THE SMGs IN THE FRENCH ARMY IN 1939-1940

End of 1918 the French troops face a new German automatic individual weapon. This weapon is the Bergmann MP 18-1 SMG (9x19mm, 32 cartridges, weight of 5.9 kg). Only 15 days after the armistice of WWI the German SMG is tested intensively and the French army requests a SMG in the 1921 armament program. It should fire the 9x19mm ammunition at a rate of fire of 400-500 rpm, at a range of 200m, with an internal mechanism similar to the German SMG but it must be lightweight, only 3 to 4 kg. The future SMG should be simple and robust. It is intended for raids, trench warfare and close combat in general.

Before the official requests, the STA (Section Technique de l'Artillerie) begins in 1919 the development of a SMG. Various prototypes of the Pistolet Mitrailleur (PM) STA are built and tested between 1921 and 1925. Until 1924 this SMG is the single French candidate.

The Manufacture d'Arme de Saint-Etienne (MAS) develops the MAS 24 type 1 and type 1bis (9x19mm). The PM STA, the PM MAS 24 as well as the MP 18-2 and the Thompson 1921 SMGs are tested by the commission of Versailles. The MP 18-2 and the Thompson are judged too heavy and the French army wants a SMG firing the 9x19mm whereas the Thompson is chambered in .45 APC (11.43x23mm). The PM STA is compared to the MAS SMGs in February 1925. The STA SMG is judged excellent and 8,250 SMGs are ordered in August 1925. The PM STA Mle 1924 is the first official French SMG.

The STA SMGs of the first production batches are equipped with a bipod and the iron sight is graduated up to 600m, the maximum range of the 9mm Parabellum projectile. This seems today a bit strange but the weapon was thought to be also possibly used as LMG. The bipod is abandoned after the first batches. The STA SMG is the first French SMG, it is modern for its time. The Beretta Mle 1938 was born about 10 years after the PM STA Mle 1924 and is very similar to this French SMG.

Nonetheless, after the adoption of the PM STA Mle 1924 the manufacturing is hampered by imbroglios in the high spheres of decision. The SMG in surprisingly not seen anymore as an offensive weapon but rather as a personal defense weapon, a bit like today's PDW SMGs (Heckler & Koch MP5K and MP7, FN P90 etc.), replacing the pistols for the officers and the crews. The frontline soldiers have to use their cartridge (8x50Rmm at that time, later 7.5x54mm) at full range whereas the officers, telephonists, drivers, gunners, collective weapons crews, tank crews, fortification crews etc. can be armed with a SMG as emergency weapon. Therefore the SMG should be very compact and lightweight. The SMG is nonetheless still seen as a good weapon for trench warfare and raids but only for small groups of men (and therefore small quantities are required). This philosophy and the adoption of the 7.65x22mm (7.65mm Longue) cartridge for close defense (same calibre as for the SACM Mle 1935A and the MAS Mle 1935S pistols) according to this doctrine will lead the French army to miss the opportunity of having a large number of SMGs in 1940. From 1925 to 1928 only about 1,000 PM STA Mle 1924 are produced. They saw action before WW2 in Morocco during the Rif war. The 7.65x22mm SMGs are used as personal defense weapons whereas the 9x19mm SMGs are used for raids.

The adoption of the FM Mle 1924 (later FM Mle 1924/29) LMG will also slow down the development of the French SMGs during the 1920's and 1930's. All the credits are used for the replacement of the FM Mle 1915 Chauchat as squad LMG. The LMG is seen as sufficient as automatic weapon. The officers and crews can be armed with carbines (mousqueton Berthier Mle 1892 M16) and/or pistols/revolvers. There don't seem to be an urgent need for SMGs. The production of SMGs is always postponed because of financial issues.

The MAS (Manufacture d'Armes de Saint-Etienne) will propose various SMGs in 9x19mm and 7.65x22mm from 1924 to 1935, all based on the former MAS 24, leading finally to the MAS Mle 1935. In 1936 different SMGs are proposed to the French army:

- PM MAS Mle 1935 (7.65x22mm)
- PM CEV (Commission d'Expériences de Versailles) (7.65x22mm)
- PM CEI (Commission d'Expérience de l'Infanterie) (7.65x22mm)
- PM ETVS (Etablissement Technique de Versailles) (7.65x22mm)
- PM Thompson Mle 1921 (11.43x23mm)
- PM Bergmann 18-2 (9x19mm)

Finally improvements are asked for all the SMGs e.g. foldable stock and foldable magazine (like on the later and famous MAT Mle 1949 SMG). Of course the foreign SMGs are still too heavy for the French requirements.

An other manufacturer enters in the game: the SACM (Société Alsacienne de Construction Mécanique) with Charles Petter, one of its very good engineers. This society produces already the Mle 1935 A pistol. In 1935 the SACM proposes a new SMG but it is tested only in 1937. The "Petter" SMG is finally accepted as the PM Mle 1939. It should enter in service after the mobilisation as the second official SMG of the French army and should be tested among the troops like the PM ETVS and the PM MAS 35. Nonetheless the order of 3,000 SMGs is rejected by the
SACM, the manufacturer is indeed already too busy producing the M² 1935 A pistol, barrels for the Hotchkiss M² 1914 MG as well as barrels for the Lebel M² 1886/93 and MAS M² 1938 rifles. Only 50 PM "Petter" will be delivered to the French army.

Beside the need of a small and lightweight SMG for personal defense, the interest for a SMG in 9x19mm for raids and trench warfare has not disappeared. From 1935 to 1940 the contacts with Bergmann and Thompson are maintained but things are always delayed.

A new source is found when many Spanish republican troops seek refuge in France. They are disarmed at the border and many weapons are seized and stocked.

The French seized various small arms including SMGs (Erma-Vollmer MP, MP 28, MP 34 or their Spanish copies in 9mm Largo). The biggest number of seized SMGs is constituted by 3,250 Erma SMGs but with only 1,540 magazines. Soviet MGs were captured and used in the French army. I don't remember in which units but I have read about a French transport unit using Russian MGs for AA defense in 1939-1940. 20mm Oerlikon AA guns were also captured and tested ... later officially ordered and adopted as 20mm CA M² 1939. They could also test Soviet tanks and armored cars (or Spanish copies of these armored cars). A number of Spanish copies of the Russian BA6 or BA10 armored cars on Chevrolet chassis called "autometalladora blindado medio chevrolet 1937" and armed with a French 37mm SA18 gun were also seized. These armored cars were issued in June 1940 to the reconstituted 8e Régiment de Cuirassiers.

On 3rd September 1939, French enters WW2. During the "Phoney War" most of the combats consists in patrols, raids and fore posts skirmishes which would especially require SMGs. After several weeks the requests for SMGs accumulate on the desks of the High Command. Every SMG is then put into service : the old MP 18-1 seized in 1918, several MP 18-2, the ex-Spanish Erma MP, all the others available SMGs in 9x19mm and several dozen Spanish copies of German SMGs chambered in 9mm Largo. The Erma MP becomes the typical SMG used by the "groupes francs" but from the 3,250 seized SMGs only about 1,000 are used due to lack of magazines. The French SMGs in 7.62x22mm are also sometimes used but they are more frequent as personal defense weapons. Typical infantry or cavalry units are also sometimes equipped with SMGs but generally only 1 or 2 per whole platoon.

The corps franc is a special infiltration and deep reconnaissance unit. It is the equivalent of the German Stosstruppen. Concerning WW2, these corps francs were created in September 1939 with specially selected volunteers at the battalion, regimental and/or divisional level. These elite troops had the mission to infiltrate behind the enemy lines, to collect information, to organize ambushes or raids and to take prisoners. The smallest element of a corps franc is a team of 6 men called "l'équipe" (= the team) or “sizaine”. All the members of the team have a combat knife, a handgun (revolver or pistol) and many grenades for close combat. These men are usually armed with the mousqueton (carbine) Berthier M² 1892 M16 and in each team there are usually 1-2 SMGs (typically Erma-Vollmer but also MAS38 SMGs, Suomi M31 and even German captured SMGs) and 1 FM 24/29 LMG to increase the firepower (some captured MG34s are also used). Some shotguns were also used during the patrols. They carried also satchel charges if the mission required explosives. Several teams could be grouped together, for example a squad of 12 men will include 2 FM 24/29 LMGs and 2-4 SMGs and has therefore more automatic weapons than a regular infantry squad. The bigger unit including several teams is called the "groupe franc" (or “trentaine”) with 5 teams (30 men), it corresponds roughly to a platoon. The “groupe franc” is generally commanded by a lieutenant and is completely independent. Several “groupes francs” can be grouped for a specific mission into a “groupement franc”. Such a “groupement franc” includes usually a maximum of 6 “groupes francs” (180 men), roughly a company.

The SES or "Section d'Eclaireurs Skieurs" (ski-scouts platoon) are elite deep reconnaissance troops. They play more or less the same role than the corps francs but they are specialized in mountain warfare and winter conditions.

Most of the 3,000 Thompson M² 1921 SMGs remained surprisingly in armories or were only tested in Morocco during 1940. They were only issued occasional in May/June 1940 or delivered to military police units (e.g. gendarmes that fought on the Loire River in June 1940). The Thompson SMGs were for example also used by the Laffly W15T CC tank destroyer crews (126 SMGs issued to the 14 self-propelled anti-tank batteries) and apparently by several AA units. They were more largely distributed among the Vichy French troops in 1941.

On the French side, there are about 1,000 STA SMGs (but how many in France and how many issued in 1940 ?), the small number of tested PM ETVS (50 SMGs) is pressed in service as well as the PM Petter (50 SMGs). Only the MAS would be able to produce rapidly in large numbers its MAS 35, which had been rejected by the army. The PM MAS 35 is adopted as the PM MAS M² 1938 and in January 1940 19,500 SMGs are ordered but the first batch
is only delivered on 3rd May 1940. Until 23rd June 1940, only 1,958 MAS38 SMGs are delivered. The MAS38 was thus rare, with only individual weapons seeing service rather than systematic issue to particular unit types. This SMG was later used by the Germans under the name MP 722(f).

A Swiss manufacturer, the EMP (Etablissements Mécaniques de Précision) is contacted to produce a copy of the Erma MP. Beginning 1940 the SMG is immediately rejected, it is judged too inferior to the original German SMG.

The most surprising is probably that in 1940 the Beretta Mle*1938 SMG is tested and should have been ordered, but 2 weeks later Italy declared war to France which was already defeated by Germany. The similarity between the French STA SMG and the Beretta SMG produced about 10 years later is amazing.

Finally beside the Erma-Vollmer SMG used by the "groupes francs" only few SMG were used in May/June 1940. About 100 MAS35 were delivered for testing before the adoption of the MAS38. The later MAS38 SMGs were delivered to every kind of units, sometimes as weapon for the loader of the LMG in the infantry squad. The 345e CACC, an independent tank company equipped with Renault D2 tanks is also issued with SMGs as individual weapons for example. The other available SMGS are 50 ETVS, 50 Mle*1939 Petter, several hundreds Thompson Mle*1921, 150 Suomi M/31, several Steyr and a few German SMGs.

ALL the SMGs used by the French Army in May/June 1940:

French origin:
- PM MAS Mle*38 : 1,958 (19,500 ordered)
- PM STA Mle*1924 : 1,000 (8,500 ordered)
- PM Petter M*1939 : 50 (3,000 ordered)
- PM ETVS : 50 used from a total of about 100 produced

Foreign origin:
- MP 18-1 and MP 18-2 : very few
- MP 28-2 : 1,000 ordered for the police but not all delivered
- MP 34 : 200
- Erma-Vollmer MP : 3,250 but only 1,540 magazines available (only about 1,000 SMGs really used)
- Steyr : about 50
- Suomi M/31 : 300 available and 150 used on the front
- Thompson M*1921 (and perhaps M*1928) : 3,000 available but only several hundreds used in 1940

Pistolet Mitrailleur STA Mle*1924
Type : Sub-machinegun
Total length : 855 mm
Weight (empty) : 3.50 kg
Barrel Length : 240 mm
Caliber : 9x19 mm
Magazine : 32 rounds magazines
Rate of fire : 380 rpm
V° : 360 m/s

Pistolet Mitrailleur M*1939 PETTER
Type : Sub-machinegun
Total length : 645 mm (388 mm with folded stock)
Weight (empty) : 2.90 kg
Barrel Length : 200 mm
Caliber : 7.65x22 mm Longue
Magazine : 36 rounds magazines
Rate of fire : 600 rpm
V° : 380 m/s

Pistolet Mitrailleur Erma Vollmer (Erma MP) - German : Maschinenpistole 740(f) -
Type : Sub-machinegun
Total length : 890 mm
Weight (empty) : 4.30 kg
Barrel Length : 250 mm
Caliber : 9x19 mm
Magazine : 32 rounds magazines
Rate of fire : 500 rpm
V° : 390 m/s
Pistolet Mitrailleur MAS Mle 1938 - German : Maschinenpistole 722(f) -
Type : Sub-machinegun
Total length : 630 mm
Weight (empty) : 2.90 kg
Barrel Length : 220 mm
Caliber : 7.65x22 mm Longue
Magazine : 32 rounds magazines
Rate of fire : 640 rpm
V° : 380 m/s

Pistolet Mitrailleur Type ETMS - German : Maschinenpistole 721(f) -
Type : Sub-machinegun
Total length : 670 mm (420 mm with folded stock)
Weight (empty) : 2.70 kg
Barrel Length : 210 mm
Caliber : 7.65x22 mm Longue
Magazine : 32 rounds magazines
Rate of fire : 500 rpm
V° : 380 m/s

Therefore in 1939-1940, the French army uses generally the 7.65x22mm SMGs for the personal defense and the 9x19mm and 11.43x23mm SMGs for raids, ambushes, trench warfare and close combat. Nonetheless the MAS38 is also sometimes used by the "groupes francs" or the SES (probably for the LMG loader). This SMG will be produced until the 1950's. It will be used in Indochina and among police and gendarmerie units until the 1970's or even 1980's.

From 1942 on, the Thompson SMGs are widely used by the French troops and several units like the French SAS or the commandos-marine equipped with British weapons use various Sten SMGs. Later during the Indochina war (1946-1954) the following SMGs will be used by the French army :
- MAS 38
- MAS 48 type C4b (a modified MAS 38 in 9x19mm with the same magazines than the MP 40 - 6,290 issued in 1950 e.g. 2e BEP)
- CMH.2 (Carabine Mitrailleuse Hotchkiss in 9x19mm, less than 7,000 produced)
- Thompson M1A1
- Sten MkII (e.g. GCMA)
- Sten MkV (e.g. commando Ponchardier)
- M3A1 "Grease Gun" (e.g. GCMA)
- MP 40 (e.g. among the commandos-marine)
- MAT 49 (issued from 1950 on)

The development of the French SMGs in 1919-1940 appears a bit pitiful : the potential was there, there was a good SMG already available in the 1920's but once again some people in the high spheres of decision wasted all the efforts. Of course there were also the financial issues and the fact that the testing commission was too perfectionist instead of using in high numbers the initial STA SMG, which would have increased the firepower of the French infantry in close combat. Nonetheless, in 1939/1940, except the German one, no army had a high number of SMGs. At this time the British army was not better equipped than the French one, it had perhaps even less SMGs available.

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