilding and “economic miracle”: the Volkswagen commissioned by Hitler - symbol of an era. Motorization stands for a new beginning.

15:31

Original sound Marianne Hesse

Eye-witness of the construction of the *Reichsautobahn*

It was 1948 in the American zone of occupation that I got my driving licence. In those days I was a book-keeper in a building business and the wages would always be paid in cash to the workers, and my boss always had to drive me to the building site so that I could pay out the individual wages, and then one day he told me that I should learn to drive as he was not my chauffeur.

15:54

Original sound Ludwig Hormel

Former worker on the *Reichsautobahn*

In '57 I bought an Isetta and with the Isetta I drove along the autobahn for the first time, along the stretch to Darmstadt and I still remember saying to my wife: imagine that I was involved in the earth works here. Of course my wife was interested in driving and did her driving test.

Narrator

16:21

Emancipation at the steering wheel

16:23

Voice of the *Wochenschau*

“Especially on the German autobahns the traffic is developing in a way almost unparalleled in Europe. The motor vehicle is the symbolic expression of our technological age. The lorries in the service of the economy travel night and day, transporting goods to all centres of consumption.

Narrator

16:39

The accelerated exchange of goods requires a further extension of the autobahn network.

16:45

**Original sound Ewald Höhlschen
Lorry driver and haulage contractor**

The roads were were very bad indeed, they were pretty rough, you had to be wide-awake when you were on them so you were always pleased when you could drive for 20 or 30 kilometres along the autobahn.

When we used to drive to Hamburg we would drive as far as Bad Oeynhausen, come off in Bad Oeynhausen and then go via Nienburg, Rotenburg, Dibbersen and onto the Bremen stretch and onto the Hamburg motorway towards Hamburg. And so it was 13 hours until you were in Hamburg, and that's why in all directions the traffic...

Narrator

17:15

... only moved forward with difficulty, and principally on the axis from the north to south, as the flow of traffic to the east was disrupted. Even intact concrete carriageways could not be used in a divided Germany

17:32

The mobilization of the West Germans who had inherited over 2,000 kilometres of *Reichsautobahn* continues.

17:40

**ADAC (German Motoring Club) 1954
Film: „Die Straßenwacht greift ein“ (The street watch steps in)**

“In 1954 the German Motoring Club, or ADAC for short, set up the road patrol service which in May of the same year was admitted to the existing european road patrol services. Scarcely anybody is aware of the burdens which these men take upon themselves for the benefit of the general public.

18:02

At the beginning of duty and also several times in the course of the day the man from the road patrol reports from the communication column to the nearest maintenance depot and asks whether anything needs to be done. Yes, all right, will be dealt with, as quickly as possible-

The tool kit is so fully equipped that all faults can be repaired, in addition there are spark plugs, light bulbs, two boxes with dressings, two hand fire extinguishers and flags for road safety purposes.

The fault is repaired, and so on your way...”

18:39

Narrator

18:39

- with the economic upturn – the continued autobahn construction in a democracy becomes a symbol for the success of the capitalist system. The Federal Republic of Germany is in the fast lane. Progress demands acceleration.

19:00

German TV-News, Tagesschau 1968

By appealing to the common sense of the motorist we intend to ensure that the traffic here on the autobahn between Frankfurt and Wiesbaden flows more freely.

The suggested speed is above all designed to ensure that certain minimum speeds are kept to, so that the dawdlers are given a recommendation by the autobahn to drive a bit quicker, a bit more swiftly.

Narrator

19:25

The land of the economic miracle declares war not on speeding but on slow driving, and the motorist is expected to adjust to the dynamism of the economy.

Autobahn construction in the Federal Republic reaches an all-time high with an increase of 475 kilometres in 1976 – but not without its consequences:

19:55

TV-News, Wochenspiegel 1968

Transport Minister Georg Leber

In terms of accidents the Federal Republic is ahead of all the other motorised nations of the world, we hold the world record for fatal car accidents. If one goes into the reasons, one comes to the dreadful conclusion that alcohol is becoming more and more a cause of serious and fatal traffic accidents.

We have to fight accidental death on our roads, and if necessary, take responsibility in the interests of the nation and have the courage to set limits and impose restrictions on ourselves and the public in order to beat this phenomenon.

20:35

20:36

Original sound Ludwig Hormel

Former worker on the *Reichsautobahn*

In the first years it was still not that bad, you could let a woman drive without any bother. But over the years this driving became a nightmare. My wife, she was very sensitive and it became so much that she said that she no longer wanted to be behind the wheel, that I could not even get her to drive.

20:56

Narrator

20:56

“Freie Fahrt für freie Bürger” (Unhindered mobility for free citizens) is championed by the ADAC.

Its demand for unhindered mobility is also adopted by the politicians.

21:05

German TV-News, Tagesschau, 10.07.1969

Transport Minister Georg Leber

The extension of the transport network in a country is one of the great public tasks faced by every nation but especially by the Federal Republic. The standard of living, the competitiveness of the economy, the face of the country and the opportunities of the people living in it depend on the solution to this problem. We have to make the final stage of motorization with 3 people for each car the point of departure for our plans, we have to improve motorization and from 1980, 1985 make the traffic flow much more freely. In addition to the 4,500 kilometres of autobahn there will so many new autobahns and long distance federal highways, that by 1985 we will have built another 5,500 kilometres of federal autobahn, that is the biggest network that has ever been built in a single country...

Narrator

22:04

But there were two states on German soil, and the newly woven autobahn network ended at the border control posts of the other Germany-
“Transit”:

Whoever wanted to reach West Berlin had to pass through the territory of the GDR on the old and antiquated carriageways of the *Reichsautobahn*.

22:26

Original sound Ewald Höhlschen

Lorry driver and haulage contractor

After 6 or 7 hours we had reached the border at Helmstedt and then we went through border clearance and the paperwork, customs certificates and everything was dealt with, and they then looked to see what, according to the accompanying goods permits, you had got on board.

22:38

Original sound Wolfgang Westermann

Chamber of Trade and Industry in Wuppertal, former lorry driver

There were up to 160, 200, 250 goods permits that you had to have and that had to be stamped accordingly. Of course the customs officials in the GDR examined everything very carefully.

22:57

Original sound Ewald Höhlschen

Lorry driver and haulage contractor

And it could happen that a border guard would ask you a question, say, where is the crate with the pyrotechnical articles from the firm of Moog. We didn't know that either, after all there were single packages, so you started to search for the crate and when the trailer was almost empty you found the crate, and after he had examined the crate you could load everything back on again...

23:13

Original sound: Wolfgang Westermann

Chamber of Trade and Industry, former lorry driver

We had to open the tarpaulins and then they checked whether anybody was in there and at a ramp they inspected underneath the vehicle with mirrors.

23:24

23:30

In the '60s it was the case that the GDR charged fees from the long-distance drivers such as visa charges, transport charges, for each ton a fee had to be paid, and if you had dangerous goods on board an even bigger sum had to be paid, and this was meant to be used for the extension of the roads.

23:51

Original sound Ewald Höhlschen

Lorry driver and haulage contractor

From Helmstedt to Berlin the autobahn was very bad indeed, there were no white lines, no central crash-barriers, and the controls, you weren't allowed to stop, you constantly had the GDR police on your back and if you had a breakdown you had to prove afterwards where you'd been, what you had been doing in the meantime - they were constantly harrasing you. Then your speed was a problem, if they caught you then you really were made to pay, then you had not just one policeman but four around you, an A4 sheet of paper would be filled out - God knows what they were all doing and what it costed - and then you were allowed to carry on.

Narrator

24:27

As far as Berlin – West Berlin, until reunification an island of traffic.

24:35

In order to compensate the restricted mobility of the residents the traffic planners attempted to avoid congestion within the city. The mobility of the islanders was to be guaranteed by multi-lane urban motorways.

24:55

Between the rows of houses the web of arteries extends through tunnels and over high-level roads. The noisy highways have been pushed right up as far as the walls of the houses.

25:08

But even in the countryside one's front garden is not safe if the mobile public demands a widening of the autobahn.

25:16

One of the traffic planners' dreams seems to have been realized at Sonnborn Junction in the region of the Bergisches Land.

25:28

The streams of traffic are able to flow past each other in all directions so long as the motorist knows when to get in the right lane at the right time and stays in the right lane. A pedestrian on the other hand appears like an alien who has lost his way, and who only avoids being run over by being on a separate path.

25:47

**Original sound Wolfgang Westermann
Chamber of Trade and Industry, Wuppertal, former lorry driver**

The autobahn was certainly never a travel experience, the high speed means that you scarcely notice everything alongside it.

There were perhaps one or two attractions, but these days you don't pay attention to them at all, you see the autobahn as a means of getting quickly from A to B.

Narrator

26:11

The perception of the surroundings evaporates when space becomes a distance which has to be covered as quickly as possible in order to get from A to B.

A can be Riga, Warsaw or Prague and B Dortmund, Rotterdam or Barcelona. Since the opening of the EU´s borders the through traffic particularly from east to west has almost exceeded the capacity of the German autobahns.

26:40

There are attempts to avoid congestion with the help of electronic traffic control. One of the most modern establishments in Hessen is the traffic control centre at the Homburg Junction, processing data on traffic density and weather conditions collected by induction loops on the traffic lanes. Once adjusted to the traffic conditions the speed restriction then flashes up automatically on the gantries.

27:08

Frankfurt Junction, where the legend of unhindered mobility started, has remained a barometer of the state of the Germans´ mobility.

27:23

Original sound Heinrich Hormel
Resident and eye-witness

Within a short space of time the section between Darmstadt and Frankfurt was a nightmare, it was always full, and in the morning, in the morning rush-hour the cars queued up, and then it was widened, then even a second time, and even now it´s still sometimes full.

Narrator

27:38

A never-ending circle which seems to have no consequences.

27:50

Original sound Heinrich Hormel
Resident and eye-witness

And then it starts all over again, the autobahn has to be widened, we protest against the forest being cleared as so many trees have already been felled, but then we too again use the car, the numbers keep increasing, but nobody knows how to solve the problem.

Narrator

28:02

Every day individual mobility is transformed into mass paralysis and in the air saturated with exhaust fumes mobility appears to be a mirage.
Standstill.

Names of the eye-witnesses

Wolfgang Westermann

Chamber of Trade and Industry, Wuppertal
Former lorry driver

Marianne Hesse

(Eye-witness of the construction of the *Reichsautobahn*)
(Former book-keeper)

Ludwig Hormel

Former worker on the *Reichsautobahn*

Alfred Wegstein

Former metal-worker and eye-witness

Heinrich Hormel

Resident and eye-witness

Mr Ewald Höhlschen

Lorry driver and haulage contractor

Credits

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Cameraman

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An EBU co-production with

DR, ERT; RTP, SWR, Teleac/NOT, TRT, TVP, UR, WDR, YLE.