

Registration: the Nazi paradigm

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New research into Adolf Hitler's use of firearms registration lists to confiscate guns and the execution of their owners teaches a forceful lesson, one which reveals why the American people and Congress have rejected registering honest firearm owners.

It would be instructive, at this time, to recall why the American citizenry and Congress have historically opposed the registration of firearms. The reasons are plain. Registration makes it easy for a tyrannical government to confiscate firearms and to make prey of its subjects. Denying this historical fact is no more justified than denying that the Holocaust occurred or that the Nazis murdered millions of unarmed people.

I am writing a book on Nazi policies and practices, which sought to repress civilian gun ownership and to eradicate gun owners, in Germany and in occupied Europe. The following sampling of my findings should give pause to the suggestion that draconian punishment of citizens, for keeping firearms, necessarily is a social good.

The Night of the Broken Glass (Kristallnacht), the infamous Nazi rampage against Germany's Jews, took place in November, 1938. It was preceded by the confiscation of firearms from the Jewish victims. On Nov. 8th, 1938, the *New York Times* reported, from Berlin, "Berlin Police Head Announces 'Disarming' of Jews," explaining: The Berlin Police President, Count Wolf Heinrich von Helldorf, announced that, as a result of a police activity in the last few weeks, the entire Jewish population of Berlin had been "disarmed," with the confiscation of 2,569 hand weapons, 1,702 firearms and 20,000 rounds of ammunition. Any Jews still found in possession of weapons, without valid licenses, are threatened with the severest punishment."

On the evening of Nov. 9th, 1938, Adolf Hitler, Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels, and other Nazi chiefs, planned the attack. Orders went out to Nazi security forces: "All Jewish stores are to be destroyed immediately, Jewish synagogues are to be set on fire. The Führer wishes that the police do not intervene. All Jews are to be disarmed. In the event of resistance, they are to be shot, immediately."

All hell broke loose on Nov. 10th: "Nazis Smash, Loot and Burn Jewish Shops and Temples." "One of the first legal measures issued was an order by Heinrich Himmler, commander of all German police, forbidding Jews to possess any weapons whatever and imposing a penalty of twenty years confinement, in a concentration camp, upon every Jew found in possession of a weapon hereafter." Thousands of Jews were taken away.

Searches of Jewish homes were calculated to seize firearms and assets and to arrest adult males. The American Consulate, in Stuttgart, was flooded with Jews begging for visas: "Men in whose homes old, rusty revolvers had been found during the last few days cried aloud that they did not dare ever again return to their places of residence or business. In fact, it was a mass of seething, panic-stricken humanity."

Himmler, head of the Nazi terror police, would become an architect of the Holocaust, which consumed six million Jews. It was self evident that the Jews must be disarmed, before the extermination could begin.

Finding out which Jews had firearms was not too difficult. The liberal Weimar Republic passed a Firearm Law, in 1928, requiring extensive police records on gun owners. Hitler signed a further gun control law, in early 1938.

Other European countries also had laws requiring police records to be kept on persons who possessed firearms. When the Nazis took over Czechoslovakia and Poland, in 1939, it was a simple

matter to identify gun owners. Many of them disappeared, in the middle of the night, along with political opponents.

Imagine that you are sitting, in a movie house, in Germany, in May ,1940. The German Weekly Newsreel comes on to show you the attack on Holland, Belgium and France. The minute Wehrmacht troops and tanks cross the Dutch border, the film shows German soldiers nailing up a poster about 2½ by 3 feet in size. It is entitled “Regulations on Arms Possession in the Occupied Zone” (“Verordnung über Waffenbesitz im besetzten Gebiet”). The camera scans the top of the double-columned poster, written in German on the left and Flemish on the right, with an eagle and swastika in the middle. It commands that all firearms be surrendered, to the German commander, within 24 hours. The full text is not in view but similar posters threatened the death penalty for violation.

The film shows artillery and infantry rolling through the streets as happy citizens wave. It then switches to scenes of onslaughts against Dutch and Belgian soldiers and Hitler’s message that this great war would instate the 1,000-year Reich. A patriotic song, mixed with the images and music of artillery barrages, Luftwaffe bombings and tank assaults, compose the grand finale.

France soon fell and the same posters, threatening the death penalty for possession of a firearm, went up everywhere. You can see one, today, in Paris at the Museum of the Order of the Liberation (Musée de l’Ordre de la Libération). A photograph of the poster is reproduced there, including a translation in the sidebar.

There was a fallacy to the threat. No blank existed on the poster to write in the time and date of posting, so one would know when the 24-hour “waiting period” began or ended. Perhaps the Nazis would shoot someone who was an hour late. Indeed, gun owners, even without guns, were dangerous, because they knew how to use guns and tend to be resourceful, independent-minded persons. A Swiss manual on armed resistance stated, with such experiences in mind: “Should you be so trusting and turn over your weapons, you will be put on a ‘black list,’ in spite of everything. The enemy will always need hostages or forced laborers, later on (read: ‘work slaves’) and will gladly make use of the ‘black lists.’ You see, once again, that you cannot escape his net and had better die fighting. After the deadline, raids, coupled with house searches and street checks, will be conducted.”

Commented the *New York Times*, about the interrelated rights which the Nazis destroyed, wherever they went: “Military orders now forbid the French to do things which the German people have not been allowed to do since Hitler came to power. To own radio senders or to listen to foreign broadcasts, to organize public meetings and distribute pamphlets, to disseminate anti-German news in any form, to retain possession of firearms: all these things are prohibited, for the subjugated people of France.

While the Nazis made good on the threat to execute persons in possession of firearms, the gun control decree was not entirely successful. Partisans launched armed attacks but resistance was hampered by the lack of civilian arms possession.

In 1941, US Attorney General, Robert Jackson, called on Congress to enact national registration of all firearms. Given events, in Europe, Congress recoiled and legislation was introduced to protect the Second Amendment. Rep. Edwin Arthur Hall explained: “Before the advent of Hitler or Stalin, who took power from the German and Russian people, measures were thrust upon the free legislatures of those countries to deprive the people of the possession and use of firearms, so that they could not resist the encroachments of such diabolical and vitriolic state police organizations as the Gestapo, the OGPU, and the Cheka.”

Rep. John W. Patman added: “The people have a right to keep arms; therefore, if we should have some Executive who attempted to set himself up as dictator or king, the people can organize themselves together and, with the arms and ammunition they have, they can properly protect themselves.”

Only two months before the Japanese sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, Congress enacted legislation to authorize the President to requisition broad categories of property, with military uses, from the private sector, on payment of fair compensation, but also provided: "Nothing contained in this Act shall be construed (1) to authorize the requisitioning or require the registration of any firearms possessed by any individual for his personal protection or sport (and the possession of which is not prohibited or the registration of which is not required by existing law) or (2) to impair or infringe, in any manner, the right of any individual to keep and bear arms."

Meanwhile, Hitler unleashed killing squads, called the Einsatzgruppen, in Eastern Europe and Russia. As Raul Hilberg observes, "The killers were well armed. The victims were unarmed." The Einsatzgruppen executed two million people, between Fall, 1939, and Summer, 1942. Their tasks included arrest of the politically unreliable, confiscation of weapons and extermination.

Typical executions were that of a Jewish woman "for being found without a Jewish badge and for refusing to move into the ghetto" and another woman "for sniping." Persons found in possession of firearms were shot, on the spot. Yet, reports of sniping and partisan activity increased.

Armed citizens were hurting the Nazis, who took the sternest measures. The Nazis imposed the death penalty on a Pole or Jew: "If he is in unlawful possession of firearms or if he has credible information that a Pole or a Jew is in unlawful possession of such objects and fails to notify the authorities, forthwith."

Given the above facts, it is not difficult to understand why the National Rifle Association opposed gun registration at the time and still does. The *American Rifleman*, for February, 1942, reported, from Berlin, on January 6th, 1942, the German official radio broadcast "The German military commander for Belgium and Northern France announced, yesterday, that the population would be given a last opportunity to surrender firearms without penalty, up to January 20th and, after that date, anyone found in possession of arms would be executed."

So the Nazi invaders set a deadline similar to that announced, months ago, in Czechoslovakia, in Poland, in Norway, in Romania, in Yugoslavia and in Greece.

How often have we read the familiar dispatches "Gestapo agents, accompanied by Nazi troopers, swooped down on shops and homes and confiscated all privately-owned firearms?"

What an aid and comfort to the invaders and to their Fifth Column cohorts have been the convenient registration lists of privately owned firearms: lists readily available, for the copying or stealing, at the Town Hall, in most European cities.

What a constant worry and danger, to the Hun and his quislings, have been the privately owned firearms in the homes of those few citizens who have "neglected" to register their guns!

During the war years, the *Rifleman* regularly included pleas for American sportsmen to "send a gun to defend a British home. British civilians, faced with the threat of invasion, desperately need arms for the defense of their homes." Indeed, the *New York Times* carried the same solicitations. After two decades of gun control, British citizens now desperately needed rifles and pistols, in their homes, and they received the gifts, with great appreciation. Organized into the Home Guard, armed citizens were now ready to resist the expected Nazi onslaught.

With so many men and guns sent abroad, to fight the war, America still needed defending, from expected invasions on the East and West coasts, domestic sabotage and Fifth Column activity. Sportsmen and gun clubs responded, by bringing their private arms and volunteering for the state protective forces.

Switzerland was the only country, in Europe, indeed in the world, where every man had a military rifle in his home. Nazi invasion plans acknowledged the dissuasive nature of this armed populace, as I have detailed in my book *Target Switzerland: Swiss Armed Neutrality in World War II* (Rockville Center, NY, Sarpedon Publishers, 1998)

Out of all the acts of armed citizen resisters in the war, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943 is difficult to surpass in its heroism. Beginning with just a few handguns, armed Jews put a temporary stop to the deportations to extermination camps, frightened the Nazis out of the ghetto, stood off assaults, for days on end, and escaped, to the forests, to continue the struggle. What if there had been two, three, many Warsaw Ghetto Uprisings?

The NRA trained hundreds of thousands of Americans in rifle marksmanship, during the war. President Harry Truman wrote that NRA's firearms training programs "materially aided our war effort" and that he hoped "the splendid program, which the National Rifle Association has followed during the past three-quarters of a century, will be continued." By helping defeat the Nazi and Fascist terror regimes, the NRA helped end the Holocaust, slave labor and the severest oppression.

Those tiny pacifist organizations of the era, which called for gun registration and confiscation, contributed nothing to winning the war or to stopping the genocide. Their counterparts, today, have nothing to offer which would enable citizens to resist genocide.

Individual criminals wreak their carnage on individuals or small numbers of people. As this century has shown, terrorist governments have the capacity to commit genocide, against millions of people, provided that the people are unarmed. Schemes to confiscate firearms, kept by peaceable citizens, have, historically, been associated with some of the world's most insidious tyrannies. Given this reality, it is not surprising that law-abiding gun owners oppose being objects of registration.