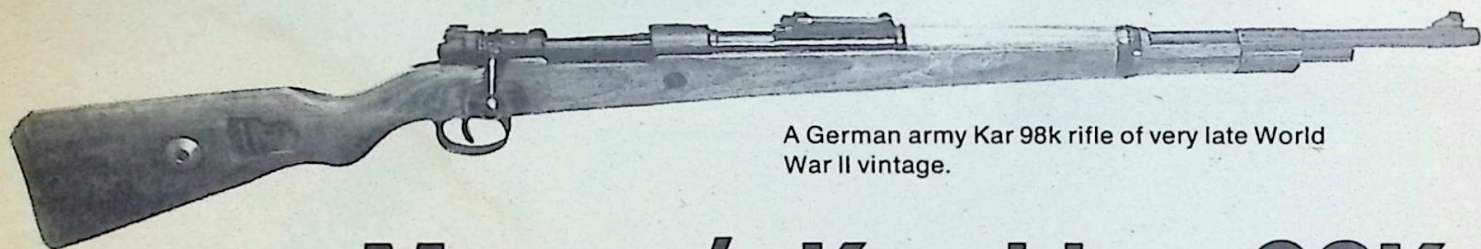


WHILE MANY of the dates and details of the development of the M1898 Rifle by the Mauser Company have been well documented by noted scholars in the field of German Arms, a distinct silence seems to surround the origin of the K98k. One authoritative English language source simply remarks that it was "in use by 1935." If the design of this widely made and used arm, of which millions were manufactured between 1934 and 1945, had been in response to an official German Army requirement, then in spite of the destruction of the end of the war period one could be certain that we would have definite, documented dates of that Army requirement and of official adoption. But like so many other important facts of the early National Socialist regime, we are once again faced by something we know to have occurred, with-

rate fire to be brought onto close-order infantry formations at ranges up to 2,000 Meters. The supposition that such sights are impossibly optimistic, designed to hit a single individual at such ranges, merely indicates that the "supposer" does not understand what such sights were intended to do. Secondly, the prewar tactical theorist believed the charge of enemy infantry would be repelled at close quarters, and then the length of the rifle with bayonet attached would be of crucial practical and psychological importance in what would be, in effect, a Twentieth Century duel with spears.

The battles of 1914-1918 rapidly changed such concepts. Any army that charged in neat mass formations left less-neat masses of corpses in profusion, mowed down with mechanical precision by high vol-

# The Wehrmacht's Rifles



A German army Kar 98k rifle of very late World War II vintage.

## Mauser's Karabiner 98K

by OTTO H. VON LOSSNITZER  
as told to LESLIE E. FIELD

out easily obtainable details as to *how* and *why* it occurred.

To have any explanation at all, we will have to rely on the recollections of those who were close observers of events at the time, in the right vantage points to make proper observations, and to coordinate their personal testimony with the more general ordnance history of the time.

The first fact to remember is the change in functional importance of rifles in the minds of the German military resulting from the events of the First World War. At the commencement of that war, the infantry regiments of the German Army, and all other armies, primarily relied on rapid mass rifle fire to force their enemies to break out of close, tightly packed formation so that the much-feared Napoleonic rapid charge might be prevented. For this reason, the G98 was provided with a rear sight which would permit accu-

rate machine-gun fire before the defenders were even clearly visible to the attackers, in most cases. The machine gun became the central weapon of infantry combat in the German Army; the infantry squad was organized around it, and all members of that squad not actively engaged in its use were provided only to direct it, to assist it, or to carry ammunition for it.

At the same time, the German sweep across France in 1914, and other circumstances, persuaded the German general staff that the infantryman marching enormous distances to battle, or in battle, was now going to be a less-common occurrence in warfare in central Europe, the German Army's chief concern. The Germans observed that both the United States and Great Britain had adopted so-called "short rifles," equivalent to the German K98—a cavalry carbine with a barrel about 600mm long and a lightened, and thus weakened, receiver—in handling

qualities, and with them achieved adequate battle results. Bayonet fighting became of minor importance; by the time one was close enough to use a bayonet the enemy had fled, or one was better advised to employ grenades or pistols, or—in the last days of 1918—the newly-developed machine pistol (submachine gun).

The result was that the soldier needed a shorter, handier rifle, convenient to riding in a truck or railroad car, and its length and fearsomeness for bayonet combat mattered little. In addition, two problems with G98 sights had been revealed in battle, and the German Army worked on both in a new rear sight design. These were, first, the burning heat of the sight parts when rapid fire had put many calories into the chamber area of the barrel where the rear sight was located. The second was that the sight graduations were in too coarse increments at the closer ranges.

Obviously, burned fingers while adjusting sights improve no army's effectiveness or morale, but the second problem is a little less obvious. Trench warfare had created its own unique needs. Often marksmen wanted to accurately hit an aperture in the enemy's trench wall from which a particularly pestiferous and casualty-causing observer was operating. The Germans discovered, to their dismay, that 100-meter sight adjustments did not offer sufficient resolution to permit them to hit such small targets with the older type of G98 sights. Something better was called for, so the new rear sight should have 50-meter adjustments.

However, other than limited production of a rifle known as K98b (a G98 with turned down bolt handle and an improved rear sight), none of the above had resulted in a more modern German army rifle by 1928. The exquisitely skilled "100,000 man army" created by General von Seeckt and his associates carried a rifle not substantially different from that carried in August, 1914, by the Kaiser's men invading Belgium. As a matter of fact, it was probably one of the same rifles, except for the sights. The supply of G98s left over from the war was more than adequate for the army Germany was permitted by the Versailles Treaty. As far as most sources can discover, no new military rifles were made for army use in the decade after the war. There was not even a require-

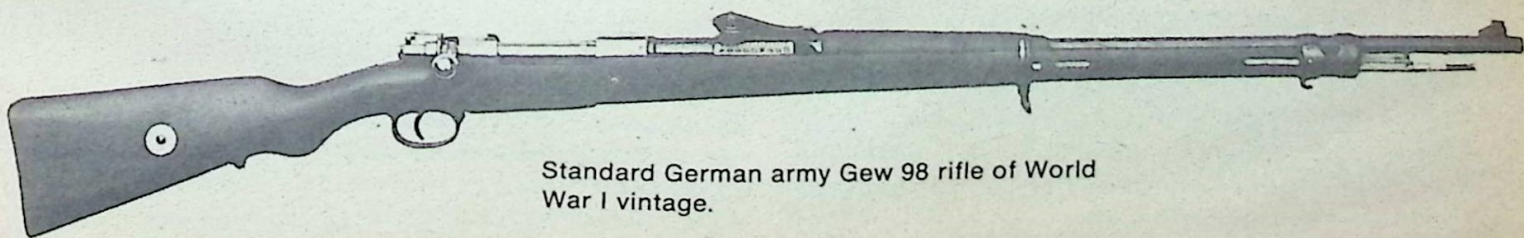


Two Bolivian army soldiers on jungle patrol armed with Czech Vz24 short rifles in 7.65mm Mauser caliber, ca. 1935.

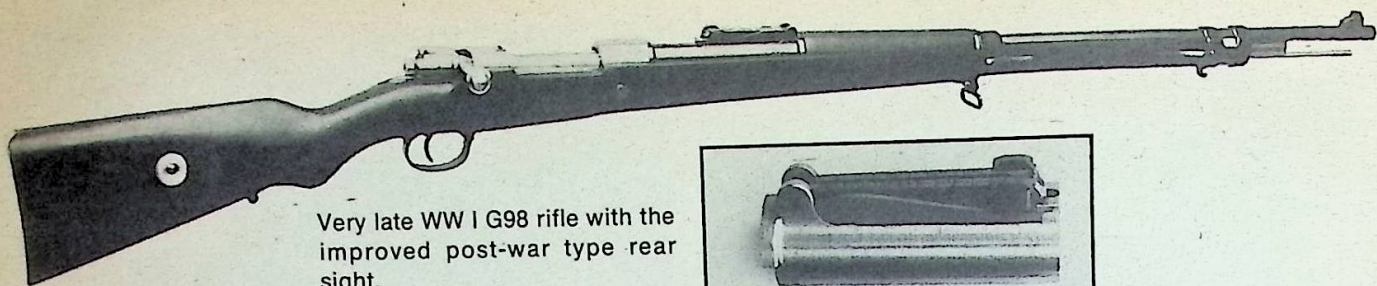
ment for one, at least not as a high-priority item. Much more effort was expended to develop a better light machine gun to replace the complex and heavy MG 08/15, which was interdicted by certain provisions of the Versailles Treaty.

The "Machine-Gun Worshipers," as they were known in German military circles, demanded a new, highly maneuverable, belt-fed gun, preferably air-cooled, so as not to contravene the Versailles Treaty. This required the development of quick-change barrel systems, and imposed severe problems for a country in which armaments research was supposed to be largely taboo. But, said General von Seeckt, "If we can't have a general staff, no one can prevent us from starting a joint stock company for the same purposes." In the same spirit, covert research on small arms was not abandoned by the Mauser Company, and as is often the case, the research was the efforts of a few men, without much official knowledge or encouragement.

At this time Otto von Lossnitzer was an officer

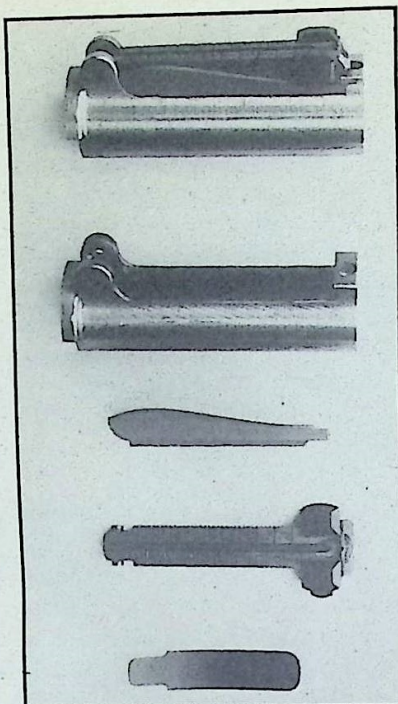
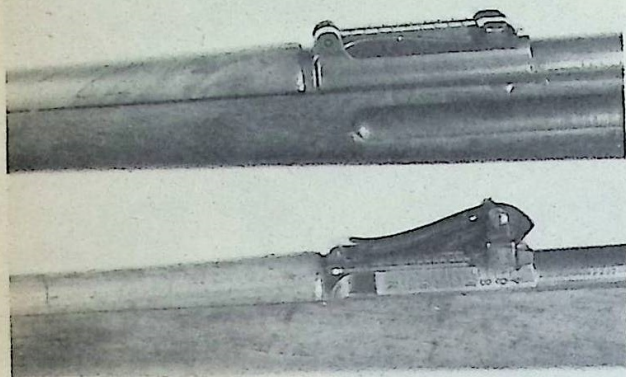


Standard German army Gew 98 rifle of World War I vintage.



Very late WW I G98 rifle with the improved post-war type rear sight.

Side by side comparison of the improved G98 sight (above) and the original.



Detail of the improved G98 rear sight and mounting sleeve. The ramp may be changed to allow for cartridges with different trajectories.

attached to the I.W.G., the "Inspection fur Waffen und Gerat," the tactfully named weapons research and development office for the German Army. There he observed the development of the K98 as it progressed at the time, to the extent it was known to the military authorities. Later he learned more details after he joined the Mauser Werke management in 1933.

The Mauser Company had considered various types of improved military rifles as early as 1917. At least two concepts had been realized in prototype form before the end of the war. Nonetheless, no improvement was worth the burden that a major change in the design of service rifles would have imposed on Germany in a period of crisis such as 1914-18, so the G98 and K98 continued to be made much as they had been in 1914. The result was that Mauser never could get permission to retool and commence production of either the simplified 98-type rifle it had designed or the prototype "Trench Rifle."

The ending of the war by the Versailles Treaty put the Mauser Company in the position of being forbidden to produce *any* military rifles, so new designs and retooling were inhibited on that account. At the same time, conditions of the postwar situation caused Mauser to send much of its older production machinery to Czechoslovakia, where an interesting development was about to occur.

The high command of that infant Republic felt it-

self beset on all sides by powerful and implacable enemies, so one of the first national priorities was to adopt and issue a uniform type of service rifle of the best possible design. The outcome, in 1923, was a rifle of 8mm German caliber with a mechanism essentially interchangeable with the G98, a barrel length of about 600mm (24"), and important modifications in the sights, stock and furniture. The design was then slightly changed, resulting in the model of 1924, an immediate success not only in Czechoslovakia, but in a growing export trade to South America and China.

At the close of the war, the Fabrique Nationale in Liege, Belgium, had also embarked on a program of producing Mauser 1898 system rifles for export in competition with the Czechs for the military markets Germany was now forbidden to supply. This commenced with the models of 1922 (generally confused with the Model 1924). After producing the 1922 models for Mexico and others, F.N. announced its own model of 1924, which also boasted the combination of the 98 type action combined with a 600mm barrel and improved sights and fittings.

None of this success was lost on the gentlemen in Oberndorf, who were now back in the military rifle business on a quiet basis. The key to this was a factory making underwear in Kreuzlingen, Switzerland. As Mr. von Lossnitzer recalls, the product line was diverse: "Men's underwear from the first floor; ladies' underwear from the second floor. And Mauser

rifles from the basement." By the late 1920s, Chinese warlords were coming to both Kreuzlingen and Oberndorf to buy Mauser military pistols and new rifles. The caliber generally selected by the Chinese was the same as the German service caliber, although some carbines were supplied in 7mm as well.

Undoubtedly, some Chinese customer asked the German factory for a "1924 type" short rifle about this time, but the name of that originator is now lost to us. However, we do know that Mauser had the services of two designers during this period, Engineer Nickl for pistols, and Herr Hauser designing sporting rifles. Mr. von Lossnitzer believes it is almost certain that Mr. Hauser designed the first Mauser export short rifle upon the request of Director Zwillingner, who had the responsibility of keeping Mauser's plant going during this difficult period. At any rate, it was known that Mauser was delivering short rifles to China, both to the National Government and to the independent warlords, by the dawn of the 30s. Powerful inferences as to the form of such rifles can be drawn from the examination of later Chinese specimens and from the rifles supplied to Paraguay as the "Modelo 1932."

In both cases, the rifle has an action dimensionally equivalent to the G98 (and the later K98k) and a 600mm barrel. The stocks are the same in profile as later K98k type rifles, and the sole differences are retention of the G98's straight bolt handle and the cross-pin retained front band. The Chinese rifles are all 8mm caliber, and the Paraguayans are in 7.65mm Mauser caliber, the national caliber in that country, as well as in Argentina, Peru and Bolivia. In 1933, the Oberndorf factory executed a contract for similar rifles in 8mm for Ethiopia, and in 1934, a second. Both were for rifles of the previously established pattern; sometime in this period Mauser also produced 7mm rifles of the same specification for Honduras.

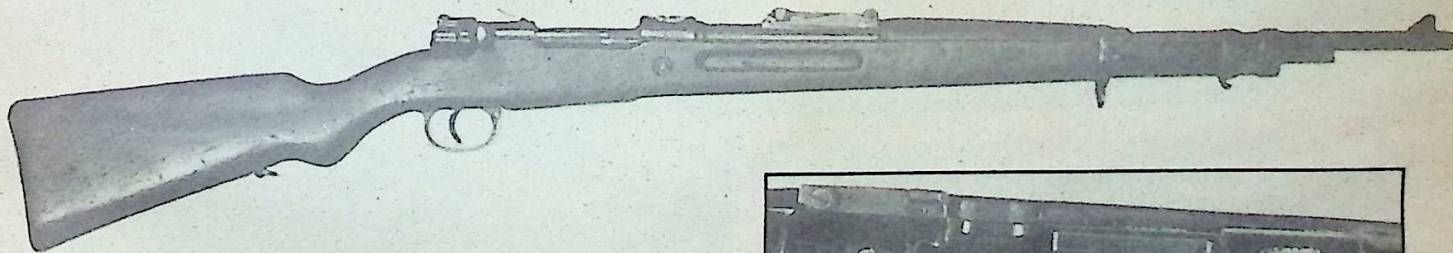
But, meanwhile, there came (at last) some evidence of official German government interest in this pattern of rifle, if from a rather unlikely source. The Reichspost, the German Post Office Department, had

Z765

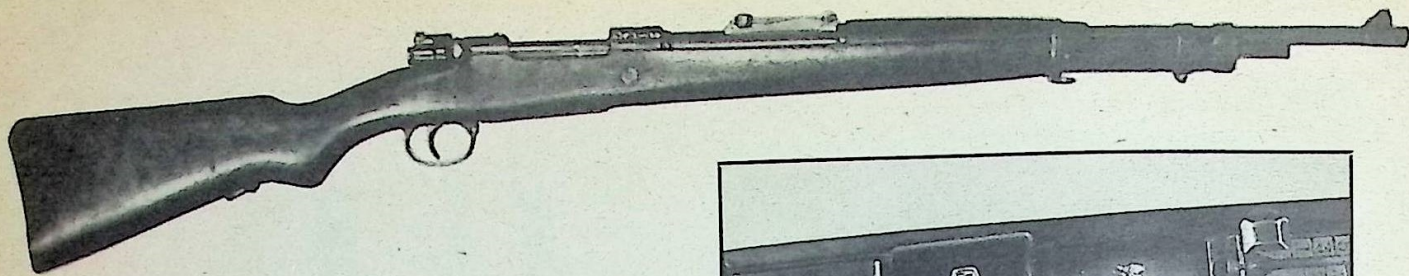


Czech Model Vz24 short rifle, one of the earliest types of short Mauser military rifles with a 600mm barrel. The original factory photo also shows the original bayonet and scabbard.

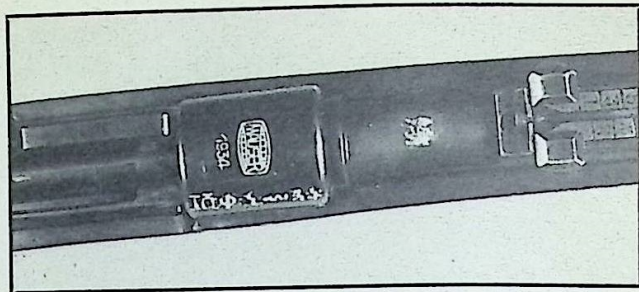
followed Mauser's Chinese and Paraguayan developments with interest. To help prevent mail robberies, an increasingly popular criminal amusement of that period, in 1933 they accepted delivery of the *Reichspost Rifle*, a close twin of the earlier examples, in the national caliber. When Mauser prepared a briefing memorandum for Otto von Lossnitzer on the



Ethiopian contract rifle of the 1933 series. (Inset) With the elaborate Ethiopian crest on the receiver ring, the Mauser banner has been moved to the rear ring. The three digit serial number begins with "A" and the action bears commercial German proofs.



Ethiopian contract rifle of the 1935 series. (Inset) The Mauser banner is in the normal spot on the receiver ring, while the Ethiopian lion is on the barrel behind the rear sight. Receiver is marked "STANDARD MODELL 1924" on the side, the ring is dated 1934, and the action and barrel are commercially proofed. The five digit serial begins with a "B." The Ethiopian markings on the side of the receiver ring were later additions.



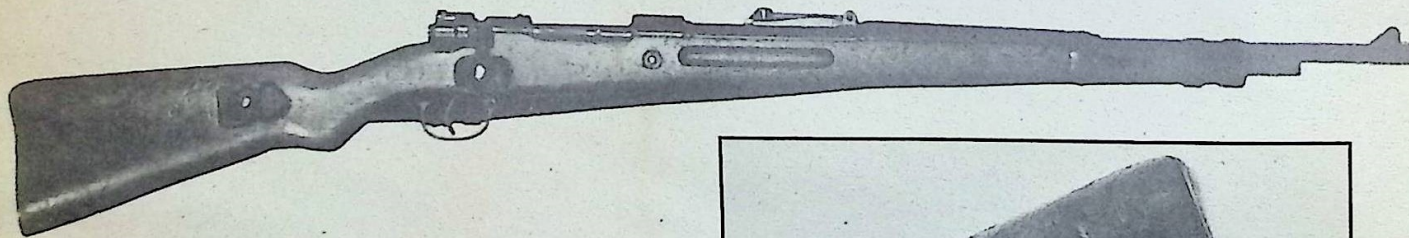
occasion of his first reception in Oberndorf for his old Army I.W.G. friends to see Mauser small arms, the Reichspost Rifle received important mention. After all, it was *the* modern service rifle development that Mauser was immediately prepared to produce. Von Lossnitzer recalls:

At the end of the (Mauser briefing) memo, Mauser standard rifle and the Mauser rifle for the German Post Office are listed. The Mauser Standard Modell rifle was only made for export (mostly China), and looked like the old German M98 rifle but with a shorter barrel. All the countries outside of Germany had only the S-cartridge. Therefore, the sight for this rifle had to be adjusted for this ammunition. The loading handle of the bolt on this rifle stuck out to the side.

The Mauser Rifle for the German Post Office was a K98k. It had a shorter barrel than the G98, its sight was as for the new German sS cartridge which was already standard in the German Army. The loading handle on the bolt was bent

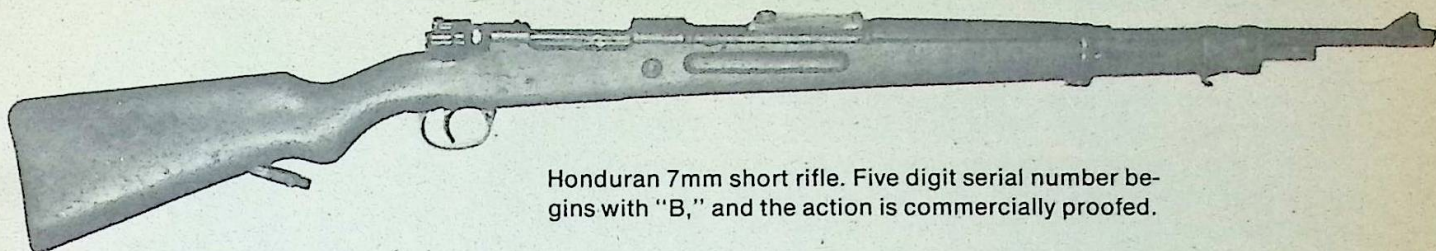
down and the rifle sling was that typical for carbines. The German Post Office had organized a security force which had to guard post offices and the postal railroad cars during riots. The armament of this security force was an official act of the German government. The postal service, therefore, preferred a rifle which was identical to what the army would require for future armament. By the way, the Mauser rifle for the German Postal Service was, within the Mauser Works, a camouflage name for all the rifles which were delivered to political formations like SA and SS.

Persuasion for the army to buy this new development did not spring entirely from military considerations, however. Adolf Hitler and his Nazis had come to power, and with them, the legions of the Sturm Abteilung. The S.A. (Storm Troops) were now dominant in the country. The leader of the S.A. was the very able and unconventional Ernst Roehm, who was no admirer of old guard attitudes, especially in the army. Roehm coveted the post of Defense Minis-



Reichspost Rifle. The Mauser banner marked receiver ring is dated 1933, and the gun bears commercial proofs and a special series five digit serial number. (Inset) Note the "DRP" for Deutsches Reichs Post and registry number burned into the stock; "D.R.P." and the abbreviation for its assigned station appear in the sling recess on the right side of the stock.





Honduran 7mm short rifle. Five digit serial number begins with "B," and the action is commercially proofed.

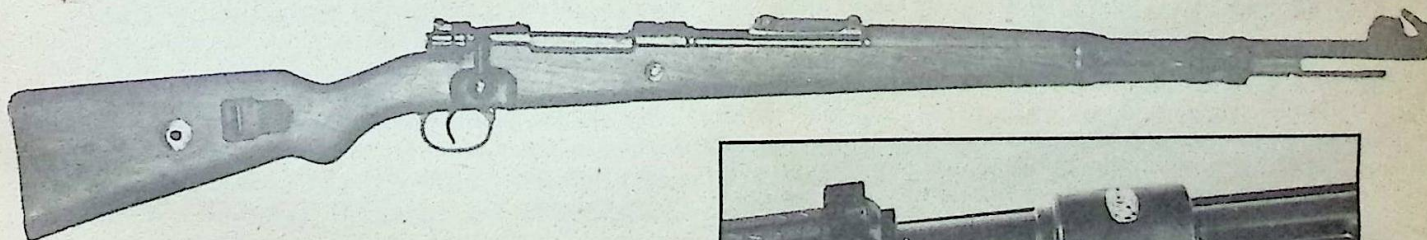
ter, with an eventual goal of taking over von Seeckt's miniscule but brilliantly-trained 100,000 man army and submerging it in the two millions of his SA men, which by comparison was nothing more than a uniformed mob. Roehm had the ambition of reforming both German society and its army, by ending the aristocratic tradition and creating a vast Militia-Army and the semi-socialist state promised by the designation of the Nazi Party as both "National" and "Socialist."

Roehm's subordinates, either with his knowledge or by his active encouragement, had started to buy military weapons *after* Hitler was already in office and presumably in control of all the levers of power in Germany. This the Army discovered and set out to prevent. Otto von Lossnitzer recollects:

When you resign from a position as I had in the German Army Ordnance, you are entitled to an official farewell party which was usually held during the last days of your service. Due to reasons unknown to me, this was not possible by the end of September, 1933, so my farewell party was held in the big mess hall of the Army Ordnance Directorate shortly after the time I had received the memorandum in question from Mr. Premauer. I attended the party in Berlin and during the festivities General von Bockelberg ap-

proached me and asked if I would have one of his favorite drinks, a "Schneegestoeber" (the best translation is "blizzard"). This, by the way, is a terrible drink which went right to your head, but it was considered to be one of the high honors and one had to suffer for it. At this occasion the General talked to me and explained his problems and his objectives, and I think I gave him the simplest answer which he needed to solve the entire affair. I told him that if the Army Ordnance with official orders would simply buy the entire rifle production capacity of Mauser this would be the best solution for both parties. He understood that fully. Of course, such an action, like everything in a government office, required some time to execute, but it finally came about exactly as I had suggested it. Based on that discussion in Berlin, the visit of the Chief of the Army Ordnance Directorate was cancelled.

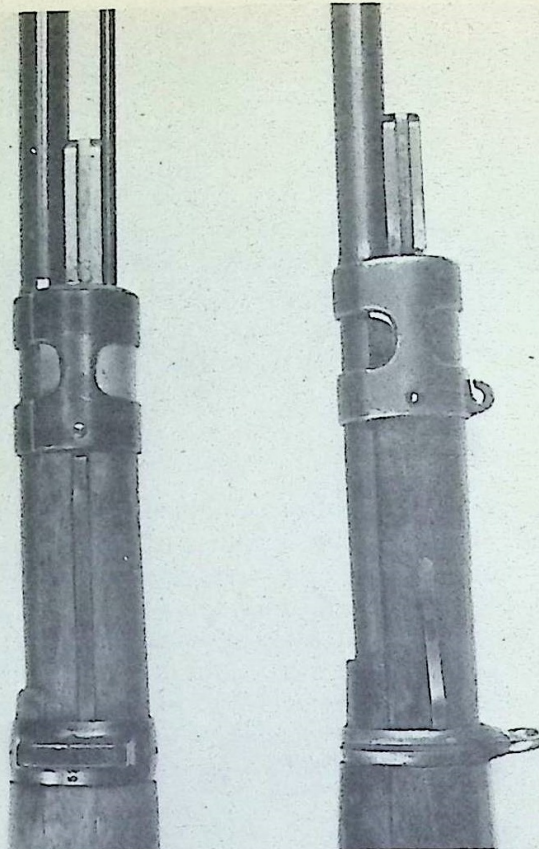
By mid-1933 therefore, the Mauser Werke had diverted the production of its new military rifle from the S.A. to the Army, leaving none from that source for the S.A. to buy. It is ironic that one of the reports which Heydrich is alleged to have forwarded to Hitler, which was to tip the scales of Hitler's judgment against Roehm in 1934, was that the S.A., under Roehm, was buying military rifles and machine guns



Very late Chinese contract rifle. No commercial proofs or markings other than the Mauser banner. (Inset) The Kuomintang symbol on receiver ring and barrel probably serves as both proof and property marking.

in Belgium for delivery to S.A. formations in Germany; this in direct defiance of Hitler's edict that, "The Army shall be the sole arms-bearer of the German nation." Hitler's decision resulted in the executions carried out in the "Night of Long Knives" of 1934. Those killed included Roehm and all of his handpicked S.A. leaders, including a number of Hitler's party comrades from the earliest days of his political career.

In its early procurement of the new rifle the Waffenamt had prescribed certain minor improvements in Mauser's design. The bolt handle was turned down, and the system of securing the bands was changed. The improved, wider sling band was used, and the sling placed the rifle flat, bolt handle out, against the soldier's back, without any sling swivels on the toe of the stock. But, in basic form the weapon differed only slightly from rifles shipped to Chinese soldiers 5 years earlier. The Second World War emerges as a paradox in that it isn't clear whether the Germans or the Chinese carried more of the K98 rifles into battle. In any event, the story of the K98k has as broad a cast of characters and as colorful a series of incidents as any collector of historical arms could desire.



Comparison of the K98k barrel bands (left) with the transitional type. Note the thin sling ring and pinned in front ring on the earlier rifle.

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history of the Mauser Werke in the period 1933-45, with special depth in the areas of aircraft armament and machine guns developed by Mauser during this period. Details visit of Mme. Chiang to Oberndorf and 1933 conference in which the army order to exclude purchases by the S.A. was set up, as well as colorful detail on Ethiopian contract, and Iranian rifle contract lost by Mauser through activities of a Nazi party zealot.

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*THE NIGHT OF LONG KNIVES* by Max Gallo (1972) published by Harper & Row, New York, N.Y., etc. 310 pages, translated into English from the French original edition. Attempt to form an hour-by-hour synopsis of the events leading to, and following, June 30, 1934 in which Roehm and his subordinates were killed on Hitler's order. Little direct material, but has discussion of alleged arms deliveries to the S.A. from Belgium at pages 102 and 103.

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