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### **THOSE FRENCH RIFLES !**

In the last few years there has been an increase in firearms importation of those used by France in the last century. Specifically, a number of MAS 44, 49 and 49/56 rifles in 7.5 x 54 French calibers have shown up. These were not exported by France but came from countries in Africa which had been under the French sphere of influence for a number of years.

Sensibly, when these small nations gained their independence the French influence waned. The weapons were packaged for long term storage and eventually found their way to the largest market for these obsolete firearms, North America. American, and to a lesser degree Canadian, military collectors and shooters benefited.

The last batches were mostly the 7.5mm 49/56 semi-automatic rifle. This rifle is a contemporary of the FAL and M14, both of which are not seen in frontline service with nations of influence anymore.

For the moment let us get away from these fairly modern rifles and go back to the turn of the century, not the recent one, but the one before that.

At this point in time most of the larger countries armies were equipped with small caliber (6.5 mm, 7 mm, 8mm, .303 British among others) manually operated rifles. The 'smokeless' powder used in these loadings was a French invention dating back to the 1880ies. Sporting ammunition

was also being loaded with this revolutionary powder, one example being the venerable Winchester 30-30.

The French developed a new turn bolt tubular magazine rifle chambered for their 8mm so-called 8mm Lebel cartridge. The rifle of course was the 1886/93 Lebel. This rifle was to soldier on well into the new century in a variety of configurations. The problem with the Lebel was that it was obsolete almost as soon as it was issued. The tubular magazine was the bugbear which doomed it. Impossible to reload quickly, there were other designs current with the '86 Lebel which had a detachable or integral box magazines that could be topped up faster. The cut-off on the '86 was intended to keep the cartridges in the tube in reserve, in the meantime you would load it singly until a crises occurred where an increase in fire power was required and then you would be allowed to shoot from the magazine.

I could go on and on about 'LaBelle' (The beauty) but am assuming that many of you already know this and I would hate to bore anybody! The '86 was not discontinued, but the search for other developments were in the works. The next model we get is the 07-15 Mannlicher-Berthier. The last two names being in the case of Mannlicher the design genius who perfected the En Bloc loading system for this rifle, as well as the split breech receiver. The 'chargers' ( it is not a stripper clip) capacity was three of those little fat 8mm Lebel cartridges. The whole thing was pushed into the magazine well until it locked in place. Pushing your bolt forward chambered the top most cartridge and you were ready to shoot. No, it did not have a safety.



1. Here are the two clips which are used with the Mannlicher-Berthier series of rifles. They must be used or you will have a single shot rifle rather than a repeater. The three shot clip will also fit the five shot rifle, and the five shot the three shotter, just only load three in it. Think about it!

The 07-15 was just as long as the '86 and when the trench warfare was fully established it was found that these rifles were difficult to wield effectively, more so when a foot and a half cruciform bayonet ( affectionately called 'Rosalie' by French 'Poilus', there is not record of what the Germans called it).

In addition three cartridges was not much of a magazine capacity, so the magazine was redesigned to take a five shot charger, the rifle became the M16. These were made in carbine configurations as well. The carbines are not bad, especially if you have the five shot option available to you. These carbines took a different bayonet from 'Rosalie', although she fitted the 07-15 and 16, so there was some uniformity there.



2. Here you see the action portion of the M. 16 Mannlicher-Berthier rifle or carbine. This is the five shot model, note the extended metal magazine. The lid at the bottom of the magazine is opened when you are shooting. The clip will fall out or protrude when the last cartridge is chambered. Closing it keeps Camel hair out.

Semi-automatic rifles were developed by the French. They were as long as the Lebel and Mannlicher-Berthier and they also took a five shot EnBloc clip. The clip was probably identical with the one used in the millions by the M16 carbine and rifle version sez you? No it wasn't. It was

totally different. At this point let us not try to figure out what they were thinking of.

Finally the War to end all Wars is over and we can relax, there will never be another one, right!

During this period of relative peace the French designers did not sit idly by. The M1917 semi-automatic rifle was given on the chance after a number of sensible modifications. It was shortened and, wait for it, YES, it was altered to accept the M16 clip we spoke of earlier. Now they had something. The rifle was deemed satisfactory during, fighting in North Africa. Whether or not it was sent to Indo-China is not known. During the twenties France had also decided that the Chauchat machine rifle was less than satisfactory and proceeded to replace it with something better. What they got was the very nice 24/29 automatic rifle, as they called it. Gas operated, top mounted 25 round magazine and selective fire by means of two triggers, front for semi, rear for full auto. This was a good design, and they are still lurking in the palm fronds of various erstwhile French possessions. It was chambered for a new cartridge, the 7.5 x 54. Rimless (some magazine designer must have heaved a sigh of relief) it is basically the French version of the 7.62 x 51 (.308 sort of) This was the cartridge they put into their belt fed LMG, the AA-52. This one is still in service I believe, but let us stick with the rifles.

The twenties pass and we are in the early thirties. The French designers pretty well had a semi-automatic rifle conceived.

In the semi-automatic rifle competition of 1930 their designs were put up against the ZH-29 from Czechoslovakia and the Swiss KE-9.

The final result from this get-together was that two of the French entries were clearly superior. Now the idea was to take these two winners and combine them into one, which, should, produce an ideal rifle.

The concept of this type of trial was such a success that the French also applied it to their pistols trials later in that decade.

While these trials were being done another Commission was busy designing a new bolt action rifle!

This decision was made in light of the fact that there was

active developments in other countries of semi-automatic rifles in the caliber which was used in their currently issued manually operated bolt or straight-pull rifles, which are really one and the same.

Everybody agreed, officially or not, that the semi-automatic rifle would be the weapon of choice in the next war.

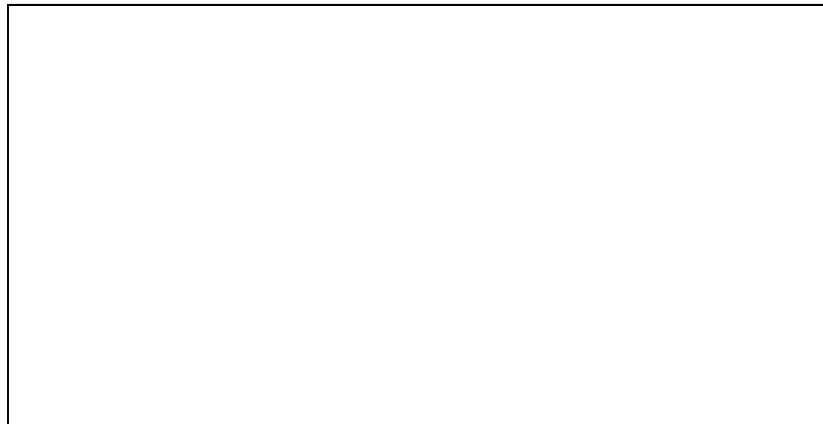
The bolt action which they were working on came to be known as the MAS 36.



3. The right side view of the much loved or much maligned MAS36. It only came in one length and is 7.5 x 54 mm caliber. Many many sporters were built on this action in France in calibers other than 7.5 which civilians cannot use. A sturdy robust rifle, it deserves a better reputation. The bolt handle is as issue if you must ask. I think Remington copied it later on.

This one is an unlovely beast, but under unprepossessing exterior a clever and effective design lurked.

The bolt was tubular in shape, sturdy rear locking lugs and a recessed bolt face.





4. This time we do have a stripper clip! The French pack them in 15 round boxes and they are fairly distinctive since they are aluminum with hrrin writing on their backs.

Five shot capacity and a cruciform bayonet housed under the barrel. Just remove, reverse and plug the hole and you are ready to bayonet fight. It was also handy as a flag pole for the 'fanions' so beloved by the French.

Two piece wood stock which eased wood supply. Unfortunately the buttstocks are always too short for me, but a slip on pad cures that problem!

It is chambered for the same 7.5 x 54mm cartridge as the 24/29, so we are edging toward uniformity.

A later version, the 36/51, has a .22 mm anti tank grenade spigot launcher. That was the chief reason for issuing the rubber slip on pad.

I have never fired a grenade from one of these launchers, and don't want to. Still, it is a cheap way to knock out an armored vehicle. If I was selling life insurance, I would probably not try to sign up whoever was elected to knock a tank using this method.

There was also an airborne version of the MAS36 manufactured the CR36. Its barrel was shortened to 18" and it was fitted with a folding aluminum stock. Very short and handy, but the stock is all corners, and with that short barrel, it is not on the list of my gotta-try-it military rifles.

The 36 action was also used to assemble the excellent sniper rifle still in use at the time of writing.

Being the last military bolt action rifle manufactured in quantity, it was still encountered in Viet-Nam and actually

anywhere within the French sphere of influence. It is a sturdy reliable rifle one should not be quick to denigrate.

### The Semi-Automatic Rifles

We last left these when they were being tested together with Swiss and Czech competitors. Much more research had been done and the invasion by the Germans called an end to testing. It is not realistic to say that the French could have had a semi-automatic rifle in service in 1940. Looking at the available data from that period, the rifle was clearly superior to the M1 Garand.



5. This is the first of the semi-autos the MAS 44. Gas operated with the same gas system as your M16. Ten shots of 7.5 ammo is a sturdy reliable combination. I believe it is superior to the Garand, if only because of the detachable magazine.



6. Once again, here with the same stripper clip as the MAS 36, but it holds ten.

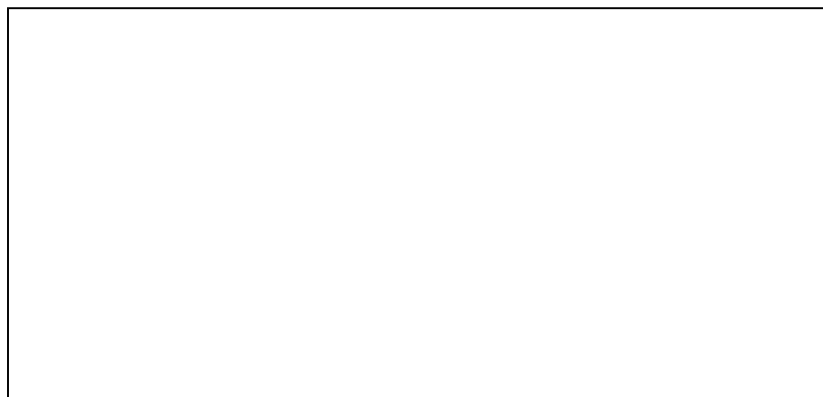


7. Here is the knitting needle bayonet which the French use to fly little flags from during their parades. Good as use as any, they are darn scary things!

The forerunner of the 7.5 mm semi-automatic rifle was the MAS 44. It was adopted in January of 1945 at which point in time the administrative areas of France were back in French hands. The 44 used a detachable 10 round box magazine which will fit the other versions of this model. The rear sight is identical with the MAS36 and of course they use the 7.5 mm cartridge. There is photographic evidence that at least one was used in combat in Marseille in 1945.

Available information is that 6000 were made and they mostly went to naval units.

Time passes and in July of 1949 the refined version of the MAS 44 was adopted and designated... MAS 49. There were only 20.000 of these rifles made and as a consequence, they have always been a scarce item. I still remember the first one I saw, through the cigar/cigarette smoke, on Bob Landies' table in one of the sixties Columbus shows. Look for the big white cocking knob and that yells:"..... MAS 49....MAS 49..." Then, when I saw the price that was the end of that.





8. Here we have a gruff, but kindly civil Servant, holding a MAS 49. Please note the distinctive white polypropylene cocking handle which I saw through the smoke at Bob Landies table, lo these many years ago.

Time passed, and eventually I would end up with them all, and for less money than the lonely MAS 49 in the Columbus cigar smoke haze!

The 49 showed its mettle all through the French period in Viet-Nam, and no doubt the heaps of 49's seen in the photos of the fall of Dien-Bien-Phu would be turned against their former owners, not to mentioned future invaders.

In the early fifties the French had at least six different military calibers in use, as well as such a hodge podge of small arms that it would which probably drive any Ordnance type bonkers. Time to finally standardize.





9. The next version, the 49/56 equipped with the 'scope. It's basically a copy of the ZF-4 with the same egregious optics. How the scope and the rifle got married is another saga in the life of a Gun Collector.

The service rifle became the 49-56. 7.5 x 54 mm caliber, fitted with a ten round detachable magazine, and four extra magazines. It is capable of launching NATO standard 22 mm grenades, both A/T and a/personnel. Dovetailed for an optical sight which was the same 'scope used on the sniper rifle. Last, but not least it also accepts a blank firing attachment for the French white plastic 7.5 x 54 mm blanks.

This rifle is still on limited issue to-day, although the current service rifle is the bull-pup type or 'Clairon' (Bugle) as the French call it because of its large sight guard/carrying handle which gives it that unique bugle shape. It is in .223 caliber and capable of selective fire from a 25 round box magazine. I owned a semi-automatic version of this rifle until the Canadian government decided I could not be trusted with it and declared it 'Prohibited'. It was just fine though, and the French seem to like it as well.

**I have a 7.5 x 54 mm French rifle. I want to shoot it!**

First of all you must have one of the following rifles:

- MAS 36 or MAS 36/51
- Model 07-15 M34\*
- MAS 44
- MAS 49 or 49/56

This one is so scarce it will merit an article by itself. The available French cartridges and the ones manufactured in their former spheres of influence is not to be relied upon. Hangfires and misfires, not to mention corrosive primers, make using any of that ammunition a NO-NO. Also it has the berdan primer to end all berdan primers in that it is crimped so well into place you have to be a safe cracker to remove it. If you do get it out, you soon realize that you can't find that size. Reloading can break your heart sometimes!

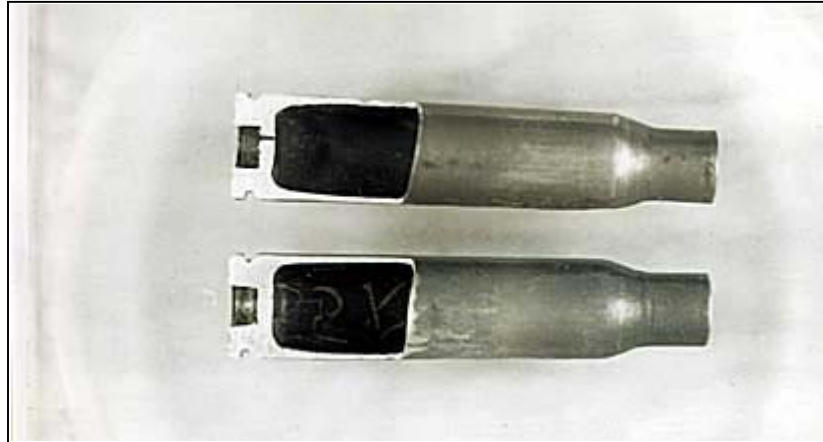
I hope that you the reader, and possibly shooter, have some hand loading experience? If you don't, when you learn how, let me say you have a treat coming to you!

The cartridge which just about duplicates everything, except caliber, of the 7.5 French is the 6.5 x 55 mm Swedish. This cartridge is being currently manufactured by several domestic factories and is not hard to find. If you have 7.5 x 54 mm dies all you have to do is run the 6.5 mm case into the full length sizing die and that will expand the neck to 7.5 (.30) If you wish you can trim a millimeter off it, but I did not have to.



10. The photo shows an unfired 7.5 x 54 mm and a 6.5 x 55 mm Swede, note how similar they are. Next a fired 7.5 and a

Swede which has been fire formed in the 7.5mm. You can make them this way, but you lose a good 6.5 mm projectile which you should have saved for those loads in your Type 22 Japanese light machinegun. Neck 'em up, works just as well.



11. Two sectioned cases. One the left is the 7. French and on the right the 6.5 .Note how the web thickness is the same. Safe to shoot for sure.

Go to your reloading book and follow the instructions for the 7.62 x 51 NATO (.308) cartridge loading specs, and you will turn out loads that will function just fine. If you have a 44, 49 or 49/56 you should follow loading directions for loads to be used in a Garand. They have a different gas system which should use fast burning powders.

Any .30 caliber projectiles will function just fine.

Take your time, enjoy, and you will know that now you are that rare breed, the Shooter/Collector.

#### NOTE

The foregoing information is very limited, and is basically meant to give the reader the incentive to get much more information elsewhere and even to own the firearms discussed. One excellent source of books is I.D.S.A. and their E-Mail address is: [idsabooks@idsabooks.com](mailto:idsabooks@idsabooks.com).

Tell the nice man that Finn sent you.

And, have fun with this!!

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