



Weapons of War: Pistols

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The pistol, originally designed as a cavalry weapon, was the staple weapon for a variety of personnel during World War One (and beyond). Traditionally issued to officers of all armies the pistol was also issued to military police, airmen and **tank** operators.

Reasons for Pistol Use

For men involved in the latter professions the pistol was essentially the only weapon that would serve under their unique environments: the cramped conditions of both the tank and aircraft dictated that the **rifle** - which was otherwise issued to virtually all regular soldiers - was impractical.

As with the rifle the belligerent armies generally manufactured standard issue pistols, although shortages (as ever) required that a wide variety of models were put to practical use in the field.

Three Basic Types

When war began there were three types of pistol in general use: revolvers, clip-loaded automatics and the so-called 'blow-back' models (where expanding propellant gas caused the gun to reload by forcing the bolt back when fired).



Model by Model

Undoubtedly the most famous wartime pistol was the German Luger, although the British Webley was perhaps not so far behind. The key models in use during 1914-18 - invariably designed in the late nineteenth century (as were most rifles) - are described below.

Germany

Some two million Luger 9mm P08 pistols were manufactured during wartime, and although primarily issued to officers (since the pistol continued to be viewed primarily as an officer's weapon) it was also issued to soldiers engaged in a wide variety of tasks.

The Luger possessed a seven-round magazine loaded via the pistol butt. Recoil-operated the Luger was regarded as both reliable and accurate but was never available in sufficient supplies to meet ever-increasing demand. It was always a popular trophy when captured by Allied troops.



A variant of the Luger, the Parabellum M17, was issued in 1917. Possessing a longer barrel it resembled a machine carbine with its magazine capable of holding 30 rounds.

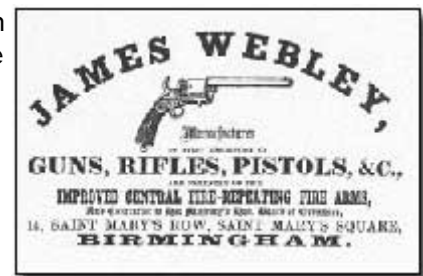
Given the scarcity of the Luger, other models were consequently produced and substituted, including the Beholla 7.65mm automatic and the Mauser C96 and C10 pistols. In fact the Mauser could lay a claim to being as popular and widespread as the Luger in the German army, and although bulky and somewhat awkward could fire a powerful 7.63mm or 9mm round.

The Mauser also had a wooden holster which, when fitted, effectively turned it into a shoulder-fired carbine rifle. The Mauser Automatic was also widespread (in its original 1894 format) among the Italian army.

Both the Turkish and Bulgarian armies depended upon the Germans for supplies of pistols, using both Mauser and Beholla models.

Britain

The Webley Mk IV revolver, produced by Webley and Scott in Birmingham, was the standard issue British pistol, with some 300,000 produced during wartime.



The Mk IV model, which debuted at the close of the nineteenth century, was a 11.6mm calibre weapon and proved immensely reliable (and consequently popular) in wartime conditions - even among Flanders mud.

The Webley was issued not only to British troops, but also to officers from Empire countries. Soldiers manning machine gun posts were usually equipped with a personal Webley revolver.

Much practice was required however before the Webley could be used accurately since it jumped on firing. Despite its high reputation British officers generally preferred the use of a captured Luger when the opportunity arose, supposedly on account of its longer range.

A variation of the Webley, a self-loading automatic, was available from 1913 but was viewed as overly complex by the army. It was nevertheless utilised by the Royal Navy.

France



The French standard issue weapon was the Pistole Revolveur Modele 1892. It was manufactured by numerous state-owned factories and also in Belgium and Spain.

Popularly referred to as either the 'Lebel' or 'model d'Ordonnance' it resembled the British Webley, although it fired six 8mm rounds. Deemed eminently reliable the Lebel remained in common use throughout the Second World War.

Whereas the Webley was snapped open for the purposes of loading, the Lebel's chamber swung out.

The Serbian army made use of French surplus stock, such as there was, for their own wartime use.

Belgium

The Belgium army was largely issued with two variants of the U.S. Browning revolver, namely the 1900 7.6mm blow-back and (less commonly) the 9 mm Model 1903.

Austria-Hungary & Romania

Both Austria-Hungary and Romania made extensive use of the Steyer Automatic, produced just before the war, in 1912.

The Steyer, which utilised an eight-round clip, fired 9mm bullets, although Hungarian home forces used a separate (Fegyvergyar) design firing 7.65 mm bullets; both were reliable weapons.

United States

The U.S. army (and navy) essentially utilised three pistol models during wartime.

The Colt 0.45-inch Automatic was introduced in 1911 and also used by the British Royal Navy in modified format.

Some 150,000 each of Colt Revolvers and Smith and Wesson Revolvers were manufactured; both fired 0.45-inch calibre bullets. As with the Colt Automatic the British also bought the Colt Revolver for their own use.



Italy

Italian forces were issued with the 1910 Glisenti 9mm automatic; at least, they were when it was available - numbers were never produced to meet up with continuing demand.

In some respects similar to the German Luger the Glisenti was notably less durable.

Two other models were often seen in Italian use. The Bodeo Revolver, designed in 1891, fired 0.45-inch calibre bullets; and the Beretta 7.65 mm automatic, produced in 1915, was widespread if unpopular (chiefly for the inaccuracy of its fire, a severe drawback).

Russia



Chronically short of revolvers, Russian officers were obliged to make do with whatever they could find.

Officially Russian officers were supposed to be issued either a Mauser Automatic (one of the older models) or the Belgian-designed Nagant revolver.

Photograph of Nagant courtesy of GreatWarAZ.

Photographs courtesy of [Photos of the Great War website](#).