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Of all the manually operated military rifles in use since the end of the last century, the one which has the worst reputation and that has always been viewed with approbation is probably the poor Carcano. When one considers that the rifle was in use by an industrialized nation for 54 years, with very few changes, that seems odd.

By the time manufacture ceased in 1945 at least eleven versions of 'Il 91' in three different calibers had been made.

Late, and post war they were still being used by Greeks, Albanians, Yugoslav and Ethiopian troops. It could not have been all bad?

It was developed at Turin Arsenal (F.A.T., Fabbrica Armas Torino) by Lt.Col. Salvatore Carcano in co-operation with General Gustavo Parravicini. It was officially adopted on 5 March 1892. Its baptism of fire came in Ethiopia during Italy's 'civilizing' adventure there from 1893 – 1896. At Adowa late in February of 1896 a force of 20.000 Italian 'colonizers' were defeated by King Menelik's forces.

Inaccurate maps and failures to communicate whittled the force down to 9200 shocked survivors of which some 1500 were wounded. This debacle finished Italy's colonial aspirations there until the thirties. Then they would be back with aerial bombing and poison gas.

This was not an auspicious beginning for the new rifle. The defeat was not due to the rifle, but those who used it. The '91 would be used at the siege of Peking in 1900, as well as Italy's attempt to annex Libya early in the new century.

The first World War saw it used on all the fronts where the

Italians fought. The climatic conditions ranged from searing heat to bone-numbing cold. There were no complaints about the performance of the rifle. At that time (1914-18) the 91 was not markedly inferior to the rifles used by Italy's allies (Us, that time) or their opponents.

Many variations of the basic rifle were produced, mainly in the form of various carbines. One such model anticipated the M203 grenade Launcher in that it too had the launcher mounted on the right side of the carbine (Italy's M1928) The launcher was constructed from another '91 action which used the bolt unit from the carbine to fire the special launch cartridge and send the little grenade on its way. It was a bulky clumsy unit, which occasionally turn up at Gun Shows.

The 'Il 91' as the Italians called it was a combination of several designs current at the time of its adoption. The receiver was reminiscent of the M1888 Mauser with its split bridge. The magazine system using the en-bloc clip to load the magazine was pure Mannlicher. It has been referred to as a Parravicini-Carcano, but ultimately became know as the Mannlicher-Carcano. The '91 also had an unusual type of rifling known as gain-twist or progressive rifling. That is the projectile was gripped by the rifling whose twist got faster as it neared the muzzle! This rifling was dropped when Italy introduced their 91/41. It used conventional rifling.

Rumor has it that one of the Italian carbines, the 91/24, won't shoot worth a damn because the projectile is barely spinning when it leaves the much shortened. All they did was shorten the barrel, add a new front sight, and away you went. Watch out for that one!

Italy had also joined the caliber reduction frenzy that occurred in the late 1880's by going from a 10.4 mm black powder cartridge to a smokeless powder 6.5 mm load. The case was 52 mm long, and was rimless and center-fire. The en bloc clip/charger held six cartridges. In common with the other Mannlicher clones the clip could not be filled once it was in the rifle. To fill the magazine the clip in the magazine must be replaced. The system is basically the same as the M1 Garand which suffers the same 'problem'. This caused numerous battlefields to be littered with clips and unfired cartridges.

The 6.5 mm cartridge uses a 160 grain full metal jacketed projectile. The cartridge has relatively low chamber pressure of some 38000 pounds per square inch. As an aside, it has the same head size as the AK 47 7.62 x 39 mm cartridge. Back in the late sixties I got my first AK, but ammo was impossible to find. Lo and behold, the Carcano case could be used and also the Mannlicher-Schoenauer 6.5 x 54 mm. The making took time, and I was very

careful not to shoot where the brass might never be found. You will also see early Finnish 7.62 x 39 blank cartridges which have been constructed from the 6.5 Carcano cartridge case.

Now, let us look at some of the complaints about this rifle. We are talking about thousands of rifles, supposedly sold by the pound, which invaded North America to a mixed reaction from the shooting public.

It is not a strong action:

The action is amply strong for the cartridge it uses and is safe. The designers did not envision someone fifty years or more down the road wanting to re-barrel their design to fire some wildcat "snortinhowling" cartridge to down various furry or pelted creatures.

It was designed to shoot people with (Whether we like that or not) in the caliber which the rifle was designed around.

The action is rough:

Yes it is, depending on how much it has been used. It is after all a Military Rifle and, yes, expense has been spared on the final finished of some parts. This ensures that when the action is full of dolomite mud it will still function as it was intended to. Try slapping a handful of slimy guck into your Weatherby action and see what happens. (An unfair comparison I know)

The safety is awkward:

It surely is, especially if you are accustomed to nifty sliding or turning safety found on your average sporting rifle. The bottom line is that it is effective and apparently soldier-proof, as it was intended to be.

It cannot be 'sporterized' readily:

No kidding! What a shame! Once again the good designers never envisioned that their design would pose a problem for some North American shooter down the road. It happens to be a fairly sturdy and reliable Military Rifle. Please leave it that way.

It does not handle gas well:

That applies to many of us, however, it could be worse. I had the 'pleasure' of having an Italian manufactured cartridge case split at the base when I fired it. I was wearing safety glasses, thank goodness, and only got some deposits of brass and powder in my forehead. The bulk of it was deflected by the safety. All I can say is to watch what ammo you use. Don't shoot wartime ammo made in Italy; it is almost a collector's item now anyway. The good brass made by Norma is the ticked and if you do your part it will not let you down. Cheap ain't

necessarily better. The stuff I used was given to me with no reservations.

It has poor sights:

Yes, they are not the greatest, but fine for the period and the type of shooting required. If your Carcano consistently dumps them into a 4" group, or less at a hundred yards, cry 'Hosannah' and count your blessings! I shoot them the way they came and that forms a type of time travel that is possible and fun too.

The ammo is hard to get:

Yes it is. You will have to hunt down good Norma stuff in that caliber or work with other 6.5's to form brass(Not 6.5 x 55) It is a pleasant cartridge to shoot though, and the brass will last forever if you don't have to full length resize it every time. It really depends on your rifle and its condition. Half the fun of owning these is brewing good loads for them.

They are cheap rifles:

Yes they are, and you should be careful of some which will be in very poor condition. The reason for the 'non-shooting' statement required by some dealers is not because the rifles they sell are inherently unsafe. They guard against lawsuits should some pilgrim fire the wrong cartridge in one and hurt himself. It can be done, as we all know, and few blame themselves. In the meantime they are excellent and historically significant firearms for the budding military rifle collector with limited means at his (or her?) disposal. The Italian rifles and the rash of Mosin-Nagants can form the basis of an interesting collection, and at a reasonable price. Are there any budding collectors in these politically correct times? Gawd, I hope so. I got bitten by the bug over forty years ago and it still has a 'holt' of me!

Other musings:

Military rifles in all their permutations have always been my big shooting/collecting interest. I wince when I see something nice, like a good 33/40 carbine, turned into a 'Sporter'. The word 'sporterized' is anathema to me and I shudder (if I am not wincing) when I hear how someone took that old rifle in really good condition and turned it into something you could have purchased cheaper off the rack.

These Old Soldiers should be left alone; most of them are not made anymore.

More on the Carcano:

Let us go through the steps required to use your rifle. Firstly the ammunition you have available is either Norma

6.5 Carcano or you have skillfully shortened some 6.5 M-S (Mannlicher-Schoenauer) cases 2mm so they are identical to the factory Norma stuff. Fill your charger/clip (NOT stripper clip, please) with six cartridges. Lift and draw the bolt fully to the rear. You will see the gaping opening of the magazine well looking up at you. Insert your clip into the opening downward until it locks into place. Push the bolt forward and turn it down. This will chamber a cartridge and the firearm is ready to fire. Your rifle may have a long trigger pull but it will probably be a two stage trigger, most European military rifles have that. It means that when you squeeze your trigger it will reach a point where there is resistance to the pressure. That is your second stage. Squeezing a little more will fire the rifle. The rifle fires! Recoil is minimal. You can smell the burning powder and life is good. Lift your bolt handle and pull it gently/slowly to the rear. Your fired cartridge case will emerge from the chamber and you pluck it out of the action before it gets lost. Now is the time to have a look at it and see if there is anything to be concerned about. Repeat the above procedures and fire all six cartridges in your clip/charger. When the last cartridge is chambered your clip will emerge, and might even drop, out of the magazine. You are ready to reload.

The clips come in brass, blue steel and a parkerized grey finish. They will fit all versions of the Carcano. They will also fit the Scotti and Armaguerra semi-automatic rifles which Italy made all too few of. That's for another story.

For a brief period in the thirties Italy considered going to a 7.35 mm cartridge, and made some carbines in that calibre. If you find this stuff clipped they will also function in the 6.5 mm as their case bodies are the same diameter. The clips/chargers can be inserted in the magazine from either end.

Of course they can be used over and over, and, remember without the clips/chargers you have a single shot rifle!

Some Carcanos were converted to 8 x 57 mm Mauser under German supervision at the end of the war. These are definitely 'no firing' statement rifles for the reasons mentioned earlier.

I don't like to fire them for the same reason I don't like root-canal work. They are just plain awful noise and recoil-wise with the full military loads. No fun here!

You are advised to play with these using mild cast bullet loads. They can be made to shoot very well with these projectiles and you don't come away from the bench a gibbering shell-shocked shooter. These rifles also used a

Carcano type clip/charger, but five shot only as the body diameter of the eight mil is larger than the 6.5/7.35 cartridges. Good luck finding the clips. I believe there are some in Italy, but I have only seen photos of them.

More on safety:

An aspect of the safety of this design is mentioned by W.H.B.Smith in his classic 'Mauser and Mannlicher Rifles and Pistols'. I hope he doesn't mind if I quote him:

"WARNING: The safety and firing pin assemblies in the Italian Service Rifles and Carbines are retained in the bolt by a small lug only. In the event of a blown primer, this comparatively weak holding device MAY (My capitals) be unsafe particularly in old or abused weapons".

A good point made, without a doubt. I have never heard of it happening, nor have I ever heard of anyone who even set it up as an experiment to see what would happen.

We should also remember that when Parker Ackley did his famous action strength tests shortly following The War (War 2), he did not include the Carcano. Not, I think because he thought it was too weak an action, but because he could never envision anyone trying, or wanting to, make a sporter out of it! This was really the point of the tests anyway. The tested actions were undoubtedly going to be used with cartridges with a greater chamber pressure than that they were designed and intended for.

So, if you don't have a lot of money, are interested in history and the rifles of history, you could do worse than beginning a collection of these pretty much despised rifles.

Doing so will build your character as you will have to learn to handle criticism and laughter from your fellow shooters. But, be assured that you will be a member of a small select group, and that's not a bad thing. Enjoy them.

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