

Parting Shot

by STEPHEN P. HALBROOK

What Made The Nazi Holocaust Possible? Gun Control

This past November marked the 75th anniversary of *Kristallnacht*, or the Night of the Broken Glass, the Nazi pogrom against Germany's Jews on Nov. 9-10, 1938. Historians have documented most everything about it except what made it so easy to attack the defenseless Jews without fear of resistance. Their guns were registered and, thus, easily confiscated.

To illustrate, turn the clock back further and focus on just one victim, a renowned German athlete. Alfred Flatow won first place in gymnastics at the 1896 Olympics. In 1932, he dutifully registered three handguns, as required by a decree of the liberal Weimar Republic. The decree also provided that in times of unrest, the guns could be confiscated. The government gullibly neglected to consider that only law-abiding citizens would register, while political extremists and criminals would not.

However, it did warn that the gun-registration records must be carefully stored so they would not fall into the hands of extremists.

The ultimate extremist group, led by Adolf Hitler, seized power just a year later, in 1933. The Nazis immediately used the firearm-registration records to identify, disarm and attack "enemies of the state," a euphemism for Social Democrats and other political opponents of all types. Police conducted search-and-seizure operations for guns and "subversive" literature in Jewish communities and working-class neighborhoods.

Jews were increasingly deprived of more and more rights of citizenship

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in the coming years. The Gestapo cautioned the police that it would endanger public safety to issue gun permits to Jews. Hitler faked a show of tolerance for the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, but Flatow refused to attend the reunion there of former champions. He was Jewish and would not endorse the farce.

By fall of 1938, the Nazis were ratcheting up measures to expropriate the assets of Jews. To ensure that they had no means of resistance, the Jews were ordered to surrender their firearms.

Flatow walked into a Berlin police station to comply with the command and was arrested on the spot, as were other Jews standing in line. The arrest report confirmed that his pistols were duly registered, which was obviously how the police knew he had them. While no law prohibited a Jew from owning guns, the report recited the Nazi mantra: “Jews in possession of weapons are a danger to the German people.” Despite his compliance, Flatow was turned over to the Gestapo.

This scenario took place all over Germany—firearms were confiscated from all Jews registered as gun owners. As this was occurring, a wholly irrelevant event provided just the excuse needed to launch a violent attack on the Jewish community: A Polish teenager who was Jewish shot a German diplomat in Paris. The stage was set to instigate *Kristallnacht*, a carefully orchestrated Nazi onslaught against the entire Jewish community in Germany that horrified the world and even the German public.

Under the pretense of searching for weapons, Jewish homes were vandalized, businesses ransacked and synagogues burned. Jews were terrorized, beaten and killed. Orders were sent to shoot anyone who resisted.

Schutzstaffel (ss) head Heinrich Himmler decreed that possession of a gun by a Jew was punishable by 20 years in a concentration camp. An estimated 20,000 Jewish men were thrown into such camps for this reason or just for being Jewish. The Jewish community was then held at ransom to pay for the damage done by the Nazis.

These horrific events were widely reported in the American media, such as *The New York Times*. After Hitler launched World War II, the United States made preparations in case it was dragged into the conflict. Just before the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, Congress passed a law noting the Gestapo methods and declaring that the Second Amendment right to keep and bear arms may not be infringed by such measures as registration of firearms.


Kristallnacht has been called “the day the Holocaust began.” Flatow’s footsteps can be followed to see why. He would be required to wear the Star of David. In 1942, he was deported to the Theresienstadt concentration camp, where he starved to death.

One wonders what thoughts may have occurred to Flatow in his last days. Perhaps memories of the Olympics and of a better Germany flashed before his eyes. Did he have second thoughts about whether he should have registered his guns in 1932?

Or whether he should have obediently surrendered his firearms at a Berlin police station in 1938 as ordered by Nazi decree, only to be taken into Gestapo custody?

Did he fantasize about shooting Nazis? We will never know, but it is difficult to imagine that he had no regrets over his act of compliance.

Today, gun control, registration and prohibition are depicted as benign and progressive. Government should register gun owners and ban any guns it wishes, Americans are told, because government is inherently good and trustworthy. The experiences of Hitler’s Germany and, for that matter, Stalin’s Russia and Pol Pot’s Cambodia, are beneath the realm of possibility in exceptional America. Let’s hope so.

Still, be careful what you wish for. 

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