

CLASSIC TEST

The WINCHESTER RUSSIAN MODEL 1895

Ordered as an Emergency Arm in World War I, This Lever Gun Is Still a Good Shooter.

**By Garry James
& Philip Schreier**

In the late summer of 1914, Paris was doomed, or so it seemed. The Imperial German Army was within sight of the eternal city, and only a miracle could save her from the same humiliation she had endured at the hands of conquering Germans in 1871. And then the "Miracle of the Marne" occurred. One and a half million Russians attacked Germany at Tannenberg in the east, drawing away valuable resources and men from the German offensive. Paris was saved. Stalemate settled in on the Western front. Almost 300,000 Russians were casualties.

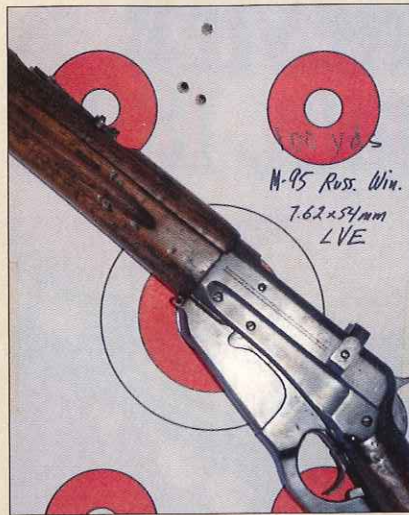


The Great War would not be over anytime soon.

Nearly half of the Russian infantry that attacked at Tannenberg went into battle completely unarmed! Like the Chinese who overran the Chosin Reservoir in Korea some 35 years later, most of the 2nd and 3rd waves of Russian infantry advanced using the firearms dropped by their fallen comrades. Russia was woefully unprepared to supply an army in the field with proper equipment and arms. The Russian Minister of War, Alexei Polivanov, estimated that in 1915 he had nearly one million unarmed soldiers. "Rifles," he wrote, "were more precious than gold."

Immediately contracts were executed with foreign arms manufactures for rifles and munitions. Remington Arms and Westinghouse were given orders for one million copies of the standard Russian service rifle, the Model 1891 Mosin-Nagant. The Winchester Repeating Arms Company of New Haven, Connecticut, received a contract to supply the Czar's army with 300,000 rifles based on the John Browning-designed Winchester M-1895 lever action. Known as the Winchester Model 95 "Russian Musket," these arms comprised nearly 75 percent of all the Model 1895s manufactured between 1896 (the year of introduction) and 1931 when production ceased.

The Winchester Model 1895 Lever



From a rest at 100 yards, groups ran in the 2-inch range. Ammo was 147-grain Russian sporting ammo by LVE.

Action (note the distinction—Winchester also introduced a straight-pull, bolt-action rifle in 1895 as well) was John Browning's response to the development of high-powered smokeless rifle cartridges. Ballistic developments that followed the introduction of smokeless powder in the late 1880s brought with them changes in bullet design. With small caliber, high-velocity cartridges, bullet aerodynamics became a

focus of attention. The introduction of cartridges with pointed spitzer bullets could in theory render most lever actions of the day obsolete and dangerous to carry. All lever guns of the period were fed from a tubular magazine. The tendency for the pointed nose of one round to pierce the primer of another round and discharge was very real if the gun was dropped. The genius of Browning's design was that his lever-action repeating rifle was fed from an internal box magazine, giving the shooter an advantage in speed and retention of sight-picture that his bolt-action competitor did not have.

Originally offered in .30 U.S. (.30-40 Krag), .38-72 WCF and .40-72 WCF the Winchester 1895 was eventually chambered in .30-03, .30-06, .303, .35 WCF and .405 WCF, a favorite chambering of President Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt took 95s on his African Safari of 1910 and his trip down the Brazilian River of Doubt (now Rio Roosevelt) in 1913. In .405 caliber, Roosevelt called his 95 "Big medicine for lions."

The Russian Model 1895, which was adopted in 1915, had its design roots in a rifle that had been made some 15 years before and used in the Philippine Campaign. Faced with a similar shortage of rifles when the American war with Spain broke out in April of 1898, the American Secretary of War, Russell Alger, ordered 10,000 Winchester Model 1895 lever-action muskets. The first delivery took place while Spanish diplomats were negotiating an end to the three-month war that left the United States with her first overseas possessions. The musket that Winchester produced for the U.S. in 1898 and for the Russians in 1915 was a full-stocked rifle with a 28-inch barrel and a Winchester blade bayonet. In September of 1899, 100 of the U.S. Winchester 1895 muskets were issued to the 33rd U.S. Volunteer Infantry for field trials and evaluation in the Philippine Islands, an active theater of combat until 1903. On Christmas day 1900, Major General Arthur MacArthur, commanding the U.S. Army in the Philippines (and the father of the future General of the Army Douglas MacArthur) cabled the Adjutant General in Washington that the standard



Functioning of our evaluation piece was flawless, with chambering and ejection very positive. Recoil was a tad on the stout side.



The Model 1895 Russian Winchester rifle looks pretty much like that company's standard musket, with the addition of a clip guide mounted atop the receiver.

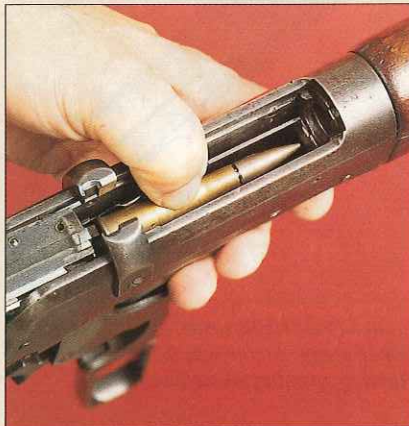
The WINCHESTER RUSSIAN MODEL 1895

service Krag rifle was “generally considered superior and much preferred” to the 1895 Winchester. He cited difficulty with loading as one of the prime reasons the rifle did not pass muster. The Chief of Ordnance in 1901 wrote, “These arms are not suited for the United States service.” In 1906 the Army commercially disposed of all 10,000, with most ending up in the service of military units in the Caribbean and central America.

Having been damned with less than even faint praise, it would seem that the curtain had been drawn on any future military sales of a lever-action Winchester. Yet when procurement agents for the Russian Defense Ministry began searching the globe for rifles in 1915 (a scene reminiscent of Caleb Huse, purchasing agent for the Confederacy in 1861), Winchester quickly offered the 1895 musket as a substitute standard to the M1891 Mosin-Nagant. The Russian 95 was chambered in the standard Russian service caliber of 7.62 mm. (Although by 1916, standard *anythings* were considered a great rarity among Russian troops. One regiment had no less than 10 different rifle calibers represented within its ranks.) The 7.62x54R round, which was originally designated for the Mosin-Nagant rifle, had a rimmed, tapered case. The original 210-grain round-nosed bullet was found to be lacking in accuracy and puissance. Fortunately, the development by the Germans of the spitzer bullet gave the round a whole new lease on life, and in 1909 an improved “L” round was adopted.

With a 150-grain bullet and adjusted powder charge, the ballistics of the cartridge were boosted to almost 2,900 fps, putting it in the .30-06 class.

The blade bayonet was visually identical to the US 1895 model but just different enough to prevent interchangeability. Stripper clip guides were mounted on the receiver to allow rapid loading of the five cartridges that the internal box magazine held, thus correcting a flaw that General



As we were not able to locate a proper Mosin-Nagant stripper clip, rounds had to be pressed into the box magazine one at a time.

MacArthur had previously identified. Markings consist of the Russian Imperial acceptance cartouche on the receiver breech and 7.62, denoting the correct caliber for use in the rifle.

A total of 300,000 Model 95 muskets were ordered, produced and delivered to the Russians in 1915 and 1916. The Russians, bankrupt from war expenses, actually bartered with the French for additional rifles and ammunition, and in 1916, the Czar traded two battalions of infantry to the French for much needed supplies.

The sights on the Russian Model 1895 involve a rear ladder graduated to 3,200 meters and a simple blade front. The safety is nothing more than a hammer half-cock, though the lever does have a



Sights on the Winchester Russian Model 95 involve a military-style ladder rear graduated to 3,200 yards and a blade front. A lug for a blade bayonet is situated on the bottom of the front barrel band.

hinged lower portion that locks it into position and prevents the action from being opened unless one's hand is actually in or about the loop.

For our evaluation we managed to locate an original Russian Model 95 in pretty good condition. It has been our experience that when these guns do turn up, they are generally well-used, however our specimen exhibited a fair amount of original finish, good wood, a clean bore and crisp mechanism.

Ammo chosen was 147-grain LVE Russian sporting fodder. Unfortunately we were unable to locate a stripper clip, so could not determine how well the loading guide worked and were forced to press the rounds into the mag one at a time through the top of the action—a task that was by no means onerous.

Initial offhand breaking-in shots proved the gun to be a good feeder and ejector, though recoil (even though the gun weighs some 9 pounds, 3 ounces) was pretty stout. The plain, curved steel buttplate did little to help in this area.

Still, we managed some pretty good sub-2-inch 100-yard rested groups using the original iron sights. The action was smooth, could be operated rapidly, and despite the stout recoil, target reacquisition was not bad. The trigger broke at just 7 pounds, after a light 3/8-inch takeup. All proclaimed the gun fun to shoot and an admirable mate to the Mosin-Nagant.

The fate of the Russian Winchesters following the Great War is as confusing as the Russian revolution of 1917 was chaotic. Some rifles have been examined with the cartouche of Republican Spain, an indication that they were sold to aid in quelling the Civil War that erupted there in the late 1930s. Advertisements in firearm magazines from early 1962 indicate that a quantity of Russian 95s were imported by Interarms of

Alexandria, Virginia, and sold for \$34.95, one third the price of a quality M1 Garand. Today they command a premium if they can be found in any type of passable condition. Many have remarked that “if only it could talk, what stories it would tell.” When examining a Winchester 1895 Russian musket, rich with history, showing the ravages of multiple wars and the effect of over 85 years of use, it will talk to you, but only if you know how to read sign.