By John Marshall

It has been known by many names. In Europe, it's usually the Parabellum pistol. In its most commonly found variation, it's often called the P.08 (pronounced “Pay-oh” in German). But to most of us on this side of the pond, it’s been forever known as the Luger after its designer, Georg Luger. It's arguably the most recognizable profile in the firearms world; its sleek and flowing lines reek of sophisticated design and Old World craftsmanship.

A little of the pistol’s history is in order. It had its beginnings in one of the first semiautomatic pistols, and the first to make use of a toggle, or knee-action, locking mechanism. This was the Borchardt (pronounced Bor-kart) pistol, the invention of one Hugo Borchardt, an American. In 1893, the Ludwig Loewe company of Berlin, Germany, hired Borchardt, and then manufactured his pistol. Although the Borchardt was ungainly in appearance, the hallmarks of the later Luger are very evident in its design. Also employed by the Loewe firm at that time was Georg Luger. He studied, refined and re-designed the Borchardt pistol into a more compact mechanism, patenting the first Parabellum, the Model 1900. Interestingly, although the new pistol obviously incorporated many of Borchardt’s ideas, no mention of Borchardt was made in Luger’s patents. The pistol was chambered for the 7.65mm Parabellum, a bottlenecked cartridge of about .30 caliber. It’s now often known as the .30 caliber Luger.

The 1900 Luger was then manufactured by the new firm of Deutsche Waffen und Munitionsfabriken (DWM), itself a merger of Ludwig Loewe and Deutsche Metallpratronen Fabrik, a prominent munitions firm in Germany. DWM sent its representative, Hans Tauscher, to the United States to market the new pistol here. He sold Luger pistols until the termination of U.S.-German relations just prior to World War I. It was Tauscher who apparently originated the term “Luger Pistol” in this country. One of his first sales was to the U.S. Government, which ordered 1000 Model 1900s for testing, each marked with an American Eagle design over the chamber.

Unfortunately for DWM, the Army’s Ordnance Department found them unsatisfactory after field trials. Most of the original 1,000 pistols were auctioned off by the U.S. Army in 1906, and are worthless when found today.

Following World War One, the A.F. Stoeger company of New York became the sole importer of Luger pistols and in fact copyrighted the “Luger” name. Meanwhile, the pistol had been refined even further by DWM. A new, coiled action spring had been substituted for the breakage-prone S-shaped spring previously used. No grip safety was employed, and the 7.65 Parabellum cartridge was expanded to make the now-famous 9mm Parabellum cartridge that is in near universal use today. The improved pistol was known as the P.08 (Model of 1908) and served the German armed forces throughout The Great War. The P.08 is the most common variation of many hundreds of models made in the first half of the 20th Century. The variations on the Luger are way too numerous to cover completely here, and many books have been written to cover the subject. In addition to the P.08, there was the Model 1914 “artillery” model made with a long barrel and a long-range rear sight mounted to the rear of the barrel. There were also 1904, 1906 and 1908 “Navy” or marine, model versions with a six-inch barrel and an adjustable rear sight mounted on the rear toggle link. A special “snail” drum magazine of 32-round capacity was made for the artillery version, which was also equipped with a shoulder-stock holster. Most Lugers were able to accommodate a shoulder stock, which could be attached to a projection on the butt of the pistol.

There were even a few prototype .45 ACP versions, made for U.S. military trials in 1907, which are priceless when found today.

In 1931, the manufacture of the Luger pistol was transferred from DWM to the Mauser company in Oberndorf, Germany. The fit and finish of these Mauser-produced examples was usually equal to their DWM predecessors. The P.08 Luger illustrated here is a Mauser-made example produced in 1936. Today it is still as issued, complete with a 1936-marked military holster, takedown tool, and spare magazine. I’m quite positive it soldiered on the German side during World War Two.

The Luger was expensive to produce and required careful machining and fitting for all parts. It was expensive to produce and required careful machining and fitting for all parts. But to many of us it’s the most beautiful firearm ever designed. And if you can’t afford the real thing, there are plenty of copies available.

Classic Handguns: The P.08

In 1938 the P.08 was officially replaced by the P.38 pistol