

# History's Most Significant Repeating Handguns

By [David Tong](#)

I have decided to write this paper from a short review of the provenance of each handgun, it's place in history due to its design, its widespread usage, and / or how it advanced the state of the art. A lofty goal, and probably there will be some dissention from equally informed armchair quarterbacks, though I hope that each of my choices will strike some chord with our readers.

## 6. The Colt Paterson Revolver

Samuel Colt was an extraordinary marketer and salesman, but before he was known for that, he had whittled a model of probably the first successful repeating arm out of wood, in the 1820s. This model of a single action revolver featured the well-known cylinder, containing a powder charge and projectile in each of five chambers, and was the precursor to the famous Colt-Paterson of 1836. Of course, at this time this concept was for a muzzle-loaded black powder arm, and it wasn't until after the Rollin White patent on a cylinder bored all the way through (purchased by Smith & Wesson) ran out in 1870 that the SA revolver achieved full fruition in the famous Single Action Army.

Later, due to Yankee ingenuity, Colt was able to introduce the concept of mass production and interchangeable parts to the manufacture of firearms, allowing their construction by less skilled labor in great quantity. Sadly, at the time of this writing, it seems unlikely that Colt as a company will ever again build revolvers, but that is another story best left to MBAs and accountants.

## 5. The Mauser C-96 "Broomhandle"

There were many inventors and designers working on a reliable semi-automatic pistol for short range personal defense, and the twin developments of smokeless powder that safely developed consistent high pressure, along with the copper gilding metal jacket, allowed for its development. This provided an 86 gr. RN-FMJ bullet at over 1400 FPS, a revelation compared to nearly all black powder bullets leaving their muzzles at under 1000 FPS, though this cartridge does not have a lot of "stopping power" as we understand this term today.

Peter Paul Mauser, better known for his turnbolt rifle actions, came up with the earliest reliable semi-automatic pistol, capable of firing single shots with each pull of the trigger, without having to manually cock a hammer or stroke a trigger action. Probably more accurately described as a "self-loading" handgun, the Broomhandle took its nom de guerre from the somewhat awkward grip that looks and feels like the end of your household implement.

This pistol differed from the usual detachable box magazine pistol of today by being loaded with six to ten rounds via stripper clip into a fixed magazine that was forward of the trigger, from the top of the opened action just like the Mauser rifle. Famously, a certain Winston Churchill used the pistol in anger

for the first recorded time during the Battle of Omdurman, just before the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. This was, quite simply, the first semiautomatic pistol that *worked*.

#### **4. The Smith & Wesson ".357 Magnum"**

Just because the auto pistol guys had the advantages of smokeless powder and its ability to create safe working pressures and high velocity bullets flying downrange, didn't mean the wheelgun guys didn't want a piece of the action. Douglas B. Wesson at first took the company's ".38-44 Outdoorsman Target Model" revolver out hunting with handloads exceeding the standard pressure .38 S&W Special round's ballistics.

It was determined that the large "N" frame used for this revolver could be re-engineered to handle a higher pressure round safely, and to ensure that the new round would not be chambered in a .38 Special revolver, the cartridge case was lengthened 1/8" of an inch and christened the .357 Magnum.

The "Registered Model" revolver that was built to customer order started in the mid-1930s, during the height of the Depression. It sold well, despite a price about four times higher than a standard DA revolver of the era. After W.W. II, this and other Magnum revolvers were built on standard production lines, and included the famous .44 Remington Magnum of 1955, which was designed by Remington and introduced to the world by Smith & Wesson.

The rest is history, as it started the trend of ever-increasing bullet weights and velocities still going on to this day. Despite the actual "need" for such magnum revolvers, this was a watershed moment in the development of hunting handguns.

#### **3. The Walther Model PP "*Polizei Pistole*"**

In 1929, the German firm of Carl Walther Waffenfabrik of Zella-Mehlis, Thuringia, Germany came up with what most experts consider a safer semiautomatic pistol, that is, one that does not require the user to have (horrors!) a cocked hammer when drawn from a holster.

Thus, this rather low powered blowback operated handgun featured a trigger which offered an uncocked first shot, in the manner of a double action revolver, with subsequent shots fired by the conventional cocked hammer method upon recoil of the moving slide. Alternatively, Walther DA pistols may be thumb cocked for the first shot, also as per a DA revolver. A slew of similar, higher-powered pistols followed, first and possibly most notably the World War II-era P-38 from the same maker.

There are some who believe strongly that the heavier first shot trigger pull helps to reduce accidental discharges, since it takes both will and more effort to make the first shot occur. Some might disagree, but it also decreases first round hit probability due to the heavier first shot trigger pull, some 10-12 pounds, against a 1.5 pound pistol. Hence, it creates a situation where making the mechanism safer makes the (uncocked) pistol more difficult with which to hit the target with the first shot.

#### **2. The Glock**

Gaston Glock, as everyone now well knows, created the 9x19mm G-17 in 1984, and it furthered a trend started in military rifles to include composites or plastics in the fabrication of arms. However, the genius of the Glock design is that the polymer frame he used wasn't simply providing a handgrip, as most of the rifles had, it was the lightweight and nearly recoil proof chassis that has taken the handgun world by storm, as it is less expensive to produce than a traditional machined steel pistol frame. Subsequent Glock pistols, using the same basic mechanism, have appeared in calibers .380 ACP, .357 SIG, .40 S&W, 10mm Auto, .45 Glock, and .45 ACP.

However, the Glock also works pretty well in that it offers the drop safety of the double action automatic with a shorter, consistent trigger stroke. Its reliability under extreme conditions is legendary, and it also has the lowest part count of any major service handgun in the world today. It is thus a boon to accountants, armorers, police administrators, military services, cops, soldiers, and civilians who desire a high quality and reliable arm that lasts for decades of hard usage.

### **1. The John Browning / Colt Model 1911**

Some regular *Guns and Shooting Online* readers are no doubt familiar with my preference for this old, traditional pistol. Mr. Browning was a wizard, and with the creation of the 1911, he built the most enduring design of them all. The Colt 1911 has been admired and used for almost 100 years, while many of its contemporaries, such as the Luger, Walther P-38, and the Broomhandle Mauser, are collector's items and museum pieces. In other words, they are history, while the 1911 is still *making* history.

This may annoy some people, who believe that only more modern arms have any relevance, yet it is the continued use of the 1911 by the FBI Hostage Rescue Team, LAPD SWAT, US Army Operational Detachment Delta, US Marine Corps Special Operations Detachment One, and more civilian target and combat competitors than any other design, should be the last word. Take a look at the sheer number of manufacturers building the grand old pistol (the Browning / Colt patents having long since expired) as another indicator of its place among its peers.

This pistol is the synthesis of disparate elements, including but not exhaustively: durability, simplicity, reliability, ergonomics, trigger pull quality, and stopping power, that has often been compared to, but rarely approximated, yet alone equaled. And none have been around longer. That's why it's number one.