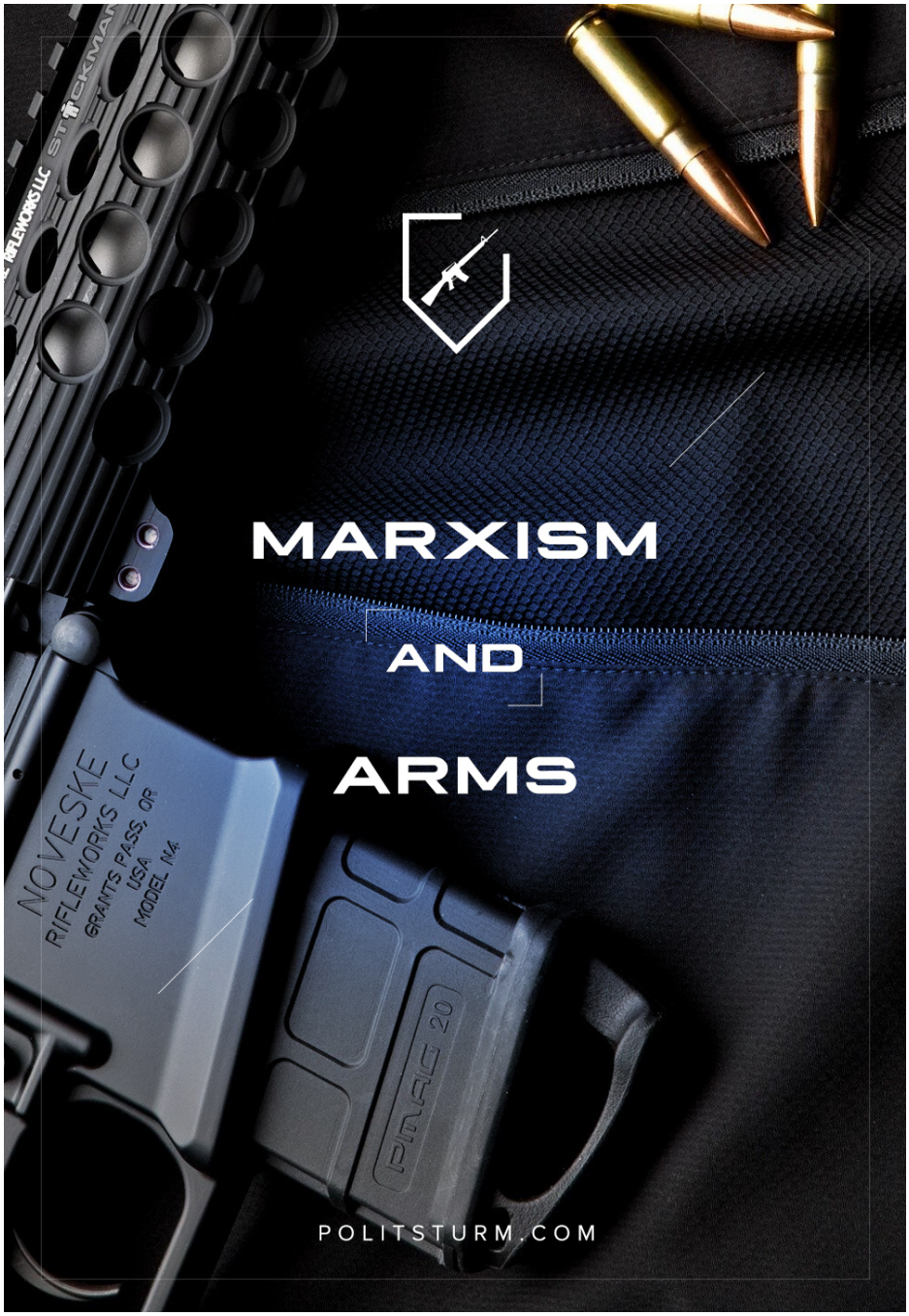
Marxism and Arms



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The issue concerning the legalization of small arms is as acute as ever in modern society.

Taking into account the fact that before the onset of communism the development of human society historically was the struggle of opposed classes, we should consider the methods of this struggle, and first one is an armed struggle. It is weapons that are the key to establishing one social group and classes' rule over others and serve as one of the paramount social regulators. Therefore the ruling class will be always and everywhere concerned with the existence of a military group ready to defend the ruling regime.

Depending directly on the ruling regime, the character of the armed forces usually changes greatly. Today's sticklers for the legalization of short-barreled weapons, libertarians, are inclined to arm the civilian population protecting the dominant capitalist ownership pattern which is private. At the same time, they state that socialism and mass arming are incompatible. The aim of this article is to analyze all the special features of the weapon's role in a class society, the experience of mass arming in socialist countries and to form modern Marxists' clear position on the arms issue.

The History of the Right to Bear Arms

Historically, the attitude towards circulation of armaments was quite different. Under feudalism the government had already functioned as the machinery for class oppression. According to the modern understanding of law it had little in common with statehood, and it was difficult to control traffic in weapons despite the fact that in Western Europe there was a tendency for the conversion from militias to elite knightly orders and mercenary foot soldiers called "Landsknechts".

But even at that time, due to the already established division of labour and growing class opposition, as well as the technological complexity of iron production in the Middle Ages, weapons were often available only to the privileged layers of society.

This was also due to the fact that under feudalism, vassals and sovereigns had the real influence on politics, but not the vestiges of tribal relations. During the days of the slave-owning system preceding feudalism the scale of arms circulation had fluctuated and had been subjected to the local cultural and historical context.

For example, in Hellenic poleis, despite their mutual hostility, the prevailing type of military institutions were militias formed from the poleis citizens. To maintain the system, the Hellenes introduced a universal draft for all of its citizens, also it imparted the so-called "heroic" pathos. At the same time, class opposition had already shown differences in the access to weapons along a monetary and property basis. For example, in Athens after Solon's reforms, the majority of citizens, the zeugitae, went to war as foot soldiers, while horsemen represented a more privileged group.

In Ancient Rome military institutions changed constantly. Having started from the militia, the Romans' conception of the military maneuvered towards a regular army under the leadership of the great Roman military commander Gaius Marius who abolished existing property qualifications which didn't allow impoverished rural

plebs to serve in the legion.

Under capitalism, as can be seen from historical evidence, the approach to the issue has also been changing. It starts with the victory of the bourgeois revolutions (the French Revolution and capitalists' military victories in America) and ends with the current situation in the capitalist countries. It should be mentioned that there is no one general approach to the issue in today's capitalist system.

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For example, in the U.S., which appeared as the result of a class war between slaveholders and capitalists, there is no one common provision on small arms. But this fact doesn't prevent the U.S. from being a practical leader in the free bearing of firearms: according to ATF and CRS, which calculate an approximation of all the weapons produced, as well as import and export data, in 2015 the U.S. had 357 million guns, that was 40 million more than the population.

By 2016 there wasn't any state prohibiting small arms in the U.S., though it can still be difficult to obtain a gun. The majority of states obey the rule «Shall issue». In the states where firearms are prohibited the status «May issue» is adopted. It means there isn't any guarantee to procure weapons. Apart from the armed civilian population, the U.S. has its own militia subordinated to the U.S. Armed Forces and called the National Guard of the U.S.

In the European Union there is also no one common provision on free bearing of guns: so, we can see the harsh contrast between Finland that requires a license to purchase a weapon and sets special recommendations for its storage in an appropriate safe at legislative level and the Czech Republic which, by some estimates, beats even the US in the freedom to carry small arms.

Militia organizations located in different countries are a part of regular armies, but they are not identical. In Latvia, the National Guard has access to weapons merely for shooting practice and manoeuvring, but in Switzerland, the militia has not been obligated to store their weapons in military bases since the 2010 referendum.

In modern capitalist Russia the right to bear arms is protected by the law but it is still limited by a number of bureaucratic formalities and the ban on short-barreled weapons (not including sporting firearms).

Libertarians looking at the Federal legislation of the conservative U.S. states, the Czech Republic and other countries and consider it a triumph of "free market" thought. At the same time these very same libertarians are pointing at the arms legislation of the liberal U.S. states, Switzerland, the FRG and Russia, with disdain and say that "communists" are to blame for imposing the restrictions on guns.

Commenting upon this doublethink, we shall note two crucial points:

— Capitalism evolves according to the dialectical laws of social development;
— the capitalist class may maintain a capitalist militia, as well as a regular army.

Not only modern bourgeois-democratic regimes but also open fascist dictatorships of big finance fully confirm these words. The most striking example here is the Third Reich weapon legislation which, according to William Pierce, didn't toughen, but on the contrary mitigated the legislation on gun trafficking in Germany, for instance, reducing the number of barriers to purchasing small firearms and removing them for long-barreled ones. Apart from that, the Nazi rise to power was impossible without the wide and colossal support from hard right, reactionary, chauvinistic and ultra-conservative ideas in grass-roots burghers, that resulted in the Storm Detachments (the Sturmabteilung) and the German Labour Front (Deutsche Arbeitsfront), which mobilized workers possessing reactionary sentiments who

betrayed their own class interests for a bone thrown by the big oligarchs.

It confirms even Lenin's opinion that the bourgeoisie can't draw only on policing institutions, but needs a mass "bottom-up" movement:

«Against the people's revolution, against the class struggle the police cannot be depended on; one must have the backing of the people, too, the support of classes. The springs of the police machinery have lost their snap; military force alone is now insufficient. One must stir up national hatred, race hatred; one must recruit "Black Hundreds" from among the politically least developed sections of the urban (and, following that, naturally, of the rural) petty bourgeoisie; one must attempt to rally to the defense of the throne all reactionary elements among the population at large; one must turn the struggle of the police against study circles into a struggle of one part of the people against the other. »

Lenin, Collected Works – Vol. 8, p. 202

Many libertarians are used to branding Hitler as "socialist", though the Third Reich gun laws didn't prevent German burghers defending their little petty-bourgeois world during the Battle of Berlin, and then hindering the Allied forces to seize an infinite number of short-barreled weapons.

Besides, in the U.S. it was armed citizens who lynched the Negroes, and it was the National Guard that suppressed the workers' uprisings, which gives Lenin's thesis a great practical meaning.

But what about arms circulation in socialist countries?

Arms in the USSR

Anti-communists are used to speaking about the whole system of restrictions on weapons carrying and acquisition in the USSR. And what is more, their argumentation is rooted in the RSFSR (Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic) arms legislation, namely in the Council of People's Commissars' decree «On Disarmament» Under order number 933 of December 10, 1918. In fact, this very decree ordered people to hand over all their weapons. Moreover, it has a special note that invalidated previous gun licenses. The decree also criminalized arms concealment and introduced a punishment for a period from one to ten years.

It may seem that our opponents have a trump card. «True socialism exists in prison, as only guards have arms», they yell in chorus. «In the Russian Empire even serfs had more rights to get a gun than in the Soviet Union», says the editor of the banned nationalist online media "Sputnik & Pogrom" ("Спутник и погром") Yegor Prosvirnin. «The Bolsheviks promised people self-government and weapons, but established their dictatorship and disarmed everybody», anarchists join the chorus, crying about the Kronstadt sailors and Makhno's kulaks (peasants exploiting hired hands – t/n).

Thus, another abominable myth based on logical mistakes and falsification has been created and successfully put into the consciousness of the masses.

To go thoroughly into the issue of arms possession under socialism, we shall start with a brief analysis of the aforementioned decree. We are to take into account the things neglected by the aforementioned public.

First, the main purpose of the Decree was to arm the fighting Red Army, which was extremely deficient in weapons. This is expressly stated in the decree: «8) All the

surrendered weapons are intended for the Red Army and fall within the Senior Supply Officer jurisdiction, whose permission is necessary for the use».

Second, it is set down in black and white in the decree that arms are confiscated not only from the people but also from the Soviet of Deputies and the Poor Peasants' Committees.

Third, the law warranted that even the party members could not possess more than two firearms (one revolver and one rifle). Besides, the party members' three-line rifles were substituted for foreign weapon samples.

Of course, an anti-communist will immediately raise a question about "the party privileges", as how did it turn out to be that the communists disarmed everyone, but were armed themselves?

There we should refer to the specific historical conditions. The actual class disunity of Russian society during the Civil War made total arming impossible. In 1918 the Bolshevik party consisted, according to various estimates, anywhere from 200 to 400 thousand committed communists, who formed the working class vanguard, its nucleus and the backbone of the entire Soviet state. The communists were always in the forefront of political and economic life of the proletarian state and, as befits the vanguard, on the blade point of the enemy's attack. The number of communists killed during the rebellions of 1918 (Yaroslavl, Izhevsk-Votkinsk, Livny, etc.) came up to several thousand people. In such circumstances, it was absolutely impossible to leave fellow comrades unarmed.

Besides, in those days the RCP(b) wasn't a party of careerists, but a party of workers and the poorest peasants, whom it led and, most importantly, armed.

The question arises: how could the party arm the working masses when the decree on disarmament was already published in 1918? To get the answer we should refer to the events that had preceded the decree and then followed it. In the first case it was the establishment and functioning of factory tactical units as an armed workers' militia, formed according to work-related principles, into the Red Guards, in some regions of the RSFSR (until 1919 and then were integrated into the Red Army). Formed in February, the Red Guards became an armed proletarian organization with a unique composition, namely right out of the factories under the guidance of the Bolshevik workers. As it was noted by the Soviet military historian A. M. Konev in his work "The Red Guards Defending the October Revolution":

> *«Practical work of the Red Guards formation was assigned to the Military organization of the RSDLP(b) and local party organizations. Considering the crucial statements made by Lenin in his "Letters from Afar", there were created initiative judicial commissions of three and five persons, organizational commissions and committees, and developed the Red Guards first regulations, instructions and later their first headquarters. The interim Commission for the Red Guards formation and regulation development was elected by the meeting of workers' druzhinas representatives in Petrograd on April 17. The meeting appealed to all Petrograd workers for the Red Guards creation.By April 1917 in Petrograd the Red Guards detachments had been formed at 12 factories and consisted of more than 2,000 fighters, including the factories "New Lessner" and "Old Lessner" (500), "New Parviainen" (300), "Ericsson" (300), "Ayvaz" (300), the Baltic Shipyard (170), "Siemens-Schuckertwerke" (120), "Renault" (100).»*

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It's also worth mentioning that the Red Guards appeared primarily due to the Bureau of the CC of the RSDLP(b) resolution on the Russian Provisional Government which contained notes of "the people total arming and, in particular, the immediate organization of the workers' Red Guards throughout the country". The

anti-communists speculating on the subject of the traffic in short-barreled and any other weapons kept silent about the resolution. The Red Guard detachments played a particular role after the Sixth Congress of the RSDLP(b) that had set a course for the armed uprising and the struggle against the Kornilov affair, and also in the years of the Civil War and the struggle against interventionists cooperating with the Red Army on the multiple areas of the front and gradually merging with it. By the way, it was the small, but desperate Red Guard detachments that had held back the German invaders advance in the beginning of 1918 before the Red Army was formed.

Being skeptical about the idea of arming the masses under socialism and, first of all, trying to bite the Bolsheviks from the left, anarchists will say that the armed people were useful to the Bolsheviks only during the time of taking and, probably, retaining power, but not after it.

This point of view is fundamentally wrong, as it doesn't take into account that:

1) The system of compulsory military training in the RSFSR — Vsevobuch system (the system of Universal Military Training), which was civil in-service military training (according to the most conservative estimates in the period from 1918 to 1923 not less than 4 million workers and peasants received Vsevobuch training).

2) The Special Forces that later came under Vsevobuch competence.

The very existence of the Special Forces as strategic special units, so-called "military party units", contradicts the ultra-left ideas about the development of armed organizations under the Bolsheviks. Let's look at the resolution of the Central Committee of the RCP (b) dated June 8th, 1919 that contained the following paragraph:

«Organize the Special Forces units at every factory and factory cell, district and city Committee. »

This is unusual from the viewpoint of the military strategy of composing a particular combination of militia and professional forces to perform tactical and operational tasks both on the front line and in the rear was the workers' battering ram in the years of the Civil War. And all these things went along with the decree on disarmament.

This chain of events when weapons are confiscated from the disunited class society, but at the same time given to the branching network of territorial and factory paramilitary organizations isn't a coincidence. It only stresses the necessity derived by Marx and Engels to create workers own revolutionary army:

«… To acquire that power you want to organize yourselves as an army possessed of that moral and physical strength which will enable it to meet the friendly hosts».

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels Collected Works, Volume 13, p. 51

Lenin in his work "The State and Revolution" proved the necessity for the conversion from the professional army to the worker's army as an alternative form of the Armed Forces. But at that moment this statement couldn't be realized due to the full number of objective reasons, in light of which the Red Army combined both a regular army and a national militia.

Lacking a knowledge of dialectics, anarchists and other ultra-left elements don't understand the subtleties of a particular historical moment, when it's more suitable to use armed masses, and when a regular and disciplined army is necessary. There is no such "barometer" for them. The captious critics of the Decree No.933 miss the

fact that weapons were primarily confiscated for the needs of the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army. And if we take into consideration that in those days Vsevobuch and the Special Forces were directly or indirectly under the Red Army's wing, and entirely under the party's wing, then dialectically the disarmament of the "people" as a class-opposed mass equaled the arming of the proletariat.

With this conclusion, Stalin's speech given on the Red Army tenth anniversary doesn't seem to be strange:

«The first fundamental distinctive feature of our Red Army is that it is the army of the liberated workers and peasants, it is the army of the October Revolution, the army of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

All armies that have ever existed under capitalism, no matter what their composition, have been armies for the furtherance of the power of capital. They were, and are, armies of capitalist rule. The bourgeois of all countries lie when they say that the army is politically neutral… In bourgeois countries, the army is deprived of political rights, it is not allowed into the political arena. That is true. But that by no means implies that it is politically neutral. On the contrary, always and everywhere, in all capitalist countries, the army was, and is, drawn into the political struggle as an instrument for the suppression of the working people. Is it not true that the army in those countries suppresses the workers and serves as a buttress of the masters?

In contrast to such armies, our Red Army is distinguished by the fact that it is an instrument for the furtherance of the power of the workers and peasants, an instrument for the furtherance of the dictatorship of the proletariat, an instrument for the liberation of the workers and peasants from the yoke of the landlords and capitalists.

Our army is an army of liberation of the working people.»

1. Stalin, Works, Volume 11, p 25— Three Distinctive Features of the Red Army

Here is it, the core of the ideological defeat of the anti-communists speculating on the subject of the gun lobby and attributing "slavish" and "unarmed" state to the Soviet society. Under socialism, workers and soldiers are not diametrically opposed, but related elements, and the main thing is that they are completely devoid of political injustice, which is typical of the soldiers' masses in capitalist countries.

As for personal weapons, which one could store at home, if the Decree of 1918, when the class oppositions in the society were maximally acute, warranted the weapons surrender for the Armed Forces' needs to defend the new ruling regime, on the contrary, the resolution No. 2186 «On IMPROVING the SUPPLY of HUNTERS with RIFLES, AMMUNITION and HUNTING ACCESSORIES» dated 1953, when the Soviet society was devoid of the antagonistic classes, had a diametrically opposed tone.

Free realization of plain-barrel guns to individuals, organizations and complete facilities «without hunting licenses and commitment letters» and registration, reduction of the cost of guns and ammunition, decrease in hunting fees and etc., all these things significantly removed restrictions on free traffic in plain-barrel guns. If we compare it with the current capitalist Russia, where a common smooth double-barreled gun, say nothing of some Saiga or Vepr, requires a medical certificate, a license, registration in the bodies of the National Guard of the RF and a separate safe (meeting certain standards) to store it, the USSR beats all.

Weapons in socialist countries

But let's proceed to the non-Soviet experience. The countries who experienced the process of socialist construction are also familiar with the maximal convergence of the army and working masses and maximally broad accessibility of weapons. Let's start with very ambiguous Chairman Mao, who left us a sizeable and rather valuable theoretical legacy on arming. In particular, his most important statement is the one that he made in 1929, long before the Chinese Red Guards appeared.

> *...The Chinese Red Army is an armed body for carrying out the political tasks of the revolution. Especially at present, the Red Army should certainly not confine itself to fighting; besides fighting to destroy the enemy's military strength, it should shoulder such important tasks as doing propaganda among the masses, organizing the masses, arming them, helping them to establish revolutionary political power and setting up Party organizations. The Red Army fights not merely for the sake of fighting but in order to conduct propaganda among the masses, organize them, arm them, and help them to establish revolutionary political power. Without these objectives, fighting loses its meaning and the Red Army loses the reason for its existence.Mao Tse-tung «On Correcting Mistaken Ideas in the Party» (December 1929), from the Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung, vol.1*

It should be admitted that the main idea in the extract is absolutely precise. That's the practical convergence which is typical of almost all paramilitary armies formed within the framework of the proletarian dictatorship. However, after about 50 years since Mao wrote these words, the Chinese People's Liberation Army degenerated together with the whole Chinese state and managed to be the Soviet forces' enemy. And then, in less than 20 years the PLA finally shed the socialist cloak and turned into a column of Chinese imperialism. Therefore in addition to the Chinese experience of mass arming, which has become hostile to any communist, we should look at that of other socialist countries. So this part is dedicated to the paramilitary armed organizations in the Warsaw Pact countries.

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The first glaring argument which refutes "unarmed injustice" under socialism is the GDR Kampfgruppen der Arbeiterklasse (the Combat Groups of the Working Class) created in 1953 in the wave of pro-bourgeois uprisings of the same year. Being militia organizations, they didn't provide their military manpower with wages, barracks and other attributes of a regular army, but at the same time, their main characteristic was formation according to the production principle. Workers joined their factory combat groups and were on the watch after their shift had ended. The choice of the "combat groups" members was made on the base of the party and class principles, preferences were given to the members and candidate members of the SED (the Socialist Unity Party of Germany), the sympathizers having the party recommendations, the majority of whom were workers and engineering staff. They were tasked with the suppression of civil disorder and maintaining security, the conduct of warfare together with the units of the GDR National People's Army, and also the conduct of guerrilla operations on occupied territories.

At least, during the anti-communist revolts of 1953 and 1961, the German-armed proletarians coped with their first function. At the time of their disarmament in 1989, 189,370 people were demobilized. For the entire time of the "combat groups" existence, they managed to become one of the most outstanding military and militia organizations in the entire socialist block.

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According to several sources, the "combat groups" formation was somehow influenced by "People's Militias" from the CSR. As in the case of the GDR, in bourgeois historiography, they are called "the party detachments", the detachments of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in this case. In fact, the Communist party had organized proletarians long before the revolution of 1948 and instilled the skill

of military formation according to the production principle by means of labour union organizations.

At least twice, in 1948 and in 1968 the proletarian units of “People’s Militias” displayed dedication to the socialism building: in the first case, they dispersed the petty-bourgeois students’ demonstration which was held to support the deposed Czechoslovak President Edward Benesh; and in the second case, they provided significant assistance to the countries friendly to the Warsaw Pact members in suppressing the anti-communist uprising. It should be mentioned that the Soviet Army was primarily engaged in propaganda and expository work, situated there rather as a deterrent, and was ordered not to shoot; on the contrary, the detachments of “People’s Militias” had to use fire in two or three cases because of the crowds’ aggressive behaviour. However, in 1989, when the number of militiamen, according to the official information, numbered about 80 thousand people, they were disbanded as had happened to the working-class combat groups in the GDR.

There are many more examples of proletarian mass arming in countries that built socialism than is represented here. They attest to the fact that in the period of radical transformations of class society proletariat arms themselves not only during the immediate establishment of the proletarian dictatorship, but also in peacetime.

By the way, the USSR had its own counterpart carrying out law-enforcement functions and consisting of civilians, which was called the Voluntary People’s Druzhina. Undoubtedly, on the background of well-armed German workers’ combat groups druzhina members, who could only be given a gun in the case of a dangerous job, looked very moderate. It is only fair to say that personal service weapons of the USSR militsiya personnel were extremely limited.

Conclusion

Having analyzed all the aforementioned experiences in arming the working class and the right of citizens to bear arms, Politsturm deduces a clear and unambiguous Marxist position on weapons.

Under the capitalist class dictatorship:

— Communists stand for the maximal distribution and access to weapons (and not only reduced civil arms as it occurs everywhere under capitalism) for proletarians above all;
— Only an armed proletariat is the force that can crush the capitalist opposition;
— Any initiatives on restricting arms are reactionary; anybody who believes that “weapons should be limited/banned” takes the reactionary bourgeois side.

Under the working class dictatorship:

— In addition to the creation of an armed forces, communists stand for proletarian militia organizations armed with combat firearms to reinforce the proletarian dictatorship;
— Communists stand for the disarmament of all non-proletarians endangering the proletarian dictatorship classes and social strata;
— Firearms distribution should be regulated by a specific historical context: from a total ban to a free permit.