Bosch history

Scholarly overview of Bosch corporate history up to present day

Renowned authors: Dr. Johannes Bähr and Dr. Paul Erker

- “Bosch. Geschichte eines Weltunternehmens” is first complete historical analysis
- Robert Bosch’s legacy: values and principles embedded in corporate culture
- Emphasis on history, values, and corporate culture is exceptional, according to authors

Stuttgart – The publishing house C.H. Beck is publishing the first complete history of Robert Bosch GmbH to be written by independent scholars. The authors of the recently-released book “Bosch. Geschichte eines Weltunternehmens” are the industrial historians Dr. Johannes Bähr and Dr. Paul Erker. The starting point of the historical analysis are the personality and business principles of company’s founder Robert Bosch. The two historians recount the beginnings of Bosch as the “Workshop for Precision Mechanics”, its rise to become a leading automotive supplier, and its expansion as a provider of technology and services. They describe in detail the creation of the company’s corporate culture and social orientation. The authors had access to original sources in the company archives for their research. “The history of Bosch is part of German and international industrial history. Both authors succeeded in crafting a nuanced, realistic, and at the same time accessible portrayal of our company’s long and multifaceted history,” said Franz Fehrenbach, the chairman of the Bosch supervisory board and managing partner of Robert Bosch Industrietreuhand KG, at the book’s launch. The event, which took place at Stuttgart’s “Literaturhaus”, was timed to coincide with the 152nd birthday of Robert Bosch.
Over approximately 720 pages, Bähr and Erker review the history of the Bosch Group up to the present day. They address major innovative achievements and successes, as well as difficult periods. In particular, it was in hard times that the company founder’s principles proved themselves. “That Bosch reflects on its own history, its own values, and its own corporate culture is particularly remarkable,” Bähr said in Stuttgart.

**Robert Bosch: an enduring influence**

“One of the most distinctive things about Bosch corporate history is that it can’t be understood without looking at the founder and his influence on the company,” Bähr explained. Robert Bosch was not only the company’s founder. Until his death in March 1942, his personal views played a major role in shaping its development. According to Bähr, “Robert Bosch’s most enduring legacy wasn’t his business success, but rather the principles and values he advocated, which he firmly embedded in the corporate culture, and towards which business policies had to be oriented.”

**Bosch: utterly distinctive**

The authors eventually come to the conclusion that Bosch does not differ in every respect from the majority of German and European businesses. “Nonetheless, Bosch is an utterly distinctive company,” Erker said. Even in times of globalization, their unique profile has not lost any of its contours, he explained. “In fact, Robert Bosch GmbH has set itself apart through its truly distinctive way of operating, which it has maintained with remarkable consistency, and which the company remains committed to,” Erker added.

**Bosch in the Third Reich: between conformity and opposition**

One of the central topics of the book is the conduct of Robert Bosch and the company during the Third Reich. The authors describe the challenge of walking the tightrope between conformity and opposition. They offer numerous examples of how associates and managers dealt with conditions under the Nazis. The circle around Robert Bosch supported resistance against Hitler. The board of management and heads of personnel took a stand in support of Jewish and “half-Jewish” associates and offered assistance to persecuted Jews. At the same time, the company was an arms producer for the regime and employed forced labor. “In light of these contrasts, any whole-sale judgment of Bosch’s conduct in the Third Reich falls short,” Bähr concludes.
The corporate constitution: reflecting the will and spirit of the founder
The second key topic is the period following Robert Bosch’s death. The founder had stipulated in his will that the company should preserve its independence. At the same time, it should continue to pursue “strong and meaningful” development. The specific elaboration and implementation of this proviso were discussed intensively. In 1964, the Vermögensverwaltung Bosch, the precursor of the Robert Bosch Stiftung, acquired a majority stake in Robert Bosch GmbH from the founder’s heirs. Dr. Christof Bosch, grandson of the founder and spokesperson for the Bosch family, made reference to this during the book’s launch: “The arrangement that was set up back then serves to achieve what was stipulated in the will.” As he explained, the corporate constitution in its current form strengthens the company, opens up future prospects for it, and simultaneously offers the family financial security. “This has allowed the company to develop in line with the principles of Robert Bosch.”

The project: three and a half years of intensive research
“Bosch. Geschichte eines Weltunternehmens” is the result of three and a half years of intensive research. During this time, Bähr and Erker had access to all relevant documents and files. For the first time, independent experts had the opportunity to examine the minutes of the executors’ committee meeting for Robert Bosch’s will. In addition, the authors had the opportunity to examine minutes from confidential meetings that took place up to 2010. The analysis was supplemented by research in state and municipal archives. In addition, Bähr and Erker conducted numerous interviews with eyewitnesses. These included members of the Bosch family as well as current and former executives and board of management members. The last comprehensive account of Bosch history was “Robert Bosch – Leben und Leistung”, written by Theodor Heuss in 1946. Since the late 1990s, other works on specific aspects of Bosch history have been published.

Stuttgart’s “Literaturhaus”: book launched at historical site
The launch of “Bosch. Geschichte eines Weltunternehmens” took place in Stuttgart’s “Literaturhaus”. The building is a designated historical monument and is part of the newly refurbished “Bosch Areal”. At the beginning of the 20th century, this collection of manufacturing and administrative buildings was the company’s headquarters. The two floors used by the Literaturhaus association also contain Robert Bosch’s former study. Robert Bosch was born on September 23, 1861, 152 years to the day before the book’s release, in Albeck near Ulm in southern Germany. He died on March 12, 1942 in Stuttgart.
About the authors
Dr. Johannes Bähr is a professor for industrial and social history at the Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main. He is the author of numerous works on the history of large German companies, such as MAN and Dresdner Bank. Dr. Paul Erker is a professor for modern and contemporary history at the Ludwig Maximilians University of Munich. He specializes in business and corporate history topics. He has published historical studies on companies including Dachser and Continental.

“Bosch. Geschichte eines Weltunternehmens” by Johannes Bähr and Paul Erker is currently available from German booksellers for €39.95. Further information about the publication can be found here.

More information on the history of Bosch can be found here. Historical video footage of Bosch can be downloaded from the Bosch video portal.

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The Bosch Group is a leading global supplier of technology and services. In 2012, its roughly 306,000 associates generated sales of 52.5 billion euros. Since the beginning of 2013, its operations have been divided into four business sectors: Automotive Technology, Industrial Technology, Consumer Goods, and Energy and Building Technology. The Bosch Group comprises Robert Bosch GmbH and its more than 360 subsidiaries and regional companies in some 50 countries. If its sales and service partners are included, then Bosch is represented in roughly 150 countries. This worldwide development, manufacturing, and sales network is the foundation for further growth. Bosch spent some 4.8 billion euros for research and development in 2012, and applied for over 4,800 patents worldwide. The Bosch Group’s products and services are designed to fascinate, and to improve the quality of life by providing solutions which are both innovative and beneficial. In this way, the company offers technology worldwide that is “Invented for life.”

The company was set up in Stuttgart in 1886 by Robert Bosch (1861-1942) as “Workshop for Precision Mechanics and Electrical Engineering.” The special ownership structure of Robert Bosch GmbH guarantees the entrepreneurial freedom of the Bosch Group, Making it possible for the company to plan over the long term and to undertake significant up-front investments in the safeguarding of its future. Ninety-two percent of the share capital of Robert Bosch GmbH is held by Robert Bosch Stiftung GmbH, a charitable foundation. The majority of voting rights are held by Robert Bosch Industrietreuhand KG, an industrial trust. The entrepreneurial ownership functions are carried out by the trust. The remaining shares are held by the Bosch family and by Robert Bosch GmbH.