Most Secret: German Industrial ARMS CODES 1921-1945

Michael Heidler outlines the special coding of the covert rearmament of Germany under the Versailles Treaty

Government, according to Article 169 of the Peace Treaty, was established. It contained 13 companies for military material and 28 companies for naval material and ships. Within three months, all establishments for manufacture, preparation, and storage of arms or ammunition were to be destroyed. Within six months, all arsenals except those for storage of the permitted stocks of ammunition were to be abolished. Within the stipulated period, the possession of arms mentioned above shall be made redundant.

With the acceptance of the ultimatum of the Allied Governments on 5 May 1921, the list of future supplies of arms, ammunition, and equipment for the German forces took over the Schwedisches Waffenschnitzzeltwerk SSW and from 1929 three developed fully automatic weapons once again. Other companies like Stenknopf, Krupp, Daimler, BMW opened offices in Russian factories as part of German-Russian cooperation. Besides, the already mentioned activity abroad, (former) defense contractors were not only limited to their own country. This was made easier by a steady diminution of allied control activity and an increasing interest in the German military. A perfect time for the start of secret rearmament cannot be given exactly, but it would seem that, by 1925, a capacity was reached that necessitated the introduction of covert production methods.

Confirmation is given by a decree of the Army Weapons Office of 12 December 1923 that began with the words: “By the above referenced Decree company markings for non-licenced arms companies were introduced.” From 1924 onwards, officially permitted companies were allowed to use a code marking. Four of those known today to have been used as a basis for the covert rearmament programme are shown in the table above.

The basic code letter was supplemented by a code number that denoted the actual – but in fact illegal – manufacturer. Thus, the headstamp code “1933” on a 9mm cartridge case identifies the manufacturer as DWWM in Berlin-Schöneberg and not, as it was intended to overtly indicate, Pfeile in Magdeburg. The same goes, for instance, for KP 98 rifles with the codes “27/5” and “27/3” actually manufactured by ERMA in Erfurt, not by Simon & Co. in Stuhl.

The same 1936 letter from the Army Weapons Office, goes on to indicate that designate for powder manufacturer no longer served necessary. Instead, the code numbers were to be replaced by an abbreviation (usually of the manufacturer’s location). The requirement for covert marking of deliveries of the powder and explosive factories with the DWWM designation, after removal of disguise, is no longer required, therefore the introduction of official company

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abbreviations take effect immediately. With that, the requests of the Weapons Office Departments for evaluation and acceptance for cancellation of the code marks were granted.

After the allocation of code numbers had reached 999, in April of 1940, a completely new code system was introduced consisting of up to three lower-case letters. This system primarily serves through the allocation of letters to the suppliers of K98 parts, the so-called ‘Saxony Group’ on the 28th of October 1938. Due to the relatively small size of numerous parts, marking with three letter codes was not possible. In those cases the companies concerned were assigned single letters to be stamped 1.6mm-2.5mm high on metallic and 6mm high on wooden parts.

The one-letter system appears to have started a whole new marking system based on code letters. With that the final form of all code systems was determined. A letter from the Army High Command from 1 July 1940 gives information about the new production marks for powder and explosives manufacturers:

The remaining marks, which were not always meant just to deceive.

The Reichsbetriebsnummer

The ‘State Manufacturing (Plant) Number’ was another type of labelling, e.g. RBN: 00/010/0853 for the company Otter & Co. in Kessangen or 07/0750/0184 for the Fratz & Gihr Wagnerschutz W. Kuller & Co. in Stuttgart. The origin of the four numbers in the last stage of this war is controversial, especially since the term sounds more civilian than military. One reads of different sponsors (from the Air Force to paramilitary formations) but this is only speculation, so long as documentary proof is missing. In addition, hardly any of the numbers have been identified. The lowest known numbers were given to companies in Eastern and Western Prussia, followed by Upper and Lower Saxony, Brandenburg, Saxony, Pomerania and the area of Berlin. Further distribution took place without any recognizable order.

The system of the Reichswaffengüterstelle of the NSDAP

In contrast to the hitherto attempts of the Air Forces and the