

R. Blake Brown, “Disarming the foreigners ... is the only way to render them harmless’: Gun Control in early Twentieth-Century Canada”

This paper constitutes part of my on-going research project exploring the history of gun culture and firearm regulation in Canada. My focus at this symposium is on one piece of this larger story – on the debates and legislation concerning pistols from 1892 to the First World War. The presentation builds upon previous papers in which I’ve shown how Ottawa banned carrying revolvers in 1892 except for those who acquired a “certificate of exemption.” The 1892 legislation did not end Canadians’ worries about handguns however. Concern with pistols remained acute for a couple of reasons. First, large numbers of handguns (including new kinds of weapons) appeared in the Canadian market. Second, the belief that certain ethnic groups were intent on using handguns for nefarious ends caused fear. The result of these concerns was more stringent enforcement of existing gun laws and the passage of new legislation by the provinces and by Ottawa.

In the mid-nineteenth century a revolution in handgun design occurred with the development of the modern revolver. Cheap, mass-produced revolvers became available for mass consumption. They replaced muzzle-loaded, single-shot pistols. In the early 20th century improvements were again made in handgun design. The most important innovation was the creation of ‘automatic’ pistols that held a larger number of rounds of ammunition and thus gave gun owners more firepower. Canadian retailers soon made such weapons widely available. For example, Eaton’s advertised the “Savage Automatic Pistol” by 1910, calling it the “most powerful, accurate and rapid fire pistol invented.”

Such guns constituted part of a growing flood of weapons into Canada in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Gun imports for home consumption were valued at \$93,000 in 1897. They then began a rapid ascent, to \$180,000 in 1901, and to \$460,000 in 1904. These figures suggest a substantial increase in the availability of weapons in Canada.

Many Canadians perceived pistols as a great evil. Newspapers frequently lamented the many accidents, suicides, and murders involving handguns in the quarter century before World War One. Several major newspapers plead for citizens to abandon the revolver and / or for governments to regulate these weapons to limit their availability. A special worry was that pistols were too accessible in second-hand stores. For instance, the Montreal *Herald* took on the issue of second-hand gun sales in 1911. It criticized the existence of “murder mills” in Montreal – second hand stores with windows filled with arsenals or revolvers, pistols, rifles, and daggers.

The availability of pistols was seen as especially troubling because of concerns about recent immigrants using weapons. Several of the gun laws passed in the late 1870s and early 1880s had been motivated by fears of young urban men, especially, young Irish men. By the early 20th century, the bogeyman for legislators had changed. Fear of armed Irish mobs subsided. It

was replaced by fear of southern and eastern European immigrants. Many established Canadians began to suggest that the new immigrants were culturally predisposed to committing acts of violence, especially gun violence. Advocates of new legislation connected the problems of easy access to guns with high rates of immigration. For example, in 1908, Conservative MP Edward Lewis of Ontario expressed concern about the availability of guns to immigrants. He complained that when new immigrants arrived in Canadian ports they immediately saw second-hand stores and hardware stores filled with rows of revolvers. They thus bought guns to protect themselves in this foreign and, apparently, violent land.

There were two legal responses to these public concerns. First, law enforcement officials more aggressively prosecuted people who carried unlawful weapons, especially foreigners. The number of prosecutions for carrying unlawful weapons grew substantially during the periods of increased immigration in Canada. There were 68 prosecutions in 1893. This grew to a pre-World War One high of 1084 in 1913. The emphasis on prosecuting 'dangerous' immigrants can be seen in the sudden increase in the percentage of foreign-born individuals convicted. In the 1890s, the majority of those charged with carrying unlawful weapons had been born in Canada – 56%. In the 1890s, only 4.8% had been born outside of Canada, Britain, Ireland, and the United States. In comparison, in the ten-year period from 1904 to 1913, the Canadian percentage declined to 36%, and the percentage born in locations other than Canada, Britain, Ireland, and the United States increased to almost 40%.

A second response to concerns about guns and immigrants was new legislation. Interestingly, the provinces led the way. Ontario acted first. In 1911 it passed *The Offensive Weapons Act*. This legislation targeted the carrying of offensive weapons, required more record keeping, and *encouraged* the deportation of foreigners found with concealed weapons. Several provinces soon followed Ontario's example, including Manitoba and Saskatchewan in 1912, and British Columbia in 1913.

Ottawa finally acted in 1913 when it made three important modifications to Canada's gun laws. First, Ottawa increased penalties. It doubled the potential fines (to up to 100 dollars) and tripled the potential jail time (to three months) for infractions of firearm legislation. Second, it limited the number of officials who could grant permits to carry offensive weapons. It took the power away from justices of the peace and gave it to police officials in the hope that the police would be stingier in granting permits. Third, the 1913 amendment dictated that you could only purchase a pistol if you first acquired a certificate to carry a handgun.

The debate about pistols prior to the Great War was similar to debates in other periods in that the existence and perceived characteristics of certain ethnic, racial, generational, or class groups were said to make new guns laws necessary. The period before World War One is also noteworthy because of the remarkable lack of resistance to firearm regulation. Such lack of resistance would, however, not last forever.