

Pistol Production in U.S. Rising, Offsetting '68 Importation Ban

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WASHINGTON, April 29 — The effect of gun control legislation that barred the importation of cheap, concealable hand guns is being offset by domestic manufacture of the guns or by the importation of foreign parts for assembly here.

The purpose of the import restriction provisions in the Gun Control Act of 1968, passed on the wave of public outrage that followed the assassination of Senator Robert F. Kennedy, was to keep such cut-rate pistols out of the hands of criminals, delinquents and the mentally unstable by reducing the number available in this country.

But the domestic business in such guns, which retail from about \$13 to \$30, is burgeoning into an industry that will soon be producing 500,000 pistols a year, compared to 75,000 before the act.

As far as can be determined, the guns are being sold as fast as they are made.

The Gun Control Act allows foreign parts to be imported as long as the frame for the pistol is fabricated here.

A New York company, Imperial Metal Products, Inc., is preparing to produce about 200,000 cheap hand guns a year, while a Miami concern is gearing up to at least an equal level, according to sources knowledgeable about the gun industry. A second New York company, a Tennessee company and several smaller concerns elsewhere will be making 100,000 more annually.

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Saul Eig, a slim, baldish man in his 40's, who Government records show was the leading importer of cheap foreign hand guns, is the owner of the Miami company. He is converting a former Pentecostal church and school compound next to his warehouse complex in Miami into a gun factory.

'We Don't Want Publicity'

In a telephone conversation from the office of his concern, Eig Cutlery, Inc., Mr. Eig said, "we don't want publicity" and declined to disclose his contemplated production figures because "this information would be of value to our

competitors."

Sources in the gun trade, however, said that since the import restrictions went into effect with the signing of the Gun Control Act last October, Mr. Eig had made arrangements to bring in enough parts from West Germany and Italy to make hundreds of thousands of revolvers and semi-automatic pistols a year.

One shipment of parts from the Tongfolio company of Brescia, Italy, for 10,000 semi-automatics recently cleared Miami Customs.

Mr. Eig acknowledged reports that last September, just before the law went into effect, he formed a new company called the Titan Manufacturing Corporation. For the last five months, he said, Titan, using machinery set up within his warehouse complex with the help of technicians from Tongfolio, has been producing .25-caliber semi-automatics from Italian and American parts.

'Lightweight, Compact'

In an advertisement mailed to gun dealers, Mr. Eig describes this pistol as a "vest pocket automatic" that is "lightweight, compact and yet sturdy enough to stand rough handling."

Mr. Eig refused to discuss reports from gun trade sources that he had also entered into a cooperative arrangement with a German company, Roehm Gesellschaft of Southeim Brenz, from which he was importing the parts for cheap .22-caliber revolvers.

Roehm, a machine tool company mass-produced such revolvers primarily for the American market and Mr. Eig was their principal importer. Sources said he made the cooperative arrangement with Roehm last October to produce the revolvers here from German and American parts.

The most common Roehm model was the BG-10, a small, snubnose, .22-caliber, six-shot revolver with a 2 1/8-inch barrel. Those still available in this country retail for \$16.50. It is not known how many revolvers Roehm produced since beginning their manufacture in the late 1950's, but one gun expert said "they came off the assembly line like cookies."

A prominent gun dealer on the West Coast said the last BG-10 he received before the import restrictions went into effect carried a serial number in the range of 1.4 million.

Familiar to U.S. Police

This revolver and similar Roehm guns, as well as copies made in smaller numbers by other German manufacturers,

have become familiar to American police departments. Police officers also occasionally refer to them as Eig guns, because some were stamped with his name.

A detective on the Washington homicide squad, who asked not to be identified, estimated that 40 per cent of the guns seized in homicides here were Roehm guns. "Any rookie on the beat for two weeks learns to recognize a Roehm gun, another detective on the homicide squad said.

Lieut. Frank Connolly, supervisor of the New York City police ballistics section, said roughly 30 per cent of the 7,000 to 8,000 guns seized each year by the New York police for all reasons were German-manufactured revolvers, mainly Roehm-made.

"You rarely see a zip gun any more," he said. "It takes time to make a zip gun. The

kids are lazy, so they buy one of these guns on a street corner from some guy who needs five bucks."

Mr. Eig said the revolver he intended to produce with Roehm and American parts would be an improvement over the Rg-10 and would retail for \$23 or \$28, depending on whether the finish was blued or chrome.

Import Totals Before Act

Until the import restrictions went into effect the American market was gradually being flooded with foreign-made hand guns. Commerce Department statistics show that hand gun imports tripled from 346,906 in 1965 to 1,155,368 in 1968. West Germany was the principal source, with 512,501 pistols in 1968. Italy, Brazil and Spain followed, in that order.

Rudolph Graf, owner of Precision Imports, Inc. in Suffern, N.Y., who does an eighth of his \$4-million annual business in hand guns, says the import restrictions have "accomplished nothing" toward reducing the number of cheap hand guns in this country because the restrictions have simply left a brisk market open to Mr. Eig and purely domestic manufacturers who make all their own parts.

"This import law has been a blessing for these guys," Mr. Graf said. "Naturally they are doing a hell of a business."

Last fall Edward Kane, the vice president of Imperial Metal Products, Inc., of New York, said his company intended to increase production from 45,000 to 200,000 cheap .22-caliber revolvers a year. The company's gun usually retails for \$12.95.

Regrets Statement

In a telephone conversation last week, Mr. Kane said he now regrets his statement because "we don't like that kind of publicity." He would not say if his production had yet reached or was moving toward

200,000 pistols a year.

Other gun industry sources said the company had geared up production toward this level.

Martin Olivenstein, the treasurer of a second New York concern that makes cut-rate snubnose .22-caliber pistols, CDM Products, Inc., was also publicity shy and would not give his company's present or projected production figures.

A salesman for the Valor Import Corporation, a gun wholesaler in Hialeah, Fla., which advertises the CDM revolver for "immediate delivery" in lots of 50 and 100, said the six-shot revolver "takes up the slack" created by the import restrictions and that his company was selling about 2,000 a month.

Another Company Growing

Another purely domestic company that has recently begun to manufacture cheap .22-caliber pistols in quantity is the Arms Corporation of America, in Nashville. Its revolvers retail for slightly less than \$20 and Harry Friedman, the president, said the company hoped to reach an annual production of 35,000 to 50,000 guns by the end of this year.

Several other companies have begun to fabricate cut-rate concealable hand guns in lots of 2,000 or so a month, with indications that the number of companies and their production will grow.

Steve Oznick, a salesman for the Buddie Arms Company, Fort Worth, said demand has "skyrocketed" since the import restriction and his company was now working "night and day" to manufacture .22-caliber Derringers that retail for between \$25 and \$30. He said the company hoped to produce 2,500 a month by the end of the year.

The \$30 model has a thin 1 karat gold finish. "The women just buy the hell out of the gold-plated ones," he said.