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Article Written by: [Finn Nielsen](#)

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The Wars referred to above are of course World War I and World War 2. There were several smaller wars in which France was involved between the two big ones. They got a lot less publicity than the two big ones, and fewer people were killed. It is safe to say I would venture that not a day went by in Frances' colonies when a shot was not fired in anger by someone and somebody died.

A big conflict such as World War I has usually left things in a mess small arms wise. Whatever standard firearms a country might have begun the war with was frequently augmented by new developments made during the war. They did not supplant the issue rifle, or whatever, but added to the inventory. Many times they were not even in the same caliber as the standard firearms issued at the beginning of the conflict.

France was no different. Let us have a quick look at their small arms situation at the beginning of that first blood letting.

France was the first country to adopt a small caliber repeating rifle using smokeless powder. This was of course the M1886 Lebel, sometimes called "Labelle", the beauty, by the "Poilus".

It was the only rifle in that conflict to use a tubular magazine. The magazine held eight cartridges, an extra in the "lifter", plus one in the chamber, for a total of ten. It used the 8

mm Lebel cartridge which was really an 11mm Gras necked down to 8mm. Its projectile was the so-called "Balle D". The tapered shape of the cartridge made it very difficult to adapt to magazine fed weapons. It was all right in bolt action rifles and not a problem in a machinegun such as the Hotchkiss which held the cartridges in a rigid strip. Its use in detachable magazine firearms was another matter.



Here is the feeding system for the M1886. Cartridges carried either paper wrapped, eight in a packet, or loose in two big leather pouches in front.



This is how it works. Put in your full clip and it will push the empty one out. Without the clip you have a single shot rifle. The M16 and 07-15 are exactly the same.

In 1890 France had adopted a carbine chambered for the 8 mm Lebel cartridge, but with a different magazine system. The magazine was filled with an En Bloc clip which held three cartridges. Upon chambering the last cartridge, the empty clip (Charger) would fall out the opening in the bottom of the magazine. The rifle was known as the Mannlicher (Clip) Berthier (Rifle) or the M90 Berthier.

Subsequently, versions in rifle length were issued. The 07-15 (3 shot clip, 8mm Lebel caliber)

Next came the M16. Same configuration as 07-15, but it had a five shot magazine, same caliber).

Then we had the little five shot version of the M16, basically very similar in size to the M1890.

These were the most common rifles in the French arsenal during the first war.

France experimented extensively during, and following the war, with semiautomatic rifle designs.

The M1917 rifle introduced that year was gas operated and fed from a five shot clip similar to the one already in service, but not interchangeable with it, naturally!

They made some 80.000 of these rifles during the war. They were long and clumsy, had a limited magazine capacity, and required much more training than the Lebel or the Berthiers.

It was not until the war was almost over than it was shortened, the clip made universal, and a much needed dust cover fitted. It performed well in the Rif war in Morocco in the twenties. Many also had their gas systems welded up and used as straight pull rifles. Whomever they were issued was probably pretty deep in the French military gene pool. Don't worry, we won't go there. Following that they seem to have disappeared. I have only seen photographs of these rare birds.



Here we have the 'En Bloc' clips for the M90, 07-15 and M16 rifles. Still the 8mm Lebel. The M1 Garand uses 'En Bloc' clips. A little easier than loading a magazine tube.

In 1921 the French High Command ordered an ambitious program to commence which would completely modernize their infantry weapons system. We are only concerned here with their rifle program (auto loading or repeater). Other weapons to be replaced or developed were the pistol, submachine gun, light machinegun, light mortar and infantry

cannon.

You will note that the rifle design could be either repeating or auto loading. That was because the old school of thought regarding waste of ammunition by autoloaders was still there. It was thought that autoloaders might only be issued to "the best shots" while the rest would carry bolt action repeaters. Hence the different developmental arenas.

One good change which came immediately following the First War was the introduction of a new rifle cartridge. The M24 7.5 x 58 mm. This round, although excellent, was sometimes mixed up with the 7.92 x 57 mm Mauser cartridges, war booty, which the French were still trying to use up by training with German machineguns. The mix ups resulted in the destruction of a couple of their excellent new light machinegun, the M24 Chatellerault.

This had occurred all too frequently, and in 1927 the case length was shortened by 4 millimeters. This resulted in the 7.5 x 54 mm "French" rifle cartridge. It is still with us today.

In the period 1920 1940 the quest for a semi-automatic rifle continued unabated with some very interesting results being made just prior to the Second World War. We are concerned here with the repeating rifles. The others will wait until another day, or until you, hapless reader, spends some money on good reference books. More on this later.

While the auto loading rifle developments were proceeding, work on the repeating rifles was going ahead also. This first one became called the MAS 36. It was of course made at St. Etienne and was in calibre 7.5 x 54. It was a completely different design and cannot be related to any other rifle design. It was uniquely French in development and features. Now over the years one has heard all the usual complaints because it is a little, okay, a lot, different.

First comes the bolt handle. Many cite that it is in the wrong position. Wrong position for what? I find no fault with it. Apparently neither did the Remington Company some years ago when they introduced their handy little carbine whose name I disremember.

Rear locking lugs do not support the bolt head like front ones do. Don't know who came out with that gem, but once again I would say, look at the size of them, and look at the diameter of the bolt whose front end seems to fit right well. Once more, let me say "Remington 788". And to go back even further, Schultz & Larsen made a number of not-too-bad sporters which used rear locking lugs. None of them are to be despised. Look at how the cartridge head is protected and the two big gas escape holes in the bottom of the bolt. The bolt, incidentally, can be disassembled by a simple twist of the bolt head to come apart in four pieces.

The bayonet is ready for instant use, being housed under the barrel. I don't like these needle bayonets, actually come to think of it I don't like bayonets at all. It used to be said that the Germans were afraid of cold steel. Well, I am not German, but can sure relate to that! I don't like it either. Much better for the French to fit their little "Fanions" on it, and parade it like hell. "Fanions" are "Flaglets", loosely translated by your aged scribe. Bottom line is that it is a well made, reliable battle rifle.

First blood drawn by it probably came in France, prior to, and during the "Phoney War", so called. During that it went to Norway with the 13th DBLE . Fought there, and then back to

France. From there it carried on to North Africa, Italy and finally Germany. There were piles of MAS 36s when Dien-Bien Phu finally fell. This booty soldiered on in other hands for the next foreseeable future, and is no doubt still serving somewhere.

They have come to North America in varying condition. Some will have seen plenty of use and reflect it. Others were refurbished, greased and wrapped for long term storage. They are sometimes virtually new. There are few variations of the MAS. There is the 36/51 with the built in grenade launcher, usually encountered in excellent shape. Then there is the aluminum butted CR 36. the butt of which folds forward while being transported. In addition the barrel is shorter and it weighs about half a pound less than the 36. I have handled one and must admit it did not seem a very comfortable arrangement. The stock was quite short and would likely be fairly tough on the shoulder with issue loads. Haven't shot one, don't know for sure.

The 36 action is still in use in the guise of the FRF1 sniper rifle. This appears to be a good piece of gear, and is still on issue as far as can be told from various publications on firearms.

The only improvement the MAS 36 needs is a longer butt stock and to be chambered for 7.62 NATO. It doesn't have a safety you say? No it doesn't, and if you really need that kind of mechanical device on your rifle, which you may be about to shoot people with, you should give it some thought.



Side view of the MAS 36. Note the baked enamel type finish. Very sturdy and weather resistant, but does scratch! Others will be parkerized various shades of grey.



Ready for loading using the uniquely French stripper clip. Big thumb cut out on the other side helps.



Here is the bayonet and note the hole where it rests between engagements.



Caliber and date of manufacture under hand guard 'MAS 1937'



Note how the head of the cartridge is protected. Parker Ackley did not include the MAS 36 in his blow up tests because it was too ugly to make a sporter out of. OK, for the most dangerous animal on earth though.



The old Lebel bolt head and the new for the 7.5. Note difference in size!



Look at those locking lugs! That is one heavy smooth bolt.



The MAS 36 bolt disassembled, easy as can be. There may have been some French peeking at a Japanese Type 38??? The 99 was not made yet. Nevertheless a fine sturdy bolt.

We will leave the MAS guys now and move on to the team who developed what can only, tritely perhaps, be described as making a silk purse from a sow's ear. What that means is that your starting out product is pretty sad, but with cunning and guile, you transform it into something pretty nifty and useful. A by product of the cunning and guile is that you also save a ton of money. Always a good thing for whatever government body does it, methinks!

World War 1 is over. The boys are going home again. With the exception of the not inconsiderable number who bought the farm. In addition there is a ton of materiel that is now obsolete because the world has moved on. Valuable lessons have also been learned. The issue rifles were too long for the trench, especially with "Rosalie" mounted on them. "Rosalie" was the French soldiers' nickname for that lovely cruciform bayonet the Lebel, the 07-15 and M16 too.

What to, what to do!!! Make the rifles shorter! Problem solved.

No Lad, it still uses that fat rimmed cartridge which has been responsible for driving our best magazine engineers/designers bonkers.

We will just make a new rifle then.

Can't do that, we don't have the money.

Here is what we will do. The M1886 Lebel cannot be altered much, except to be made shorter.



Here we have a completed 'silk purse' and the 'sow' below it.



The receiver of the 'silk purse', boldly stamped. A rare rifle indeed.



Ready for loading with 7.5 x 54 mm and aluminum clip. It will also fit MAS 36, MAS 44, MAS 49 and MAS 49/56' Mission accomplished.

That was done, and the end result became that nasty little shooter known as the 1886-93 R 35.

It is still in 8 mm Lebel caliber, but there are still 87 trillion rounds which we didn't shoot off in storage. Not a problem.

But, what about all the 07-15 and M16s which are still too long and use the fat cartridge? We will have to use some funds here, but not a lot. Let us make 24 barrels and chamber them for the 7.5 x 54 mm cartridge. Remove all the old magazine guts, and replace it with a square box which will take five cartridges of the 7.5 caliber. Retain the Rosalie bayonet system, we will shorten her, but she will still be scary.

A new bolt head with the face correct for the 7.5 x 54. Removal procedure is identical with the old caliber. Deepen the charger guides, which will now be clip guides and function with new aluminum clips that we use in the other new rifles. Put some deep grooves in the floor plate of the magazine, so that at some point in the future a crazed gun collector can see them, and holler "Mine, Mine" while charging toward it waving money.

And look at the money we have saved!!

All levity aside, I have no idea how many were actually converted. Judging by how many I have seen in 45 years (2) not a great deal. No doubt money were saved, but the era of the auto loading rifle was just around the corner, and it would have been foolish to spend money that could be put to better use.

My rifle was barreled, and probably converted by MAS in 1937. That manufacturers' information may be found under the hand guards of most French rifles, at the rear right side.

That's about all for now. I will entertain questions by Email.

Earlier on I was beginning to rant about books. There are two excellent volumes put out by Collector Grade Publications here in Canada. They are "Proud Promise, French Auto loading rifles". The other is on the Chauchat LMG, "Honor Bound". Both volumes are virtually works of art, and reflect a virtual life time of research. E Mail: INFO@COLLECTORGRADE.COM

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Article Written by: [Finn Nielsen](#)