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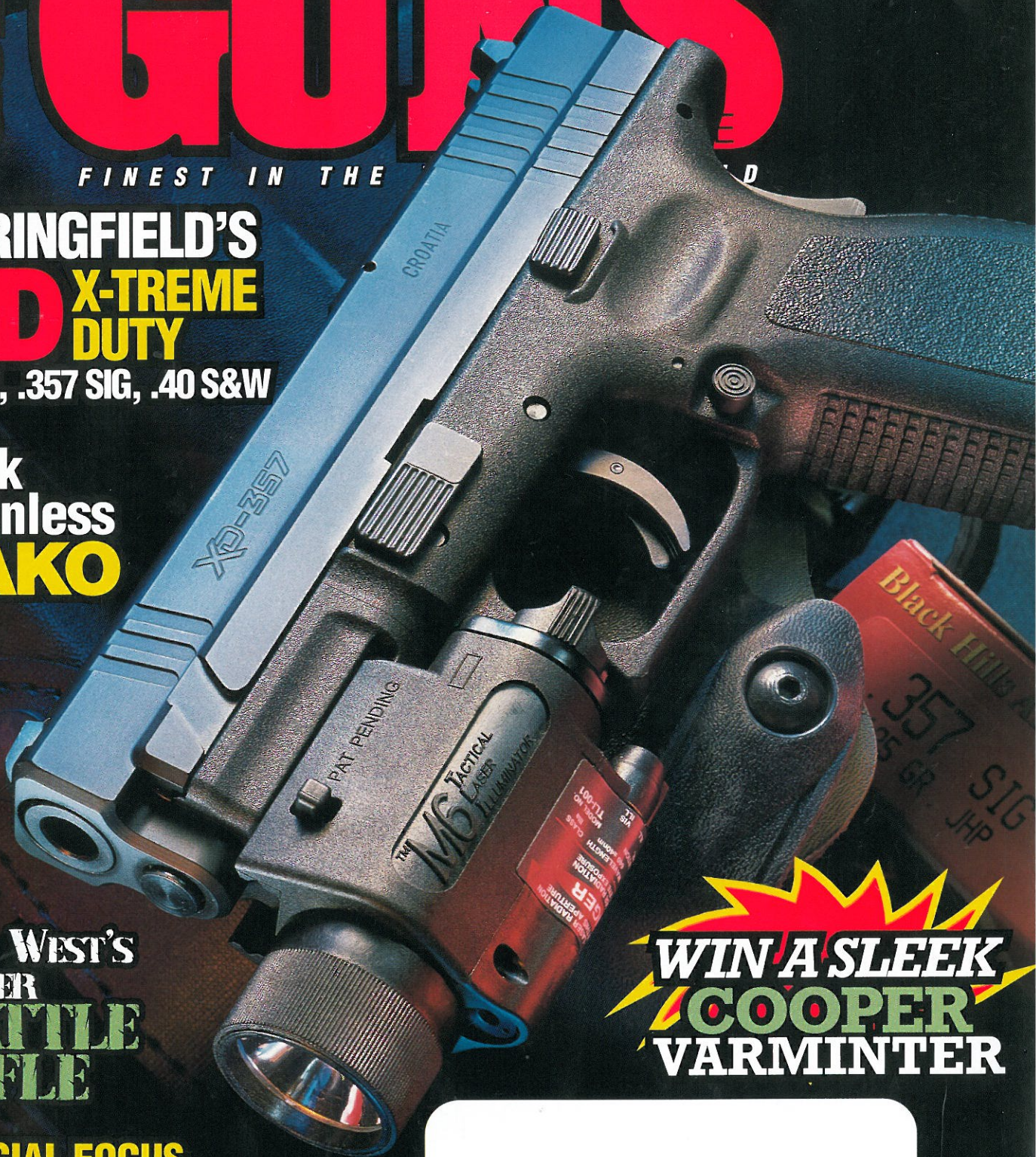
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# THE WEST'S OTHER BATTLE RIFLE FRANCE'S MAS 49/56

HISTORY NEGLECTED THE  
FRENCH MAS 49/56.  
FORTIER TELLS US  
WHY THAT'S A MISTAKE.

**STORY BY DAVID M. FORTIER**

**PHOTOS BY EMILY K. FORTIER**

**A**fter the close of World War II there was a great flurry of activity among arms designers. During this period in time men around the world were hard at work creating what would become the next generation of combat rifles. This is when Mikhail Kalashnikov breathed life into his Avtomat, Dieudonne Saive and Ernest Vervier begot the FN FAL, Garand's M-1 evolved into the M-14, the AR-10 sprang from the creative genius of Eugene Stoner, and Nazi Germany's StG 45 was resurrected to become the basis for the CETME and H&K's G-3.

These rifles were all destined to become respected designs that, with the exception of the AR-10, would see extensive use. These were the weapons that defended the ideals of

the East and the West. Other than the AR-15, which was eventually developed from the AR-10, these were the only major players of the '50s, '60s, and '70s. Right? While this may be what many think, it's simply not true. One major player, who's roots reached back further than any of the rifles mentioned and saw heavy combat, is the French MAS series of rifles that culminated in the MAS Mle 1949/56. That so little is known of this rifle series is really a pity, as it proved to be a sturdy, reliable and accurate weapon in actual combat.

Truth be told though, there is no major power, with the exception of China, with less known about its small arms development than France. Cloaked in a shroud of silence since the late 1800s, France has historically kept her developments a secret. So

while she is known as the birthplace of smokeless powder and the first modern combat rifle/cartridge (the M1886 Lebel and its 8x50R round), after that things get hazy. We know, and shake our heads at, how she sent her boys off to fight in two World Wars with a hodgepodge of outdated bolt action rifles. Then somewhere around 1980 she rearmed with a modern, albeit strange looking, 5.56x45 bullpup. But is that all there is to it? Were her small arms designers simply unable to produce anything of value between 1886 and 1980? Hardly.

Traditionally one of the great military powers of Europe, France made many outstanding advances in both arms and ammunition after their invention of smokeless powder. However, everyone involved in her



defense research community was strictly charged with remaining silent about their work. No patents were ever sought, so as not to arouse outside suspicions. All was done for the Glory of France. This has had the effect that nobody today realizes how much the French actually accomplished. A prime example of this is the development of the rifle in question, the MAS Mle 1949/56.

To trace the lineage of the MAS 49/56, one has to go all the way back to the 1890s. Too quick on the draw, the French soon realized, much to their chagrin, that their Lebel and its groundbreaking 8x50R cartridge were obsolete overnight. However, rather taking an evolutionary step by designing an improved bolt action rifle, the French desired to take a revolutionary step, and field the world's first autoloading rifle. So towards the end of the 19th Century, studies

were begun that led to the development of several remarkably modern cartridges. These were in the 6, 6.5, and 7mm range, and autoloading rifle prototypes were also developed to fire them. Between 1894 and 1913, over 20 autoloading and fully automatic rifles were developed and tested. One of these was the 6x60mm B1 rifle developed by weapons inspector Rossignol and perfected in 1901. This rifle, NOT the Swedish Ljungmann AG m/42b, introduced the pistonless, direct-gas impingement system as typified today in the AR-15. Amazingly enough, Rossignol also developed a companion weapon, a detachable magazine-fed, machine-rifle with a bipod. Between his battle rifle and squad auto he had developed the world's first weapons system. His gas system, from 1922 onwards, would remain a cornerstone of MAS rifle design.

***Above: While not as well known to Americans as the FN-FAL, G-3, or M-14 — the MAS 49/56 is a well-designed combat rifle that saw lengthy service around the globe.***

However, through no fault of the weapons designers, France did indeed send the flower of her youth off to war in August of 1914 armed with the obsolete Lebel M1886-M93. What is not so often stated is the fact that she also became the first country to widely issue to her infantry an autoloading rifle, the Fusil Automatique Modele 1917. While the Russians can claim to have fielded the first unit armed entirely with light automatic weapons — a company from the 189th Ismailskiy Regiment that went into action in December 1916 armed with Fedorov Avtomats — their numbers were small. When the Fedorov went out of



**Accuracy with Quality Cartridge's 155 grain HPBT Match load was excellent, as this .75 inch 3-shot group testifies. Five-shot groups at 300 yards averaged 4 inches — truly outstanding accuracy for a rack grade self-loading rifle.**

production in October 1925, only 3,200 had been produced. Compare this to 85,333 Mle 1917s produced and issued to combat troops from April, 1917 to September, 1918. An improved version, the Mle 1918, came too late to see action in World War I but did see combat in Morocco in the Rif War of 1921-1926. According to field reports, there was "complete satisfaction" with it, even in the harsh desert conditions.

Not satisfied with the Mle 1918, the French continued development of a self loading rifle. In 1921, examples of a new rimless cartridge intended to replace the 8x50R first appeared. They used a case based upon the 7.92x57 Mauser and a projectile inspired by the Swiss 7.5x55. This cartridge was eventually developed and shortened to become the 7.5x54mm Model 1929. In 1921, new specifications for France's postwar autoloading rifle program were also established. Throughout the '20s and '30s, various designs from different manufacturers were tested and refined. Manufacture Nationale d'Armes de St-Etienne (MAS) resurrected Rossignol's gas system in 1922 and then developed a carrier controlled, tilting, rear locking bolt in 1928. This locking system used no pins or linkages, and was well in advance of either Fedor V. Tokarev or Dieudonne Saive's designs. This rifle was eventually developed into the MAS 38/39. Featuring a two piece stock and a bayonet under the barrel, this model looks very

similar to the bolt action MAS 36. It was the first French autoloader to consistently perform as reliably as existing bolt action repeaters. During shooting trials held on January 8, 1940 it proved superior to the MAS 36, especially on moving targets. The design was adopted in March 1940, but it was too late. A few months later France was overrun, unable to cope with the lightning speed of modern warfare.

Four years later, when the St-Etienne region of France was liberated, work again commenced on France's autoloading rifle. The design was modified to accept a 10-round detachable magazine and adopted as the Fusil Automatique MAS 44. However,

Germany surrendered before production had commenced. Eventually 6,200 of this model were produced, most of them going to Marine Commandos in Indochina. Combat use of this model led to a desire for increased accuracy, an adjustable rear sight, ability to mount a telescopic sight for sniping out to 600 meters, and integral grenade-launching capability. It was refined first to become the MAS 44A and then the MAS 49. This latter model saw heavy combat both in Indochina and later Algeria, where it proved tough, accurate, and reliable.

However, as good as the MAS 49 was, there was still room for improvement. The barrel was shortened and the forend cut back, making the rifle both lighter and handier. In order to shorten the recovery time between shots a muzzle brake was mounted. At this time rifle grenades were an important part of small unit tactics in the French Army. So a gas cutoff was added and an improved Spigot-type grenade launcher was mounted. To aid the operator, a sight for launching grenades, either directly or indirectly, was incorporated. Plus the ability to mount a bayonet was added. The result was the 7.5x54 MAS Mle 1949/56. A fine combat rifle, the MAS 49/56 would serve France well until it was finally replaced officially in 1979 by the 5.56 FAMAS bullpup.

Up until fairly recently, the MAS 49/56 was a very uncommon item here in the U.S. However, as the rifles have been replaced in French service, small quantities have shown up on the U.S. surplus market. A few years ago a number showed up for sale that the U.S. importer had rechambered to .308 Winchester. These invariably had numerous problems due to the differences in pressure curves between the .308 and the French 7.5

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**100 yards:** 1 $\frac{3}{8}$  inches

**300 Yards:** 4 inches

### 7.5x54

### 139 grain FMJ ball

**Velocity:** 2,600

**100 Yards:** 3 $\frac{3}{8}$  inches

*Velocity readings taken 12 feet from the muzzle at an ambient temperature of 50 degrees F with an Oehler 35P. Groups are an average of four 5-shot groups from the bench.*

## MAS Mle 1949/56 SPECIFICATIONS

### Method of Operation

Self-loading via direct gas impingement, tilting bolt

### Caliber

7.5x54mm M1929 C

### Overall Length

40 inches

### Barrel

19.7 inches, 4 groove

1:10.6 LH twist

### Weight, empty

9.66 pounds

## SIGHTS

### Front

Protected post adjustable for elevation

### Rear

Aperture, adjustable from 200-1200 meters, and for windage.

### Feed

10 and 18 round detachable box



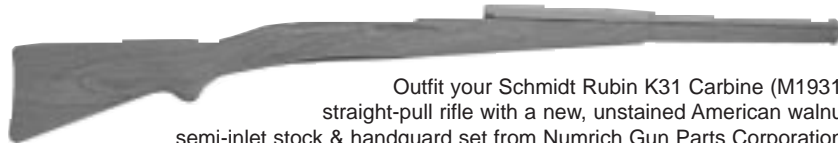
*Right (Top): The MAS strips easily for routine maintenance. (Middle): The Modele 1953 APX L 806 is a tough little scope which attaches easily to the rifle's siderail. Featuring 3.85 magnification, a post reticle, and BDC out to 800 meters, it's a simple and reliable unit with surprisingly good optics. (Bottom): The rear sight is an aperture adjustable for windage and elevation from 200-1200m.*

round. Failures to extract and case heads torn off were common and did nothing to endear the MAS to American shooters. This was a pity, as the problem lay solely with the shoddy caliber conversion by the importer. Time went by and the MAS disappeared from the scene for a while and then recently reappeared being offered by SOG International Inc. The difference this time though is that the guns are offered in their original caliber and in excellent like-new condition, for only \$239.95.

I acquired one and it arrived in literally "like new" condition. The rifle's stock was not only perfect, but the wood was quite handsome and nicely fitted. The metal work was finished in an even and attractive gray phosphate. Pulling the weapon apart revealed it to be in excellent mechanical shape with a perfect bore. In the hands the MAS 49/56 feels quite good. With a 19.7-inch barrel and an overall length of only 40 inches, it's a quick handling rifle. However it is a little on the heavy side, tipping the scales at 9.2 pounds. The rear sight consists of an aperture adjustable from 200 to 1,200

*continued on page 72*

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## FRANCE'S MAS 49/56

*continued from page 39*

meters for elevation and for windage when zeroing. The front sight consists of a protected post adjustable for elevation. The bolt handle is a large white plastic knob located on the right side of the action. The weapon's safety is located on the right side of the trigger guard and is easily manipulated via the trigger finger — if you're right handed. Feed is from 10 round detachable magazines (although 18 rounders were also produced and issued). Of interest is that the magazine catch is located on the right side of the magazine, rather than the rifle. Magazines insert easily by simply pushing straight up, and they lock securely in place. The bolt locks back on the last shot and the bolt carrier has a slot for stripper clips. This, in conjunction with a cutout on the receiver, allows the weapon to be loaded via 5 round stripper clips if the operator desires.

The weapon was designed to allow an operator to quickly and easily launch rifle grenades. At the front of the upper handguard is the gas cutoff switch. Lifting this up 90 degrees cancels the normal gas flow for operating the action and blocks the operator's view of the front sight. The grenade launcher sight may be deployed by pulling back and lifting up. Between the front sight and muzzlebrake is a sliding collar. This can be adjusted to increase or decrease how far a rifle grenade will be propelled by a blank cartridge. Slick. On the left side of the rifle's beefy receiver is a rail for mounting day/night optics. The rifle's sling swivels are located on the left side of the weapon as well.

In addition to the rifle, SOG International Inc. sent us a host of accessories that are included with each rifle. These consisted of four 10 round magazines, sling, bayonet, manual, night sights, rubber butt extension, cleaning gear, spares, and pouches. All of it was in new or like new condition and still sealed in plastic. It was an impressive array of new gear and a fine looking rifle. To adequately test it, I borrowed an original French Modele 1929 C drives a 139 grain FMJ at 2,756 fps for 2,336 ft/lbs of energy at the muzzle. Surplus 7.5x54 ammunition is currently available through Wholesale Guns&Ammo, Inc. They were kind enough to supply us with 200 rounds of bright and shiny ball loaded on AA52 links. It was produced by Societe Francaise des Munitions, Paris in 1976. However, rather than relying only on surplus ammunition for accuracy testing, I contacted Pete Cardona of Quality Cartridge. Pete specializes in custom loading ammunition to a customer's indi-

The standard Ball Cartridge 7.5x54mm Modele 1929 C drives a 139 grain FMJ at 2,756 fps for 2,336 ft/lbs of energy at the muzzle. Surplus 7.5x54 ammunition is currently available through Wholesale Guns&Ammo, Inc. They were kind enough to supply us with 200 rounds of bright and shiny ball loaded on AA52 links. It was produced by Societe Francaise des Munitions, Paris in 1976. However, rather than relying only on surplus ammunition for accuracy testing, I contacted Pete Cardona of Quality Cartridge. Pete specializes in custom loading ammunition to a customer's indi-

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vidual specifications. What I was looking for was accuracy, so Pete loaded up some 7.5x54 Match ammunition for me using the 155 grain Sierra HPBT Matchking bullet. With these two loads in hand I put the MAS through its paces at 100 and 300 yards.

As I zeroed the rifle at 100 yards, I was hoping for groups of less than 3 inches. After all, it was a rack grade service rifle. Stripping the ball out of the MG belts, we loaded magazines. With this load the MAS averaged 3 $\frac{1}{2}$  inch 5-shot groups. But as soon as I switched to Match ammunition, I was pleasantly surprised. The MAS would keep three shots into an inch or less. Firing 5 shot groups for record off the bench, the rifle averaged 1 $\frac{1}{2}$  inch at 100 yards. Moving back to 300 yards the MAS/Quality Cartridge combo astounded me with one 3-shot group that measured a mere 1 $\frac{1}{2}$  inch! While impressive, three shot groups don't count. Firing for record, the MAS again put on a good show and averaged five shots into 4 inches at this distance. Recoil was mild, ejection was positive and consistent. The trigger, although a little on the heavy side, broke nicely. Moving from the bench, we removed the optics and did some shooting offhand, kneeling, and prone. Here the MAS did extremely well. The sights are very good, the safety easily manipulated, and magazines quick to change. The only thing I could have wished for was some of the rare 18 round mags.

I came away quite impressed with the MAS 49/56 and its 7.5x54 cartridge. The rifle is both well-designed and well-made. Our specimen ran flawlessly during testing and, when teamed with Match ammo from Quality Cartridge, shot extremely well even at 300 yards. With this load I would expect this rifle to perform well out to at least 600 yards. While not the best known battle rifle of its era, the MAS is none the less a fine design that served France well. For someone looking for a fine example, I heartily recommend that they contact SOG International Inc.



#### REFERENCES:

Huon, Jean. *Proud Promise: French Autoloading Rifles 1898-1979*. Collector Grade Publications, Inc., Cobourg, Ontario, Canada. 1995.

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION

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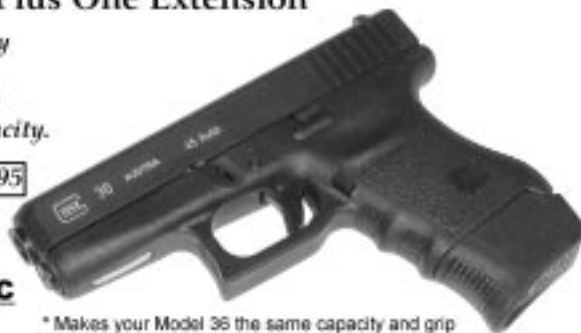
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