



SOVIET PISTOLS

Tokarev, Makarov, Stechkin and others

LEROY THOMPSON





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INTRODUCTION

April 1991: a member of the OMON special internal security unit points his PM pistol. (Alain Nogues/Sygma/Sygma via Getty Images)

As in many countries, the handgun in Russia and the Soviet Union has served as a symbol of authority for military officers and state-security personnel, as well as a primary small arm for the armed forces' armoured crews, artillerymen, transport drivers and medical personnel among others. Russian handguns have traditionally been exceptionally durable and simple to operate. That reputation is evident in the fact that the Nagant M1895 revolver, originally adopted in the 19th century, remains in second-line service with some Russian police and military units at the time of writing, as does the Tokarev TT-33 pistol, initially adopted in the 1930s. Originally adopted in 1951, the Makarov PM pistol is still in front-line service with many Russian military and police units, though various newer pistol designs such as the GSh-18 and MP-443 *Grach* have also come into service.

Intended as a replacement for the M1895, the TT-30 was designed by Fedor Vasilievich Tokarev (1871–1968), who also designed the SVT-38 and SVT-40 self-loading rifles. To accelerate production, changes were made to the TT-30's design, resulting in the redesigned pistol being designated the TT-33. By the end of World War II, a total of 1,330,000 Tokarev pistols had been produced, with limited production continuing after the war. Eventually, TT-33 variants would be produced by eight other countries, most of which were within the Soviet sphere of influence, and would see action in myriad conflicts, especially Soviet- or Chinese-supported insurgencies. The substantial number of Tokarev pistols brought back by US veterans of the Korean War (1950–53) and the Vietnam War (1955–75) attest to its widespread usage in those conflicts.

The TT-33's great strength is its high-velocity bullet that will punch through thick clothing and equipment – an invaluable advantage in the conditions of the winter fighting on the Eastern Front or during the Korean War. However, it lacks an external safety, thus increasing the likelihood of a negligent discharge and was a single-action (SA) design in the post-Walther PP, PPK and P 38 era of double-action (DA) pistols.



A TT-33 along with a typical style of holster and a packet of 7.62×25mm cartridges.

The Soviets were well aware of the DA/SA design of Walther pistols, having captured large numbers of them from German forces. Additionally, Zella-Mehlis, where the Walther manufacturing plant was located, lay in the Soviet occupation zone of post-war Germany, giving the post-war Soviet Army access to tooling and prototype pistols. There is little doubt that the Walther design for a double-action pistol influenced the design of the TT-33's replacement, the Makarov PM (*Pistolet Makarova*, 'Makarova's Pistol'). In the post-World War II competition to find a more compact and modern replacement for the TT-33, the design from Nikolay Fyodorovich Makarov (1914–88) was chosen.

The round for the new pistol, the 9×18mm Makarov, had actually been developed prior to the pistol itself. The round was designed by Boris Vladimirovich Semin (1911–82); though it fired a 9mm bullet, it was not as powerful as the 9×19mm Parabellum round, but was more powerful than the 9×17mm round used in Walther PP and PPK pistols. This intermediate round could be fired in a blowback design, thus allowing the PM to be cheaper to produce and more compact.

The PM has proven to be a highly reliable pistol that may be carried safely yet brought into action quickly due to its DA/SA design. Production was made quicker and cheaper as the PM has only 27 parts. It may be quickly disassembled for cleaning, with small components remaining 'captive' so they do not get lost.



The APS (above) compared with the Makarov PM; note the selector switch for the APS is on the slide and is set on semi-auto. Rotating the selector up to the left puts it on safe and all the way to the right where the red dot is located puts it on full-auto.

The PM remains in service with many Russian law-enforcement agencies and some military units. It has proven popular on the export market, especially to countries formerly within the Soviet sphere of influence, and has seen service with around 50 countries. In addition to the Soviet Union/Russia, China, East Germany and Bulgaria have manufactured the PM. ‘Khyber Pass’ craft-built examples have also been used in Afghanistan and Pakistan. PM pistols have been prized by US troops who captured them in Vietnam and other countries in Africa and the Middle East where they served. Large numbers of East German and Bulgarian PMs have been imported into the United States and are popular pistols for self-defence use.

The PM served alongside another new handgun, the APS (*Avtomaticheskii Pistolet Stechkina*, ‘Stechkin’s Automatic Pistol’). Chambered for the same 9×18mm round as the PM pistol, the APS offers both semi-auto and full-auto fire. The mysterious PSM (*Pistolet Samozaryadny Malogabaritny*, ‘Compact Self-loading Pistol’) is also discussed in this study, along with a range of specialized handguns such as the MSP, PSS and S4M silent pistols and the SPP-1 and SPP-1M underwater pistols.

DEVELOPMENT

The evolution of Soviet handguns

THE SMITH & WESSON REVOLVER

The first revolver to be issued widely in the Russian armed forces was the Smith & Wesson Model 3 with modifications specified by the Russians, including chambering for a .44-calibre cartridge that differed from the standard .44 S&W chambering. This cartridge would come to be designated the .44 Smith & Wesson Russian and to accommodate it, the Smith & Wesson Russian revolver's cylinder had a step machined into each chamber. Additionally, barrel markings were in Cyrillic instead of English. The first order was placed in May 1871, for 20,000 of what are generally termed Smith & Wesson First Model Russian revolvers.

After the Smith & Wesson revolver had entered Russian service, the Russian government requested a grip configuration that would dampen the tendency of the revolver to shift in the shooter's hand. This new model



ABOVE & LEFT

The .44 S&W Second Model Russian single-action revolver was produced during 1873–78; the Imperial Russian Army eventually purchased over 131,000 Smith & Wesson revolvers in three variations. The Russians copied the Smith & Wesson design and began producing it themselves at Tula Arms Plant. The Russian government cancelled the Smith & Wesson contract before it was completed, resulting in a large number of the revolvers being sold in the United States. In addition to the Cyrillic markings, the most noteworthy feature of the .44 S&W Russian revolver is the 'spur' beneath the trigger guard. (Courtesy of Rock Island Auction Service)

also had a shortened barrel (178mm) compared to that of the First Model Russian (191mm). Revolvers incorporating these changes were designated the Smith & Wesson Second Model Russian, with an order for 20,000 of this model being placed in January 1873 and 70,000 eventually being purchased (Jenks 1977: 77)

Yet another model, the Smith & Wesson Third Model Russian, incorporated a barrel with a forged front sight, improved extractor and an even shorter barrel (165mm). Russia would order more than 40,000 Third Model Russian revolvers from Smith & Wesson, but the intention was to eventually establish indigenous production of the company's revolver design; and to this end the Russian government ordered 100,000 Third Model Russian revolvers produced by the German firm Ludwig Löwe between 1877 and 1884. In 1886, production of the Third Model Russian revolver began at Tula Arms Plant in Russia, with an estimated total of 80,000–160,000 produced (Ezell 1981: 116–24).

THE NAGANT M1895 REVOLVER

The Nagant M1895 was the brainchild of the Belgian weapons designer Léon Nagant (1833–1900), whose brother Émile (1830–1902) designed the M1891 Mosin-Nagant rifle used by Russian and later Soviet troops. Léon Nagant's revolver design and the round it chambered incorporated some distinctive features. The 7.62×38mmR cartridge employs a 108-grain (7.00g) FMJ (Full Metal Jacketed) bullet seated below the mouth of the cartridge case, which is crimped above the bullet. When the round is fired, as the bullet leaves the cartridge case the case rim expands to form a 'forcing cone' resulting in a gas seal that is intended to mitigate the loss of muzzle velocity caused by gas leaking through the gap between the revolver's cylinder and barrel. Various patents were issued during the late 19th century for 'gas-seal' revolvers, the first being registered by the German-born but Belgium-based gun designer Henri Pieper (1840–98) in 1886. For the purposes of this discussion, however, the most important of these patents was issued to Léon Nagant in 1894.

Nagant's revolver was of solid-frame design and employed a side loading gate and an external rod ejector of the type familiar on the Colt single-action revolver. It had a seven-chambered cylinder rather than the six-chambered one more commonly found; and it was chambered for a 7.62×38mmR cartridge. The gas seal was achieved by a 'male' cone on the rear of the barrel seating in a 'female' cone in the mouth of the chamber (Taylerson 1970: 181–82). The 7.62×38mmR cartridge was also designed to aid in forming the gas seal by having the mouth of the cartridge case protrude 1.5mm from the cylinder when the cylinder was in its rearward position (Ezell 1981: 124). During the cocking sequence, the cylinder was rotated one-seventh of a revolution to align the chamber with the barrel before the cylinder was pushed forward to complete the gas seal. To prevent the gas seal from being broken when the revolver was fired, during the cocking sequence of the revolver, a wedge block was moved against the cartridge-case head in front of it to prevent movement.



Releasing the trigger allowed the cylinder to return to its rearward position (Taylerson 1970: 181–82).

The Russians chose the Nagant design in 1895 as a more modern replacement for the Smith & Wesson Russian revolvers. Adopted as the *Revolver Sistemy Nagana obrazets 1895 goda* (Nagant System Revolver Model 1895), the M1895 fired a smaller-calibre cartridge, which performed more efficiently because of the gas-seal design. The M1895 was also more compact and could be carried more easily by officers and other specialized troops issued a holster weapon rather than a rifle; and it allowed double-action fire, though only officers were issued double-action revolvers. Enlisted personnel who were issued revolvers received single-action revolvers. The Russian designation of the single-action model was ‘Soldier’s Pistol’ (Ezell 1981: 129). The logic of this decision is not clear unless it was deemed desirable for officers to be able to fire rounds more quickly should the troops show ‘revolutionary’ tendencies! In actuality, the intent may have been to limit ammunition expenditure by requiring more effort to fire quickly, but also allowing better accuracy through the lighter single-action trigger pull. Another rationale for producing the single-action model was that it was less expensive to manufacture.

The use of a side loading gate and an external ejector rod to load cartridges and eject spent cartridge cases also slowed the reloading process, thus discouraging rapid use of ammunition. In fact, based on typical M1895 holsters, only one seven-round reload was normally carried. After the Russian Revolution (1917–23), when production resumed in 1925, all Nagant M1895s were produced with the double action. In Belgium, the M1910 Nagant was developed with a swing-out cylinder to speed the loading process; however, this version was never adopted in Russia, nor elsewhere for service usage.

A very early single-action-only Nagant M1895 revolver, dated 1899; note the holster with the loops for a cleaning rod and the pouch for seven rounds of 7.62×38mm ammunition, a round of which is also shown next to the revolver.