

The Revolution and the Right to Bear Arms

The Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution

EXPANDED FROM WORKERS VANGUARD • NO. 475, 14 APRIL 1989

"Remember that the musket... is better than all mere parchment guarantees of liberty. In your hands that musket means liberty; and should your constitutional right at the close of this war be denied ... your brethren are safe while you have a Constitution which proclaims your right to keep and bear arms."

—Frederick Douglass appealing to blacks to join the Union Army, August 1863

America's capitalist rulers are taking aim at the fundamental right of the people to arm themselves. This right to bear arms was born of revolution, constituting a vital defense against tyranny. Naturally, despotic regimes prefer to rule over defenseless subjects: an armed people can fight back. Today, the government which sponsors counterrevolutionary terrorists and drug traffickers in a crusade against Communism wants to disarm the population in the name of a "war on drugs and terrorism." Though the United States with its widely popular and constitutionally recognized right to bear arms provides a sharp example, this is no issue of "American exceptionalism" but a historic and living question elsewhere internationally. And it is the Marxists, who champion the cause of all the exploited and oppressed, that oppose gun control from the standpoint of the struggle for workers revolution.

Currently spearheading the gun control drive in the United States is the ban on so-called "assault rifles." As usual, the gun-ban forces seized upon an emotion-packed criminal incident to fuel a campaign of hysteria—the January massacre of five Asian American schoolchildren by a racist nut wielding a semiautomatic AK-47 rifle in Stockton, California. Needless to say, the maniac might just as well have misused an ordinary shotgun for his horrible slaughter, but the fact that he used a military-type weapon was played to the hilt in the media to whip up support for a ban of this particular category of weapon.

What's new here is the *active political campaigning* by the country's police chiefs to disarm the civilian population. Heading them up is Los Angeles chief Daryl Gates, notorious for his racist defense of the LAPD's use of the deadly choke hold against blacks and Latinos. The campaign has been picked up by the Bush administration's antidrug "czar" William Bennett, and the federal government has now banned imports of 49 models of semiautomatic "military-like" weapons. In Washington, D.C., curfews are being imposed on youth while the

president drops hints of calling out the National Guard in the name of the "war on drugs." The drift toward police bonapartism in the U.S. has just lurched into a higher gear.

"I don't want that gun on the street," Chief Gates decreed (*New York Times*, 28 January), and he quickly received backing from police groups across the country. For the TV cameras, cops staged demonstrations of the supposedly "excessive" power of these "assault" rifles by blasting away cinder blocks and watermelons, not telling viewers that virtually any good hunting rifle could do the same thing. The police claim they are "outgunned" by drug gangs on the streets, but anyone who's seen the L.A. cops' paramilitary operations, using an arsenal of gunship helicopters and tanks, knows that's baloney.

The guns they are talking about banning are civilian versions of military-style rifles, such as Colt's AR-15, which is patterned after the army's M-16. They can carry large magazines of 20 or more bullets, but the civilian version is only semiautomatic, meaning a single bullet is fired with each trigger pull; in the fully automatic military version, a stream of bullets is fired as long as the trigger is pulled back. The distinction between a common semiautomatic hunting rifle and an "assault rifle" is blurry, since the former can also accept large magazines and many of them are more powerful than the military weapons. Thus the popular .30-06 *manual, bolt-action* hunting rifle packs *twice* the kinetic energy of a "military-style" AKS.

Polls show that even people who favor banning "assault rifles" know it will not stop the "drug mafia" from getting their guns the same way they get their drugs—smuggling them in with the help of corrupt police departments and army commanders with friends in high places. (In the Iran / contra scandal, the Reagan / Bush / CIA team in Central America smuggled guns to the contras and returned with drugs for profit.) So the anti-gun propagandists resort to loaded questions, asking "whether there is any purpose in civilians' owning military-style weapons except to kill people and why law-abiding people would want to own them" (*New York Times*, 3 April).

It's really not news that guns were invented to kill people. And in this class-divided society, it has more than occasionally been necessary for "law-abiding" citizens to defend themselves

with violence, even against the so-called legally constituted authorities. Are memories really so short? Recall the bloody Ludlow, Colorado massacre of 1914 in which 21 men, women and children, families of striking miners, were killed by the machine gun fire of the state militia, who were really Rockefeller's hired guns. But the workers were armed by the United Mine Workers, and to the bosses' horror for ten days some 1,000 strikers fought back bullet for bullet.

Recall as well the 1937 Memorial Day Massacre at Republic Steel in South Chicago. On May 30 of that year, in the midst of a national strike against the "little" steel companies (i.e., all the companies except the giant United States Steel Corporation), 1,500 protesters, mostly strikers and their families, marched in a holiday mood toward the Republic Mill. They were met by a solid line of 200 cops and a sudden volley of tear gas shells. As the marchers broke and ran, the cops charged with blazing guns and swinging clubs. Ten workers were shot dead, and another 40 were wounded—all of them shot in the back. An additional 101 protesters, including an eight-year-old child, were injured by clubs. In this case the strikers had been politically disarmed by their union misleaders with the line that the cops, sent to keep order by the Democratic "friends" of labor, should be "welcomed."

We also remember the 1979 Greensboro Massacre, in which five leftist civil rights workers and labor organizers were gunned down in cold blood by a Klan/Nazi group. An FBI informer led the fascists to the murder site, and an agent of the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms showed them how to use and transport the semiautomatic weapons. Or in the Philadelphia of black mayor Wilson Goode, where the cops in 1985 raked the MOVE commune with 10,000 rounds in 90 minutes, using fully automatic M-16s and M-60 machine guns, and incinerated eleven black people, including five children, in a fire ignited by C-4 plastic explosive provided by the FBI. But of course none of the "concerned" anti-gun lobbyists are advocating taking away guns from the cops.

White middle-class liberals preach total pacifism from the relative safety of their condos and suburban ranch houses—they don't expect the cops to come bursting into *their* homes. But the ruling class does not believe in pacifism and has carefully armed *its* state to the teeth. The whole issue of gun control revolves around the question: do you trust *this state* to have a monopoly of arms? And the answer is refracted through the deepening class and ra-

cial polarization of this society. The core of the state, after all, is "special bodies of armed men," as Lenin explained in his 1917 pamphlet *The State and Revolution*, commenting on the writings of Marx and Engels. And this is *not our state*, but the capitalists'; they assert the state's monopoly of armed force in order to maintain their class rule.

To Disarm the People

The whole history of gun control is the story of the ruling class trying *lo disarm* the population, particularly in periods of social struggle. The ban on automatic weapons is usually linked to gangsters like Al Capone, but it never stopped them from getting their hands on Thompson submachine guns, just as the mob today has its Uzis. More to the point, the 1934 ban on automatic weapons came in the Great Depression when the spectre of working-class revolution haunted Washington (in fact, that year saw three citywide general strikes led by ostensible communists). The federal gun control act of 1968 came at the peak of black ghetto upheavals. And the perennial push to ban the cheap handguns known as "Saturday Night Specials" is just an attempt to make guns more expensive and hence less accessible to the poorer classes.

Gun laws are fossilized traces of the evolution of society and the state. In a recent book on Afghanistan, Pakistani leftist Raja Anwar writes: 'in a society where every group and every citizen is armed, no government can possibly function' (*The Tragedy of Afghanistan* [1988]). Anwar knows whereof he speaks in his richly detailed firsthand account of this country of heavily armed tribal peoples, but his conclusion is wrong. The conclusion should be that the government must have some relation to the governed, good or bad. Thus in Nicaragua there are several hundred thousand guns in the hands of the population, and while the shooting range outside Managua is filled every weekend with people practicing their (fully automatic) AKs, these guns have been used to defend a revolution against the contra terrorists.

Today the police are concerned about "assault rifles" mainly because they are turning up in the black ghettos, at least in California. What gets cops upset is that a semiautomatic rifle might have given a Malcolm X the chance to defend himself, or might let a housing project resident fend off cop assaults when a "TNT" anti-drug squad comes illegally bursting through the door. In the recent period cops have run amok across the country, gunning down people at will. And when a Larry Davis managed to defend himself against the murderous cops, and was acquitted by a Bronx jury

last year, the killers-in-blue staged a massive armed demonstration of cop power.

For years, as liberals railed against every sort of firearm, opposition to gun control was led by the National Rifle Association, which brags about training police. But this time the NRA's right-wing political and cop connections were of no avail against the "bipartisan" consensus of the capitalist parties—concerned about "violence" as the economy spirals downward—to push for civilian disarmament. So in quick succession unprecedented bans have been passed on "assault rifles"—dubbed "Rambo guns" by the same media which promoted the Rambo image during the Reagan years. First Stockton, then L. A., and in March the California legislature voted a statewide ban. In New York City, which already requires strict licensing of rifles and shotguns, the city council is considering a similar ban, pushed by racist mayor Ed Koch and police chief Ben Ward.

On the national level, the day after Bennett announced the import ban, Colt Industries said it would voluntarily stop selling its AR-15 to civilians (police and military can still buy it) in order to be "consistent with U.S. Government policy." (Colt is a scabherding outfit whose workers have been on strike for over three years.) And in Congress, Democratic Senator Howard Metzenbaum, among others, is pushing a bill which would treat semiautomatic weapons like fully automatic weapons (already banned). Liberal Democratic Senator Ted Kennedy endorsed the anti-gun ban under the slogan "Support Your Local Police" (*New York Times*, 22 March). And sensing the political winds, President Bush, a life member of the NRA, backhandedly endorsed' the "outcry" against the guns, "semiautomated [sic] weapon or automated, whichever it was." - .

In an attempt to justify this massive assault on Americans' constitutional right to "keep and bear arms," the bourgeoisie is rewriting its own Constitution in the media. We are told civilians can own arms only if they are "particularly suitable for, or readily adaptable to, sporting purposes," as specified in the 1968 federal gun control law. A "stricter" interpretation of this act was the administration's basis for cutting off imports of the "assault" weapons. So we are told it's OK to use firearms to hunt deer or shoot at paper targets but not for self-defense. "I do not believe that an AK-47, a machine gun [sic], is a sporting weapon," was the line ex-president Reagan mouthed for the TV cameras.

From Feudalism to Capitalism

Four centuries ago the Renaissance and the Reformation combined with the "gunpowder revolution," as military historian John Keegan noted in his book *The Mask of Command* (1987). This threatened the state by putting untold power in the hands of the common man, Keegan noted, particularly when combined with the proclamation of a right to bear arms, "a genuinely seditious principle." Military power could no longer be confined to a few skilled noblemen and their retinues. A precursor to the gun was the crossbow: "In seconds an amateur with a crossbow could wipe out years of costly training, to say nothing of generations of noble (even royal) breeding," wrote Robert L. O'Connell in the *Military History Quarterly* (Winter 1989).

Both the Church and the English aristocracy tried to ban the crossbow, but the rifle was a far more serious threat, particularly after the Industrial Revolution made mass production possible. Under the Saxon and Norman feudal systems every freeman had not only a right but a duty to keep arms. In 1181 Henry II issued an Assize of Arms which specified what type was to be kept by what type of person. The late feudal, centralizing proto-absolutist Tudor monarchy took measures to protect the declining skills of longbow archery (symptomatic of the declining feudal order) by passing laws against handguns and crossbows, limiting possession to the wealthy. The 16th and 17th century rulers in Madrid, Vienna, Paris and London met the threat posed by the new weapons by establishing standing armies "to monopolize the power unleashed by the gunpowder revolution" (Keegan). The French absolutist king Louis XIV made laws against pistols, and later only the aristocracy was permitted to carry arms, while firearms production and supply was heavily state-controlled.

In Japan the Tokugawa Shogunate succeeded in disarming the peasantry in the late 16th century. The bid order was retained into the 19th century by closing the society to European mercantilism, Christian missionaries and firearms. In the 1850s about the only firearms in Japan were primitive matchlocks replicating 300-year-old Portuguese designs. But new and overpowering Western imperialist pressures led to the Meiji Restoration in 1868, opening the road to capitalist development. The Shogunate itself had disarmed the old samurai caste; it was itself overthrown by a rifle-equipped conscript army. The Japanese citizenry never acquired any significant stock of non-military firearms, making it easier for the Japanese ruling class to apply the sweeping

bans on firearms and other weapons which it retains to this day.,

In Europe and America it was the struggle against absolutist, reactionary tyrannies which produced the revolutionary principle of the "right to keep and bear arms." One of the first acts of the French Revolution was to seize weapons and ammunition from the arsenals. And every subsequent revolutionary upsurge has been accompanied by similar actions. The right to bear arms was codified by the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. What's going on today is a calculated *counterrevolutionary* attack by a decaying ruling class on these constitutional guarantees.

The Second Amendment's Revolutionary History

The clear intent of the Second Amendment (ratified in 1791), as expressed in its language, was not sport or hobby but a people's militia:

"A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed."

The constitutional right are not about hunting or target practice; the American colonial revolutionaries wanted the whole people armed, centering on military arms—in today's terms something like the AK-47—in order to be able to *kill British soldiers*, and to forestall the threat of any standing army, which they rightly regarded as the bane of liberty and the basis of tyranny. Indeed, what triggered the American Revolution were attempts by the British army, in particular General Thomas Gage, to force colonialists to surrender their arms. As noted in a recent article by Stephen P. Halbrook:

"The Revolutionary War was sparked when militiamen exercising at Lexington refused to give up their arms. The widely published American account of April 19, 1775, began with the order shouted by a British officer: "*Disperse you Rebels—Damn you, throw down your Arms and disperse!*"

—*American Rifleman*, March 1989

There is a continuum between the English Civil War, the American Revolution and the American Civil War. The question of the standing army and the king's attempts to raise taxes to finance it against the opposition of Parliament and the emergent bourgeoisie was central to the outbreak of the English bourgeois revolution. Oliver Cromwell, beheaded the king in 1649 and the revolution gave birth to democratic principles, codified decades later in the English Bill of Rights of 1689 when the revolution was already ebbing and after a renewed drive to absolutist reaction under James II. As a guarantee against the Catholic/royalist

threat, the English Bill of Rights listed "true, ancient and indubitable rights," including:

"6. That the raising or keeping a standing Army within the Kingdom in Time of Peace, unless it be with Consent of Parliament, is against Law.

"7. That the Subjects which are Protestants, may have Arms for their Defence suitable to their Condition, and as are allowed by Law."

—quoted in Stephen P. Halbrook, *That Every Man Be Armed* (1984)

This principle was reiterated in the 18th-century Black-stone's Commentaries, still regarded as a definitive bourgeois statement on the English Common Law. The 1689 Scottish Claim of Right reiterated an identical point about the right to bear arms. In Scotland this assertion was underpinned by a widely accepted custom of bearing arms. This reflected among other things the recognition that the ability to mobilize forces of equipped and experienced fighters at short notice had often been the margin between independence and English invasion and conquest. In addition the Scottish Reformation had faced the challenge of attempts to impose French-backed Catholic absolutism.

Carrying forward the English tradition, the American revolutionaries expanded on this right, in light of their own experience in struggle against the British king, when they drew up the Constitution in 1787. In the state conventions which ratified it, a "militia" was understood to mean the armed people, not a "select" militia like the present-day National Guard (which can be federalized and keeps its arms stored in armories controlled by the government). The right to "keep and bear arms" was universally recognized as an *individual* right. As Patrick Henry summed it up, "The great object is, that every man be armed."

As in any class society, there were some big, categorical exceptions to these "universal" rights. The Second Amendment assumed it was English-speaking white Protestants that had the guns, to be used against Indians, black slaves, Spanish, Dutch and French invaders and, needless to say, the British former colonial masters who continued to threaten the young republic. Thus in South Africa today the white population is individually heavily armed as one of the means to maintain their status over the black majority. Similarly in the English Revolution the right to bear arms was directed against Catholics as perceived and frequently real representatives of reaction. Applied in Ireland this was an instrument of exploitation and terrible oppression. In Ireland after 1688, among other anti-Catholic measures, no Catholic could serve in the army or possess arms. In the later 18th century armed

militias were raised in Ireland and Britain. In Ireland these mainly Protestant "Volunteers" took up the struggle for reforms. Then an "Arms and Gunpowder Bill" was passed requiring the Volunteers to turn in their arms. The radical wing, inspired by the American and French Revolutions, and led by Wolfe Tone, took up the call for universal suffrage and the removal of all laws against the Catholics. The United Irishmen uprising of 1798 was Ireland's failed bourgeois revolution.

Despite these limitations on the concept of "universal rights," the American War of Independence released a world-shaking democratic spirit, reflected in the military sphere by the arming of masses of civilians who could be trusted, out of ideological conviction, to fight for their government in loosely-controlled guerrilla-type units. As was noted by Friedrich Engels, who was no mean soldier himself (being a heroic and able officer on the revolutionary side in 1848):

"While the soldiers of European armies, held together by compulsion and severe treatment, could not be trusted to fight in extended order, in America they had to contend with a population which, untrained to the regular drill of line soldiers, were good shots and well acquainted with the rifle. The nature of the ground favored them; instead of attempting manoeuvres of which at first they were incapable, they unconsciously fell into skirmishing. Thus, the engagement of Lexington and Concord marks an epoch in the history of infantry."

—"Infantry," an article for *The New American Cyclopaedia* (1859)

Abolition of Slavery by Arming the Slaves

But the Americans' so-called democracy accepted slavery, written into the Constitution itself. It was generally recognized that if the slaves got guns it would mean the end of slavery, so they were denied this legal right through the device, juridically approved by the Supreme Court in the infamous Dred Scott case in 1857, of claiming that "the people" meant only "citizens," and "citizens" did not include black slaves. Chief Justice Taney noted with horror that if blacks were citizens they would be entitled to a long list of rights, including the right "*to keep and carry arms wherever they went.*" John Brown was among a small vanguard in the 1850s who saw that only force of arms would put an end to slavery, and he became a prophetic martyr for leading the famous raid on a federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry in 1859. Meanwhile, ex-slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass, a close friend of Brown, openly defended a man's "right of self-defense" when fugitive slaves were being hunted by agents of

the slaveholders, even if this meant "shooting down his pursuers," as occasionally happened. "Slavery is a system of brute force," he said. "It must be met with its own weapons."

Thus when the Civil War came, and the Northern bourgeoisie became so militarily desperate in 1862-63 to crush the slaveholders' rebellion against the Union that Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation and agreed to the forming of black regiments, Douglass seized on this historic opportunity. "Men of Color, To Arms!" was his slogan as he campaigned for black volunteers for such famous regiments as the 54th Massachusetts. And it wasn't only in the army that blacks fought—during the racist antidraft riots in New York in 1863, according to one black newspaper of the time;

"The colored men who had manhood in them armed themselves, and threw out their pickets every day and night, determined to die defending their homes. Most of the colored men in Brooklyn who remained in the city were armed daily for self-defense."

—quoted in James M. McPherson, *The Negro's Civil War* (1965)

In the post-Civil War Reconstruction period, the central struggle in the South was between the newly emancipated blacks seeking to exercise political power and the remnants of the slaveholders' government seeking to put the former slaves back "in their place." This struggle pivoted on black people's possession of arms. Hence the reactionary "black codes" passed in various Southern states tried to outlaw possession of firearms by blacks. An 1865 Florida statute, for instance, made it unlawful for "any Negro" to possess "firearms or ammunition of any kind," the penalty for violation being the pillory and the whip.

In response, the federal government's Freedmen's Bureau widely distributed circulars which read in part, "All men, without distinction of color, have the right to keep and bear arms to defend their homes, families or themselves." But the question would be decided by military power: the racist white state militias, aided by the private Ku Klux Klan, were already disarming blacks, whose only defense, was their own arms and/or the occupying Union Army. What was going on in the South was graphically described in one letter cited in Congressional hearings in 1871:

"Then the Ku Klux fired on them through the window one of the bullets striking a colored woman...and wounding her through the knee badly. The colored men then fired on the Ku Klux, and killed their leader or captain right there on the steps of the colored men's house...."

In this case, as in many others, the Klan leader turned out to be "a constable and deputy sheriff."

While Congress adopted all sorts of paper measures protecting blacks, including the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution which guarantees "equal protection of the laws," it betrayed the promise of black liberation in the Compromise of 1877, when Union troops were withdrawn

from the South. Because they could not defend their rights by force of arms, black people were denied all their rights. It took a long and often bloody struggle for the civil rights movement 80 years later to restore some of the blacks' rights won in the "Second American Revolution" which was the Civil War.

Disarming the Population

In the 19th century Karl Marx had expressed the hope that America would be one of the few countries where working people could take power more or less peacefully because the ruling class had virtually no standing army but relied on militias. Yet by the turn of the century the U.S. had entered the imperialist club and quickly developed a standing army. And over the years Second Amendment rights; supposedly inviolate, have been increasingly constricted by layer upon layer of laws which made gun-owning and armed self-defense more and more of a class privilege.

The most notorious example is New York State's Sullivan Law, which makes it illegal to carry a pistol for self-defense, unless you're one of a handful of well-connected people who can get a license to "carry" from the police department, people like real estate mogul Donald Trump and *New York Times* publisher Arthur O. Sulzberger ("Businessmen Opt to Pack a Gun," *New York City Business*, 11 March 1985). The law was passed back in 1911 after a man who felt he had been unjustly fired from his city job as night watchman shot the mayor with a revolver. Hizzoner survived, but the incident was seized upon by "prominent" citizens such as John D. Rockefeller, Jr. (the same one responsible for the Ludlow massacre) to launch a campaign for gun control. And the *New York Times* led the pack.

Today, also, while "Punch" Sulzberger has armed guards, as well as a pistol stashed in his desk drawer, his newspaper editorializes against "Rambo Guns" (15 March)—all in the name of fighting "crime," which certainly hasn't decreased in New York City since 1911. The *Times* has an amazing capacity for nonsensically disconnecting the question of guns from its social context. Thus Stephen Kinzer, for

five years the *Times'* man in Managua, calls it a "social problem" that in Guatemala "300,000 people are licensed to carry firearms and another 300,000 do so illegally" ("Guatemala: What Has Democracy. Wrought?" *New York Times Magazine*, 26 March). He doesn't relate this to the fact that there have been rightist death squads, a guerrilla insurgency for 20 years, and an insanely savage, heavily armed army.

The *Times'* A.M. Rosenthal has gone a step further by suggesting (17 March) that today the Second Amendment means nothing but arming a "drug militia." And on April 7 the paper printed a letter from a Catholic bishop explicitly calling for repeal of the amendment. The *Times'* unstated goal is in all circumstances a thoroughly armed government and a thoroughly disarmed population.

And it's not only such mainstream imperialist spokesmen, but also the rad-libs and even "left" groups, which want gun bans. The *Nation* (3 April) front-paged their position: "How Citizens Can Beat the Gun Lobby." And most of the reformist left has kept mum on this issue, because they're closet liberals. After eight years of the Reagan/Bush administration, the days are gone when social activists at least made the obvious observation that "crime" is rooted, in social conditions and cannot be eradicated by police measures.

In talking about who is "outgunned," the real balance is, in Jeffersonian language, how many guns are in the hands of the people, and how many in the hands of the government. Yet today the reformists are all signing up for the Democratic/Republican "war on drugs," which is a rationale for vicious police repression of the whole population, particularly blacks and Hispanics. In fact, street crime could probably be cut in half overnight simply by decriminalizing drugs and giving them out, free to addicts. But such a measure would fly in the face of bourgeois "morals," as well as undermine the rationale for increased police powers. Behind the renewed call for gun bans is racism; as we have said before, gun control kills blacks. With the rise of the civil rights movement, gun control again became closely associated with ruling-class fears of black liberation. Robert F. Williams, the head of the Monroe, North Carolina NAACP, was hounded out of the country for organizing a black defense squad against racist attacks. When Malcolm X tried to get around the stringent New York pistol law by carrying a carbine for self-defense, the city quickly passed an ordinance against carrying "long-arms" in public. Not long after, in 1965, Malcolm was assassinated.

In Louisiana and a few other Southern states in the mid-'60s the Deacons for Defense and Justice were successful in using firearms to protect the civil rights movement from Klan attack. Among the Deacons' standard weapons was the M-1 carbine, an "assault rifle" which black men had learned to use in the army in World War II and the Korean War.

While the U.S. formally upholds on paper the right to "keep and bear arms," there still are a number of capitalist countries where the right is much more of a reality because of exceptional circumstances (mainly a more muted class struggle). Switzerland has 600,000 "assault rifles" capable of full-auto operation, in private circulation, and in Denmark the Home Guard militia keeps their "assault rifles" and submachine guns in private homes (there are bitter memories of the Nazi occupation). Yet a total of 13 killings in 25 years have been linked to the 60,000 Danish Home Guard weapons in circulation.

The Turning Point: 1848

As the call for a people's militia was adopted by the rising proletarian movement, the bourgeoisie abandoned its own slogan that "every man be armed." As noted by Friedrich Engels, the workers' demands for social equality contained "a threat to the existing order of society": " ... the workers who put it forward were still armed; therefore, the disarming of the workers was the first commandment for the bourgeois, who were at the helm of the state. Hence, after every revolution won by the workers, a new struggle, ending with the defeat of the workers. "This happened for the first time in 1848." —Engels' 1891 introduction to Marx's *The Civil War in France*

With the appearance of the proletariat as an independent actor on the scene, "the armed people" became archaic as the population was polarized along class lines. 1848 marked the beginning of the modern world in which we still live, and the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and proletariat remains historically unresolved to this day.

The defeat of the 1848 revolutions in Europe was followed by a bloodbath revealing the "insane cruelties" of which the bourgeoisie is capable, wrote Engels. "And yet 1848 was only child's play compared with the frenzy of the bourgeoisie in 1871," when the workers of Paris rose up and formed the Commune. One of the Commune's key decisions came on 30 March 1871, when it "abolished conscription and the standing army, and declared the sole armed force to be the National Guard, in which all citizens capable of bearing arms were to be

enrolled." When the Commune fell in May 1871 before the troops of the French government, behind whom stood the more substantial forces of the Prussian army, the disarming of the working class was followed by a massacre of defenseless men. Legislation against the possession of arms and for gun control precisely correlates with the social situation. Besides the seminal events of 1848 and 1871, the whole history of France since 1789 demonstrates the way in which the ruling class has resorted to firearms control in accord with the felt threats to its position. After the restoration of the monarchy in 1816, Louis XVIII sought to disarm the population by ordering all arms turned in. Louis Philippe in 1834 and Napoleon III in 1858 passed laws to restrict access to arms. A 1939 emergency decree of the Daladier government remains the basis for all subsequent French gun control laws, and new restrictions were imposed in 1958, 1960 and 1961, during the crisis surrounding the Algerian war for independence. However, the memory of the armed insurrection of the Communards remains alive in the French working class. And the Resistance during WW II, despite the Communist Party's nationalist, class-collaborationist role, did not exactly leave a pacifist anti-gun legacy.

Anti-Gun Legislation in Britain

Such is the social-democratic complacency and respect for the established ruling-class order among many British leftists, that they often see a concern with the right to bear arms as a peculiarly American fixation. Yet Britain presents a centuries-long history of anti-weapons threats tightly associated with counterrevolution and fear of the working class. It was the spectre of the Russian Revolution and national uprising in Ireland which prompted the introduction of the 1920 Firearms Act, which remains the basis even today of the sweeping gun controls in Britain.

In 1939 George Orwell noted the direct correlation between stricter gun control legislation and rising class struggle in Britain:

"When I was a kid you could walk into a bicycle shop or ironmonger's [hardware store] and buy any firearm you pleased, short of a field gun, and it did not occur to most people that the Russian revolution and the Irish civil war would bring this state of affairs to an end."

In fact the right to bear arms was preserved by Parliament throughout the 19th century. But faced with the example of the French Revolution, and new upheavals associated with the growth of industrial capitalism, the capitalist ruling class resorted to a number of other

measures. Particularly following the Luddite disturbances and the 1819 Peterloo massacre (in which Hussars killed and wounded hundreds at a popular demonstration in Manchester), laws were passed banning drilling, "seditious" meetings and the publication of "seditious libels."

The Arms Act of 1820 allowed Justices of the Peace to seize arms which might be used by revolutionaries but it applied only to industrial areas like Lancashire, Nottinghamshire and Durham which had been at the center of the unrest. Opponents of the 1820 Act denounced it in Parliament as an attack on the right to bear arms and the government admitted such a right. Later in the century, there were repeated attempts to introduce gun control, all of which failed in Parliament. In 1889 an ambassadorial report commissioned by the government noted: "If a Montenegrin has a six barrelled revolver in his belt, he knows that his neighbour is similarly provided. Consequently, it may be said that all start fair" (quoted in Colin Greenwood, *Firearms Control*). And during the 1893 debate over pistol legislation, one M P asked: "Why should Englishmen not arm themselves? It was natural and parliament ought not to interfere with such a right" (*ibid*). In 1903 an act was passed making it necessary to obtain a license for a pistol, but obtaining a license was still relatively easy. In 1911 following an armed robbery by "Russian anarchists" in which three police were killed and the ensuing siege of Sidney Street for which the army was called in, an Aliens (Prevention of Crime) Bill was presented to Parliament. This sought to restrict the right of foreigners" to bear arms, but this also failed to carry in Parliament.

During World War I the Defence of the Realm Act included restrictions on the sale, purchase and transfer of arms, but it was applied only in Ireland. All army officers were still expected to buy their own revolvers, except with the mass conscription and slaughter at the front, they were not all "gentlemen" anymore. But events during and after the war began to loom large in the mind of the ruling class: the 1916 Easter Uprising in Ireland, Scotland's Red Clyde-side, army mutinies, October 1917 and the revolutionary turmoil in Central Europe, unrest in the colonies. A 1920 government report focused on the danger to the "British Empire" of arms in the hands of "savage or semi-civilised tribesmen" and "the anarchist or intellectual malcontent of the great cities" (quoted in Greenwood). Among other weapons, 15,000 machine guns had been *officially* awarded to ex-servicemen as trophies of the world war. By the time the 1920 Act was debated in Parliament only one M P, a Lt. Commander Kenwor-

thy of Hull, clearly expressed concern about the right to bear arms: "The very foundation of the liberty of the subject in this country is that he can, if driven to do so, resist. You can only govern with the consent of the people." He was roundly denounced by other MPs for suggesting that redress might be sought through "armed resistance to the State" and the legislation was carried at its second vote by 254 to 6. Needless to say, after the Firearms Acts of 1922 and 1937 (directed against the IRA) the British-imposed gun control laws in Ulster, among the hardest in the world, have not dented the widespread use of arms in that never-ending fighting rooted in Britain's centuries-old oppression of Ireland.

More recently, following the 19 August 1987 "Hungerford massacre," when a licensed gun holder ran amok killing 15 people, even more sweeping gun controls were introduced, banning not just automatic weapons but also semi-automatic and pump-action rifles, and adding new restrictions on shotguns. The very wide police discretion on licensing and control is enhanced. Meanwhile the "unarmed bobby" increasingly resorts to the use of firearms even in connection with traffic offenses.

The Bolshevik Revolution

It was an armed working class which made the Bolshevik Revolution, in accordance with Lenin's call:

"Following the path indicated by the experience of the Paris Commune of 1871 and the Russian Revolution of 1905, the proletariat must organise and arm *all* the poor, exploited, sections of the population in order that they *themselves* should take the organs of state power directly into their own hands, in order that *they themselves should constitute* these organs of state power."

—"Letters from Afar, Third Letter Concerning a Proletarian Militia" (March 1917)

The Soviet Red Guard workers militias fought the first battles of the ensuing civil war. Like all militias, the Red Guards were not much good at first, but in war one's strength is always relative to the enemy's, and the Whites suffered from low morale. Militiamen can become professional fighters if they survive long enough to gain experience. As the founder of the Red Army, Leon Trotsky, commented in December 1921, "In the initial stages we learnt manoeuvring from them [the Whites]." And the Soviets eventually triumphed over the combined strength of 14 imperialist/ Allied expeditionary forces and the tsarist White Guards.

Though the Bolsheviks advocated a socialist militia "in connection with the abolition of classes," they were forced by the fight against

counterrevolution to build a standing army. Trotsky explained in the foreword to the fifth volume of his military writings (*How the Revolution Armed, 1921-23 [1981]*) that the problem was rooted in the poverty and backwardness of Russia, wherein "the Red barracks constitutes an incomparably higher cultural setting than . . . that to which the Red Army man is used at home." But when Stalin usurped political power at the head of a conservative bureaucracy, he made the standing army into a fetish, going so far as to mimic the Western capitalist armies' ranks and privileges. Trotsky denounced this:

"No army. . . can be more democratic than the regime which nourishes it. The source of bureaucracy with its routine and swank is not the special needs of military affairs, but the political needs of the ruling stratum." — 77ie *Revolution Betrayed* (1936)

Having restored the officer caste 18 years after its revolutionary abolition, Stalin then beheaded the Red Army on the eve of Hitler's invasion.

In the shadow of the oncoming world war, Trotsky's Fourth International insisted in its 1938 *Transitional Program*: "The only disarmament which can avert or end war is the disarmament of the bourgeoisie by the workers. But to disarm the bourgeoisie the workers must arm themselves." Its program for revolutionary struggle against imperialism and war included the call for: "Substitution for the standing army of a *people's militia*, indissolubly linked up with factories, mines, farms, etc." Its demands for military training and arming of workers and peasants under the control of workers' and peasants' committees were coupled with the demand for "complete independence of workers' organizations from military-police control."

The American bourgeoisie of the 18th century could afford the Second Amendment when there was not much wage labor, blacks were not free and a small farmer class approximated "the people." But today, in capitalism's death agony, as the economy falls apart and labor/black explosions threaten, they want to take the masses' guns away. In this atmosphere, the NRA lobbyists now find themselves politically disarmed in Congress, state legislatures and city councils as they plead for their "sporting" weapons while urging an even greater "War on Crime" by the cops and the feds (*American Rifleman*, April 1989). Marxists, in contrast, oppose racist gun control and defend the right of labor/black armed self-defense. And over the years women too have gained from Second Amendment rights—as the old saying goes, "God created man and woman,

and Colonel Colt made them equal." But, guns were designed for killing people. The desire for a socialist world order—i.e., the abolition of society based on class division and national oppression—is in part the desire that the use of guns might indeed become a mere hobby.

The guns the working people had better worry about today are those in the hands of the capitalist rulers, who want a total monopoly, at home and in the world. The former chief of the U.S. Strategic Air Command, General Curtis LeMay, called for bombing Vietnam back to the Stone Age, which the Pentagon attempted. And Washington howled against Soviet Marshal Malinovsky for declaring that the USSR must be prepared to defend itself with nuclear weapons. Yet only the Soviets' own development of an atomic arsenal has been able to deter the first-strikers in Washington who are gearing up for a final nuclear *Gotterdammerung*.

Having guns is no magic talisman, but an unarmed population faces merciless slaughter at the hands of this vicious ruling class whose state is armed to the teeth. For as Karl Marx summed it up in *Capita!* (1867), "Force is the midwife of every old society pregnant with the new."