

Did Gun Control Prevent Jews From Stopping the Holocaust?

As gun control moved toward the top of the American agenda after the Dec. 14 massacre at a Connecticut elementary school, gun rights activists began to invoke a curious analogy: the Holocaust.

On television, radio and in letters to the editor, the argument went that Hitler's gun control laws left European Jews defenseless, and that the Holocaust would not have happened—or at least would not have been as catastrophic in scale—had Jews had guns.

But here's the question: Is it true?

Many American Jews and others have had enough of the claim, and are denouncing as specious the comparison between the Third Reich law that forbade Jews to own guns and current gun control proposals under consideration by President Obama, Congress and state legislatures.

The Anti-Defamation League “has always strenuously objected to the use of Nazi analogies to advance any kind of political debate, including the gun control debate,” said Deborah Lauter, the group's civil rights director. “We believe it's historically inaccurate and incredibly insensitive, particularly to Holocaust survivors and their families.”

Beyond that, she said, it's just a false comparison.

“In no way could armed people have stopped the totalitarian power of the Nazi state,” she said, noting that some European Jews had access to a small number of firearms. “There could be symbolic resistance, as we saw in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, but it would not have stopped the Nazis.”

The invocation of the Holocaust to argue against gun control is an abuse of history, said Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism.

“When it doesn’t hold up to any kind of serious historical argument, then it feels manipulative in terms of using the death of our 6 million (Jews) and the 5 million others who were butchered by the Nazis,” said Saperstein, a vocal proponent of strengthening U.S. gun laws.

Even so, many who fear for their Second Amendment rights in the U.S. today continue to draw a parallel to Hitler.

As Andrew Napolitano, a senior judicial analyst at Fox News, wrote on Fox on Jan. 10: “If the Jews in the Warsaw ghetto had had the firepower and the ammunition that the Nazis did, some of Poland might have stayed free and more persons would have survived the Holocaust.”

A few days later, former Major League Baseball pitcher John Rocker wrote on about “the undeniable fact that the Holocaust would never have taken place had the Jewish citizenry of Hitler’s Germany had the right to bear arms and defend themselves with those arms.”

And in the Washington Jewish Week on Jan. 24, letter writer Jonathan E. Grant railed against the current “suicidal tendencies of the Jewish community,” and the strongly pro-gun control positions of many of its most prominent institutions.

“Have we learned nothing from the events of World War II, when the ban on the civilian possession of guns led to the deaths of our people?” Grant wrote. “Had the Jews had pistols and rifles, 6 million of our people would not have died like vermin in the hands of the Nazis.”

Not so, say many Jewish and non-Jewish scholars.

Though none dispute that the Nazis in 1938 issued “The

Regulations Against Jews' Possession of Weapons," which prohibited Jews from having guns or any other kind of weapon, they find nonsensical the assertion that this law is what doomed European.

Guns could not have made the difference, columnist Michael Moynihan wrote in the Tablet, an online magazine of Jewish culture. The Holocaust was a state-sanctioned outpouring of violence from the German public, so the idea that gun control stood in the way of Jewish survival "vastly overstates the effectiveness of a tiny minority resisting a genocidal machine," he wrote.

Antony Polonsky, a professor of Holocaust studies at Brandeis University, takes issue with a common corollary: that the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising – in which about 750 Jews took up arms, killed about 25 Nazis and briefly slowed the deportation of Jews to concentration camps – shows that an armed minority can resist its genocidal oppressors.

The uprising was the largest single Jewish revolt against the Nazis. But the Nazis killed thousands of Jews in the Warsaw ghetto, and the 50,000 who survived were sent to concentration camps. "The people who participated in it were killed," said Polonsky.

The record also shows that the Nazis accelerated the liquidation of remaining Jewish ghettos after the uprising.

That's a pattern with anti-Jewish violence, said Polonsky. "Attempts at self-defense provoke more violence." The same occurred when Jews took up arms during the Russian pogroms of the early 20th century, and when blacks did the same in the American South before the civil rights era, he said.

When gun rights advocates aren't using the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising to make a case against gun control, they often invoke Sobibor, an extermination camp in Nazi-occupied Poland that was shut down by the Germans after a Jewish revolt—involving

first an ax and then explosives and guns.

But the rebellion was but one reason why the Germans destroyed the camp and hid all evidence of mass murders there, wrote Moynihan. They also wanted Sobibor to disappear because the Allies were fast approaching.

“The heroism of those who resisted the Nazis in Warsaw and Sobibor is undeniable and should be honored,” he wrote. “But these actions were taken after it became undeniably clear that the incarcerated Jews were soon to be murdered; clearly, against-all-odds resistance is likely when desperation demands it.”

“America isn’t Nazi Germany,” Moynihan concludes, “and it cheapens the experience of Holocaust victims to suggest otherwise.”