

# Most Secret: German Industrial ARMS CODES 1921-1945

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

The numerical and alphabetical manufacturer's codes on German ordnance items have always been a topic of interest to collectors. But what was the reason for the secrecy that lasted until 1945?

The well-known letter codes of World War II are the result of various marking and encoding attempts that started during the inter-war period of covert rearmament. The cause was the Versailles Treaty (28 June 1919), accepted by the Weimar

Government. It was published on 16 July 1919 as the 'Law of the Peace Treaty between Germany and the Allied and Associated Powers' in the Imperial Law Bulletin.

**Article 168 states:**

'The manufacture of arms, ammunition and war equipment of all types may only take place in workshops and factories, of which the location has

BELOW: Cartridge rifle-grenade, 1940 and headstamp

BELOW: Hitler on firing-range during a test of the MG-08/15

been made known to and approved by the Governments of the Allied and Associated Powers. These Governments reserve the right to limit the number of workshops and factories. Within three months after effect of the current treaty all establishments for manufacture, preparation and storage of arms or the production of relevant designs shall be closed. The same applies to all arsenals except those for storage of the permitted stocks of ammunition. Within the stipulated period the personnel of aforementioned arsenals shall be made redundant.'

With the acceptance of the ultimatum of the Allied Governments on 5 May 1921, the set list of future suppliers of arms, ammunition and war equipment for the German

P	for	Ammunition, all types	(Polte, Magdeburg)
Rdf	for	Powder & Explosives	(WASAG, Werk Reinsdorf)
Rhs	for	Fuses & Fuse bodies	(Rheinische Metallwarenfabrik, Werk Sömmerda)
S	for	Carbine parts	(Simson & Co., Suhl)

Government, according to Article 168 of the Peace Treaty, was established. It contained 13 companies for Army material and 28 companies for Navy material and ends with the remark:

1. No war material or individual parts thereof may be produced in any other factory than those named here.  
2. Limitations in the manufacture of economic and industrial articles in postwar factories are not referred to.

Subsequent to this, special attention must be paid to the Implementation Law of the Peace Treaty of 31st August 1919 (Imperial Law Paper No. 171 pg: 1530 Paragraph 24, Figure 1 and 6), where it states that violations will be criminally prosecuted.

The permitted armament of the Reichswehr was precisely defined in Article 180 of the peace treaty as, for instance for small arms: 84,000 rifles (Mauser 98 system), 18,000 carbines (Mauser 98 system) and 1,863 machine guns. Surplus weapons had to be handed over to the Allies (although they often disappeared) and new developments were forbidden.

Eminent German armament companies like Mauser had to convert their production to consumer articles, whilst the allies approved the relatively inexperienced Simson company of Suhl as the sole producer of pistols, rifles and machine guns – probably with the deliberate intent to weaken Germany militarily.

In the following years German industry was under constant scrutiny by the Allied Control Commissions. Some companies managed to emigrate to or establish branches in neutral countries. For example Rheinmetall-Borsig AG

covertly took over the Schweizerische Waffenfabrik Solothurn AG and from 1929 there developed fully automatic weapons once again. Other companies like Henschel, Krupp, Junkers and BMW opened offices in Russian factories as part of German-Russian cooperation.

Besides the already mentioned activity abroad, (former) defence contractors were not idle within their own country. This was made easier by a steady diminution of allied control activity and an increasing interest by the German military. A precise 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 marks.

Confirmation is given by a decree of the Army Weapons Office of 12th December 1925 that begins with the words: 'By the above referenced Decree company markings for non-permitted arms companies were introduced.' Presumably at that time every officially permitted company was allocated 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.

This basic code letter was supplemented by a code number that denotes the actual – but in fact illegal – manufacturer. Thus, the headstamp code 'P131' on a 9mm cartridge case identifies the manufacturer as DWM in Berlin-Borsigwalde and not, as it was intended to overtly indicate,

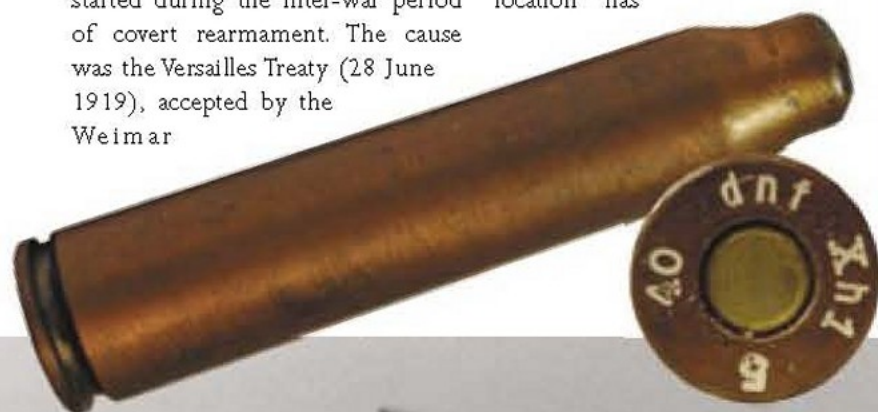
Firma	Firmennummer
Maschinenfabrik G.m.b.H. & Co. Reichenbach i. Vogtland, Werk Reinsdorf, Weidenau G.m.	170
Maurer, Friedrich, Söhne München Freising	798
Maschinenfabrik A.-G., Oberndorf Werk, Wittmann Berlin Borsigwalde, Eichhornsdamm 167/209	243
Maschinenfabrik A.-G. Klein-Ehrenfels	340
Maschinenfabrik A.-G., Werk Oberndorf Oberndorf/Neckar	42
Mauke, Friedrich, Maschinenfabrik Schwelmingen S.	740
Meybach Motorwagen G.m.b.H. & Co. Friedrichshafen	496
Mechanische Werkstätten Wulst	364
Mechanische Werkstätten Zitt. G.m.b.H. & Co. Berlin-Weissenhof	335
Meier, A.H. & Co. G.m.b.H., Maschinenfabrik u. Eisengießerei Hamm/Westf.	470
Meier u. Reichelt, Werk Grössenbucherg Leipzig	330
Müller F.u.M. München, Lilienstr. 24	600

ABOVE: Early letter-codes page from the original list

BELOW: Different markings on Karabiner 98k made by ERMA

Polte in Magdeburg. The same goes, for instance, for K98k rifles with the codes 'S/27.G' and 'S/27': actually manufactured by ERMA in Erfurt, not by Simson & Co. in Suhl.

The same 1936 letter from the Army Weapons Office, goes on to indicate that disguise for powder manufacturers no longer seemed necessary. Instead, the code numbers were to be substituted by an abbreviation (usually of the manufacturer's location): 'The requirement for covert marking of deliveries of the powder and explosives factories with the Rdf. covert designation, after removal of disguise, is no longer required, therefore the introduction of official company ▶







ABOVE: MG42 heavy machine-gun code 'dfb'



LEFT: MG-Zielgeraet-34 optic for tripod

BELOW LEFT: MP40 Schmeisser magazine marked '98E'

BELOW RIGHT: MP40 barrel detail

abbreviations takes 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 presumably arose through the allocation of letters to the suppliers of K98k 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 these 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 encoding 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 manufacturing marks for powder and explosives factories are made up like the other production marks of a three-letter group of small letters, so that these marks do not stand out by appearance amongst the bulk of other coded manufacturing marks. To ease the memorizing of these production marks by the qualified personnel they will not be sought out at random as is done for reasons of secrecy for the other production facilities, but will be made up in conjunction with the official denomination of the manufacturing facility.'

Due to secrecy the lists of code assignments were copied in very limited numbers and unfortunately only 15

original volumes remain. The letter combinations 'paa'- 'zzz' are untraceable and it is doubtful if all combinations were ever used.

Subsequent to the first issues, additions, alterations and deletions were made from time to time, but were not all passed on. In some cases the final production or assembly plants began to investigate who their suppliers were, since the code identities were kept secret even from them. In 1944 the Mauser company tried to find out the identity of its suppliers with the help of a survey, but not all companies answered the questionnaire and so the resulting list showed large gaps. In contrast to the three-letter groups the one and two-letter codes leave questions which have yet to be answered. Although the 'aaa'- 'azz' groups were already issued in November of 1940 the volume containing 'a'- 'zz' appeared in October of 1941, although the single-letter codes of the Saxony Group had been in use since 1938.

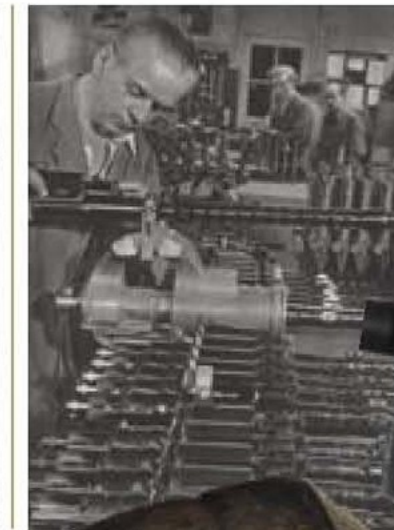
**OTHER CODE SYSTEMS**

Beside the aforementioned code systems there were other less common systems, which were not always meant just to deceive.

**The Reichsbetriebsnummer**

The 'State Manufacturing (Plant) Number' was another type of labelling, e.g. RBNr. 0/0020/0053 for the company Oster & Co. in Königsberg or 9/0750/5184 for the Franck'sche Verlagshandlung W. Keller & Co. in Stuttgart. The origin of these numbers in the late stage of the 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 Silesia, Brandenburg, Saxony, Pomerania and the area of Berlin. Further distribution took place without any recognisable order.

**The system of the Reichszeugmeisterei of the NSDAP**  
In contrast to the half-hearted attempts of the Air Force and ▶



These markings are the marking system of the Supplier's Association of German Medal Manufacturers, abbreviated IDO (Leistungsgemeinschaft Deutscher Ordenshersteller), founded in 1941. Its task was to oversee the distribution of decorations, raw material assignment to the individual manufacturers and the uniformity of quality of the manufactured items. All the affiliated manufacturers received two numbers each, a



ABOVE LEFT: Production of MG15.

ABOVE RIGHT: Production of MG17

ABOVE: Antitank rifle-grenade, 'Gewehr-Panzergranate', 'SS46'

BELOW LEFT: Stamping-tool 'baj'

BELOW RIGHT: ZF4-scope in detail

number that they had to mark on all items delivered instead of their company logos.

It is interesting to note that companies concerned now had to cope with dual codes in production, depending on the recipient organisation: HJ [Hitler Youth] proficiency badges of the G. Brehmer company in Markneukirchen are stamped 'M1/101' whilst other items for the Army from this same manufacturer dating from the same period have a 'eyb' marking.

**The markings of the Suppliers' Association of German Medal Manufacturers**

On many war decorations from 1941 there is an 'L/number' code that is often mistaken for an RZM code, as one can see in numerous militaria sales lists, even though there is no product group number and the RZM logo is missing. Interpreted as an RZM number, in this case 'L/...' would stand for a leather processing facility – unlikely on a metal medal.

Reich's Chancellery number and IDO number. It is not known which of the two was to be used when, but they were never used together.

The German code system did not stay undetected by the Allied intelligence agencies. But the Allies were intent to know the various locations of the German arms industry – the centres (ball bearings, oil, heavy industry, etc.) of which were already long known, as could be seen by the numerous bombing raids. To what extent the German code system, in conjunction with the relocation of production, was successful and whether it influenced allied actions cannot be judged here, since too many events and information still lie in the dark. ☑

Michael Heidler is author of 'Deutsche Fertigungskennzeichen bis 1945' [German Manufacturing Identification Codes to 1945] available in both German and English, a comprehensive 500-page reference work of post-WW1 arms manufacturing code systems in Germany to the end of the Third Reich. Readers may contact him for a copy on [ggbuch@web.de](mailto:ggbuch@web.de)

