

BOOK REVIEW

GUN CONTROL IN NAZI-OCCUPIED
FRANCE: TYRANNY AND RESISTANCE

STEPHEN P. HALBROOK

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AUDREY D. KLINE*

Several years ago, in these pages, I reviewed Stephen Halbrook's compelling work, *Gun Control in the Third Reich: Disarming the Jews and "Enemies of the State"* (2013). It should come as no surprise to any reader of that book that Halbrook would provide another riveting account of the role of gun control by the Nazis in occupied France in the 1940s. Relying on original sources, data records kept by the Germans on gun registrations and confiscations, and surveys of French Resistance survivors, Halbrook weaves another cautionary tale of the perils of gun prohibition at the hands of a criminal government such as the Nazi regime. Halbrook, with incredible detail, documents yet again the danger of a totalitarian regime seeking to disarm the citizens in occupied France. With contemporary calls for gun bans of varying degrees as terrorist attacks continue across the globe, Halbrook adds to the cautionary

* Audrey D. Kline (audrey.kline@louisville.edu) is Associate Professor of Economics in the College of Business at the University of Louisville.



tale in his historical account of the case of Nazi-occupied France and the subsequent liberation.

As in Germany, in 1935, then-French Prime Minister Pierre Laval had enacted a firearms registration requirement in an aim to curb unrest and violence (p. 1). It is important to note that the registration law was a mandate, not one that was voted on by the French politicians. Just as in Germany, the firearms registry soon took on another purpose at the hands of the Nazis following the occupation of France. Halbrook painstakingly details a similar story to what unfolded in Germany as the Nazis followed their same playbook in France, exploiting existing gun laws to terrorize and disarm the French. Halbrook's book consists of eight chapters covering the period of 1934 through 1945, with attention early on focused on the call for firearms registration by Laval in 1935 to suppress violence and unrest, to the occupation and Laval's role in aiding the Nazis, to resistance, and ultimately the French Liberation.

In the five years that have followed Halbrook's first book on the subject of the Nazi's and gun control, the battle over the Second Amendment in the U.S. has only grown more divided. Recent school shootings and terrorist attacks have led to an increase in calls for gun control, and several states have seen an increase in legislation with firearms restrictions, including defining circumstances that allow for the confiscation of firearms.¹ Halbrook notes that the contemporary (and historical) debate between allowing an armed citizenry for self-defense versus disarming the population to prevent terrorism is a debate that might never be solved (p. 6). *Gun Control in Nazi-Occupied France* provides another cautionary tale of how good intentions can be severely abused when extremists gain control of things such as firearms registries. Nazi-occupied France saw similar tactics employed by the Nazis in Germany and consequent loss of life of French citizens who refused to disarm at the hands of the Nazis.

Halbrook opens his book by documenting the turbulence in 1934 following the Great Depression and political upheaval. A

¹ See <https://www.cnn.com/2018/04/09/us/gun-laws-since-parkland/index.html> and https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/five-states-allow-guns-to-be-seized-before-someone-can-commit-violence/2018/02/16/78ee4cc8-128c-11e8-9570-29c9830535e5_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.dc222a186658.

massacre of civilians occurred at the hands of the Radical-Socialist government led by Édouard Daladier and other groups, leading to his resignation (pp. 8–10). This opened the door for a role for Laval once more, as he was appointed minister of colonies, and Philippe Pétain, who had been a national hero for stopping the German advance in 1915, was appointed minister of war. These two appointments would be crucial for the Nazis later on when they became the leaders of Vichy France, the puppet government of the Nazis (p. 11). Following the massacre came the prohibition on carrying firearms in Paris and Seine in early 1935.

In chapter 2, Halbrook documents Laval's rise, which included securing the power to rule by decree in June, 1935, and how Laval quickly enacted several decrees ranging from increasing the size of the Mobile Guard to hinder protests, requiring registration of people wishing to demonstrate, and requiring registration of individuals who wanted to secure a firearm (pp. 21–22). Laval's definition of war weapons banned small arms along with military weapons from the citizenry along with other restrictions, including the requirement that firearms owners and their firearms be registered. These same records, as seen in Nazi Germany, became the source for gun confiscation at the hands of the Nazis five years later (pp. 22–24). Despite the threat of the death penalty for non-compliance, compliance with the registration decree was low.

The spread of Hitler's power (also detailed in Halbrook's *Gun Control in the Third Reich*) is documented in Chapter 3, which moved into France with the blitzkrieg attack in May 1940. The invasion resulted in the posting of requirements to surrender all radio transmitters and firearms within 24 hours or face the death penalty, hard labor, or imprisonment (p. 40). Home visits by soldiers armed with a list of registered firearms rounded up weapons or shot those who were non-compliant. Elsewhere, individuals turned in guns without any receipt for their records. Several personal accounts of surrender are documented throughout the chapter; however, some resisted and hid their guns.

When Paris was bombed on June 3, 1940, a majority of the French fled, and a resistance failed to materialize. Hitler's henchmen took over, and Werner Best, who had instituted the death penalty order for refusal to surrender firearms in Germany, enacted several

decrees in France as well, notably including once again the threat of death on the spot for refusal to surrender guns (pp. 55–56). The French police ultimately collaborated with the Germans, making enforcement of the various decrees even easier. The French had no right to a defense under the terms of the armistice, and were now in the same boat as the citizens of Germany since the rise of Hitler.

Details of the occupation and the focus on eradicating weapons from the French is the focus of Chapters 4 and 5. Laval became the main collaborator with the Nazi occupation at the outset of the occupation. Concurrently, the French began to hide their hunting and military weapons for later use, while others stole across the border to the unoccupied Vichy zone. It was decreed that the French could no longer hunt, gun confiscation ramped up, and the registration of Jewish art became required, all under the guise of protecting assets with assurance that these items would be returned after the war.

With the replacement of the military commander in France in late October 1940, Werner Best's role blossomed and so did the orders for execution of the French who had not surrendered their firearms, though those in non-compliance were primarily jailed through 1941. Similar to the pattern in Germany, efforts to repress "Jews, religious groups, Communists, and other targeted classes," (p. 75) became the focus of the SS. By now, the registration of Jews was also required. Though death sentences had been issued before, the carrying out of the executions was now increasing. In an announcement on September 12, the sentence for violating the gun prohibitions or having "war materials" was now solely punishable by death, with an October 25 deadline for surrender imposed (p. 105). Many citizens were reported to continue to defy the orders. Concurrent with the escalation of executions, which were now routinely announced and publicized, the Resistance worked with Allies to obtain firearms and funds. The Swiss banks helped, as did the British. As 1941 came to a close, even as executions continued to be carried out, many of the French continued to hide their guns.

1942 saw the rise of the Resistance. Halbrook's focus in Chapter 6 includes the continued pressure to remove weapons from the French alongside the rising organization of the Resistance. Arms were parachuted in by the British, and some French police tried to hide surrendered firearms. At the same time, executions continued,

including the case of a group running the underground *Résistance* newspaper. They were turned in by an infiltrator and sentenced to death. Ultimately the women were not killed but were sent to the camps in Germany, though the seven men were shot to death (pp. 132–33). As late as March 1942, decrees were still being issued to surrender weapons and war materials. By the time the March decree was published, people had only a few weeks to meet the latest deadline of April 1. In an effort to create uncertainty about enforcement, the Germans stopped publishing reports of executions that had taken place (p. 142). Laval was reinstated as head of the French government by Hitler in April 1942, prompting a rise in Resistance activity. May Day saw up to 100,000 demonstrators rally against Laval (p. 146) while in Berlin, the SS was replacing the military as the policy enforcers along with the French leadership. June saw the arrival of SS General Karl Orberg in France, and the ramping up of the Nazi agenda. Jews were ordered to wear the Star of David, and the deportation of the Jews began (pp. 148–49). Deportation to concentration camps was also used for those caught stealing previously surrendered weapons for the Resistance. It is important to note that enforcement for violations of the Nazi gun control policies varied tremendously at this point (p. 151).

In June, it was announced that the SS would enforce new sentences for anyone related to the Resistance fighters. In addition, Jews were arrested and put on trains to the concentration camps (p. 154). The Resistance fighters did not stop, however, and in May 1943, the United Movements of the Resistance (MUR) brought the many branches of the movement together, armed primarily by airdrops at the risk of facing the death penalty if caught (p. 155). The Vichy cabinet reinforced the death sentence decree for anyone in possession of explosives or stockpiles of weapons. Laval continued to aid the Nazi regime, allowing the formation of the paramilitary outfit, the *Milice*, to uncover Resistance fighters. Laval maintained to the French that had he not cooperated, things would have been much worse. One Resistance fighter, Gilles Lévy, recounted that most of the firearms used by the Resistance had been airdropped by the British, the Americans, or were recovered from storage depots of the French Army (p. 159). Though helpful, many of the recovered weapons were not sufficient for fighting. How the Resistance secured weapons more appropriate for military warfare is the subject of Chapter 7.

Though the French army was disbanded, it defied the armistice and retained some firearms, which were hidden in Vichy until Laval ordered all weapons be surrendered to the Germans. Laval upped the ante on firearms prohibition, declaring that any "sale, possession, transportation and carrying of firearms of any kind" was punishable by imprisonment or death (p. 165). French military members still in service as of December 1, 1942, government workers, and inoperable firearms were exempt from the new order. However, failure to report any of these gun-related violations was now subject to imprisonment or death as well. Demobilized military officers were required to register their weapons and could only retain weapons in their homes. Failure to register subjected them to the death penalty as well. Still, many French citizens continued to hide weapons and did not obey the decrees to register or surrender their firearms. Ultimately the armed French citizenry was a critical component of the Resistance and liberation of Paris two years later.

Penalties ramped up in 1943, with threats of being shot on the spot for possession of weapons and explosives. Due process was increasingly ignored. Concurrently, the Resistance movement became increasingly active and coordinated. Arms drops from Allies helped the Resistance ramp up activity against the Nazis. The American Office of Strategic Services (OSS) began collaborating with the Resistance, exchanging arms and supplies for intelligence (pp. 169–70). In mid-April, efforts to move stockpiled arms to Germany ramped up, as awareness of the threat of the weapons being stored at depots falling into the hands of Resistance fighters grew. It was also ordered that hunting guns be sold to Wehrmacht troops each day, beginning April 20 (p. 177). A few months later, young men were ordered to leave for Germany for labor. Those defying the order became a supply for the Resistance instead.

Enforcement of all decrees continued to vary, however, as did compliance with orders to surrender arms, even during amnesty windows. The SS was realizing that the French would not comply regardless of the threat of death. As awareness of the possibility of an Allied invasion mounted, so too did the need to distribute any stockpile of weapons so that citizens could be prepared to fight. A shortage of firearms for the Resistance was still a problem, causing the size of the Resistance to fluctuate with variations in the gun supply. Despite the discrepancy in the number of arms surrendered

compared to the number of arms supposedly hidden, the Resistance fighters were perpetually claiming a shortage of arms and evidence suggests the majority of arms used did come from Allied airdrops.

Halbrook's concluding chapter addresses the liberation, along with atrocities committed following D-Day. Estimates of the death toll incurred to liberate Paris near 3,000, including residents of Paris, the Forces Francaises de l'Interieur (FFI) and police, as well as French and American soldiers (p. 201). A new government took over in France, ordering a dissolution of militias in the fall of 1944 as well as requiring the surrender of privately held arms (p. 203). A review of the impact of firearms prohibitions on the French during the war produced some incredible figures—execution of 60,000 people and deportation of 200,000, of which it is estimated that only 25 percent survived. Of course, it was Laval's executive order in 1935 requiring firearms registration and prohibitions on certain types of firearms that enabled the Nazis to pursue and execute so many by using the firearms registry. In the end, Laval himself was convicted and executed.

Although France did not have a guarantee of the right to bear arms, the occupation in France led America to maintain its right to bear arms. With each terrorist attack, mass shooting, school shooting, or other gun-related tragedy, however, there is always a call for gun registration, bans of high capacity magazines, bans on certain types of firearms, and so on. People on both sides of the issue would do well to read Halbrook's works on the subject and not turn a blind eye to history.

REFERENCES

- Halbrook, Stephen P. 2013. *Gun Control in the Third Reich: Disarming the Jews and "Enemies of the State."* Oakland: The Independent Institute.

Gun Control in Nazi Occupied-France: Tyranny And Resistance. USA - (AmmoLand.com)- No discussion of gun control goes for very long before someone mentions Nazis. Yet surprisingly little historical research has delved into what the Nazis actually did, both in prewar Germany and in the countries that fell before the invading Nazi armies. With his recently-released Gun Control in Nazi-occupied France and its 2014 predecessor, Gun Control in the Third Reich. Dr. Stephen Halbrook has started mining a long-ignored vein in the history of World War II. Gun Control in Nazi Occupied-France: Tyranny And ... "The theme of Gun Control in Nazi-Occupied France is new, and Stephen Halbrook conveys it with laudable precision. In the early 1980s, I spoke to French Resistance fighters who told me how difficult it was to hide weapons during the German occupation." In this book, Gun Control in Nazi-Occupied France, Stephen Halbrook continues his extensively researched history of Nazi gun controls and gun confiscation, revealing in particular how prewar French gun registration laws made the Nazis' task easier, and how French disobedience to those laws preserved a reservoir of firearms that made the Resistance's task easier. Highly recommended!" Start reading Gun Control in Nazi Occupied-France: Tyranny and Resistance on your Kindle in under a minute.