

# Reminiscing About the Luger P-08 Pistol

By [David Tong](#)



Luger P-08. Photo courtesy of Wikipedia.

Having a strong affinity for European arms in terms of development and history, one of the most fascinating has to be the P-08 Parabellum pistol. This German service pistol from the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century was used in both World Wars. Commonly referred to simply as the "Luger," after its designer Georg Luger, it represented the era when handgun designers and manufacturers around the world had not yet standardized on the simple and potentially reliable Browning tilting barrel action.

Incidentally, the name "Parabellum" comes from a Latin phrase, "*Si Vis Pacem, Para Bellum.*" Translated, this means "If you desire peace, prepare for war." Truer words were never said, given human nature.

Adopted in 1900 by the Swiss government in caliber 7.65 Parabellum/Luger, the German Army closely followed its development, along with the cartridge to which it is inextricably linked: the 9mm Luger (9x19mm), which debuted in 1902. After testing earlier prototypes, including the leaf-mainspring powered Models 1900 and 1902 and the grip safety equipped 1906, their army selected the Model 1908 as the official service pistol.

The pistol borrowed its operating principles from the short recoil toggle lock designed by American Hiram Maxim for his machine gun and that first appeared on a pistol designed by Hugo Borchardt. Essentially, a bolt that travels in a straight line holds the breech closed. Upon firing, the upper receiver and bolt travel rearward under recoil for approximately 1/3", then the toggle knobs encounter a pair of ramps machined onto the top rear of the grip frame. This impact breaks a "knee" joint in the link between the bolt and the rear of the toggle. This allows the bolt to move freely rearward to extract and eject the spent case. The bolt is returned to battery by a coil mainspring in the frame, stripping a fresh round from the detachable, single column, eight-round magazine in the grip on its trip forward.

The Luger is one of the strongest repeating pistol actions extant. The bolt system is closed and subject to destruction only by compression of the steel parts. In normal circumstances, this would be highly unlikely. The pistol must be made to a high standard in materials, dimensional accuracy and heat treatment. In any Luger in good, original condition (with matching serial numbers), one finds the tolerances between the recoiling upper receiver and its bolt toggle system, as well as between the upper and its grip frame, are tight indeed. Although the trigger uses a unique L shaped lever system located within a side plate, which depresses a spring loaded plunger to trip a sear that releases the striker within the bolt, the pull that results is generally quite clean and crisp.

Earliest examples up through WWI were always finished in rust blue, internals being left in the white. Heat drawn "straw" colors adorn the trigger, safety and dismounting levers, as well as the leaf ejector. Serial numbers appear as two- and four- digit identifiers on all small and large parts to ensure that reassembly of matching numbers is made easier.

Generally, the pistol retained its stock lug, a machined steel extension on the bottom of the rear grip frame that would accept a WWI-era shoulder stock. This was normally fitted only to the long-barreled "Artillery" models, whose crews were often armed with the pistol for self-defense purposes.

The P-08 was normally issued with a spare magazine pouch and a full flap holster with a belt and roller type closure. These can be in brown or black color. Within the holster was a small compartment in the main flap that contained a small magazine loading tool and a screwdriver for tightening the grip screws and for stripping the striker from the

bolt for cleaning. The main body of the holster had a short leather thong, used as an assist to pull the pistol free of the holster. A maker's mark was generally stamped on the rear of the holster between the sewn-on belt loops along with the year of manufacture.

Under the terms of the Versailles Treaty, Germany was limited to an Army of 100,000 men. Pistols could not be in the wartime 9mm caliber and had to have barrels under 4" in length. Many existing Luger pistols were re-barreled to caliber 7.65 Parabellum, which fed perfectly from the existing magazines and the pistols required no other changes to comply. So-called "1920 Police" models were often fitted with "sear safeties," which prevented mishandling from causing a negligent discharge. The rise of National Socialism under Adolf Hitler resulted in abrogating the Versailles Treaty and the P-08 in its original form and 9x19mm caliber again became the standard service pistol.

During WWII, the Germans adopted the Walther P-38, as a less time and material intensive arm was required to replace the P-08. The P-38's claim to fame was its first shot double action trigger system. However, its looser tolerances and unsupported muzzle, plus inferior balance, meant that this pistol never shot as well, at least in my hands, as the P-08. The P-38 provided some of its DNA to the future design of the Beretta Model 951 Brigadier pistol, which evolved into today's U.S. M9 service pistol.

The Luger pistol, as you might surmise, is a joy to shoot. A Luger was the first centerfire handgun I ever shot. This occurred in my mid-teens on a Scouting trip to the Mojave Desert in California. I relish shooting them now, as they always present a challenge to the experienced marksman to do his best. There are few alibis available, due to the high quality of the arm! The precision of manufacture, even in a WWI era Luger, is astounding. The fit of the upper receiver and barrel onto its grip frame/lower receiver are so good that the Luger can be considered essentially a fixed barrel arm.

Many pundits over the years have written that the Luger is not reliable. That may indeed be the case when slogging through the mud of Flanders (or Stalingrad, for that matter), due to the pistol's very tight tolerances and the open nature of the mechanism. However, if kept clean and used with good magazines, the Parabellum pistols I have owned have always worked very well and shot brilliantly. I do not care for the Luger's acutely raked grip angle, but the pistol works well enough.

In my experience, the most reliable of the Luger breed are the WWII era pistols. They suffered a bit in finish quality compared to the pre-WWI examples, being simply hot salt dip blued throughout, but the metallurgy and consistency of manufacture was better. The later Haenel-Schmeisser extruded body magazines with aluminum floor plates and updated springs provide sure function, even with Federal's famous #9BP 115 grain JHP rounds. These shoot as reliably as hardball.

One does have to take into account the inverted V front sight and the tiny V rear sight, which can be difficult for aging eyes to see and acquire. Then there is the trigger's take up before striker release. Never forget to bring the loading tool, as the magazines are a bear to load without it. When all is right, a good Luger will shoot with any Browning pattern target automatic.

I am always in the market for a 90%+ condition, WWII era P-08. Feel free to write to me, just click on my name at the top of this article. Rest assured it would get a good home with someone who appreciates it and will use it, too!