THE "MONTSERRAT" CARBINE AND ITS COMPETITORS; THE EQUIPMENT OF THE "SOMATEN" (1)

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In the collection of the Monjuïc Military Museum, in Barcelona, there were three specimens of the MONTSERRAT carbine, serial numbers 291, 465, and 497 respectively; three specimens are many, considering the total number produced probably was only around 500 units.



MONTSERRAT carbine, with Mauser type mechanism, magazine fed, pistol grip stock with a single front barrel band bearing a bayonet lug.

Around the mid-twentieth century, anyone inquiring about the MONTSERRAT carbine in Don Gustavo Castells's sporting goods establishment in Barcelona, would notice his immediate flustering and excitement as he recalled how his father had been the victim of the dishonesty of the manufacturer that he had contracted to make these carbines, who, after the initial delivery, tried to change the conditions of the contract and, in order to nullify it even set fire to his own shop so he could allege rupture of contract due to "force majeure".

As if this were not enough aggravation, in July of 1936 (onset of the Spanish Civil War), when the sewers of Barcelona were full of hidden firearms (same as happened later on in January of 1939, at the end of the war), the few carbines remaining in his establishment almost cost him his life as they were suspected of being destined to the military (Franco's) uprising; in short, that when I visited Don Gustavo in his shop, in the 1960s, he kept only three mementos of the MONTSERRAT carbine: a bad memory, his recollections of the patent obtained for the "repeating carbine, Génova system", and , the original sales brochure, which he kindly presented to me.

This brochure tells us that the MONTSERRAT carbine had been designed by Colonel Don Juan Génova, as a weapon intended for the SOMATEN, that he personally supervised the manufacture of the prototype in the Oviedo Factory, then ceded the patent rights to Don Genaro Castells, and shortly thereafter, died.



Propaganda brochure of the MONTSERRAT carbine, "Génova" patent.

Colonel Don Juan Génova e Yturbe(1858-1920), born in Zaragoza, was the maximum Spanish authority on portable weapons at the time and lived in Barcelona, same as Don Genaro Castells, who was the son of Don Bernardo Castells, a businessman who, in 1834, founded a military goods store named "Al Ejército Español" (dedicated "To the Spanish Army"); When Genaro inherited the store he changed its name to "Son of B.Castells".

After obtaining the Génova patent rights, Genaro Castells, who was a Corporal of the SOMATEN in the La Salud district of Barcelona, registered the trademark "MONTSERRAT" (the Virgin of Montserrat, who was the Patron Saint of the SOMATEN) in order to market it, and contracted its construction to the Eibar gunmaker Isidro Gaztañaga, manufacturer of pistols and revolvers commercialized under the trademark DESTROYER, which he had registered in 1914 after ending his association to Juan Esperanza (Gaztañaga y Esperanza, 1911-1914).

The SOMATEN was a lay Catalonian rural institution composed of country people who, when alerted by the tolling of the church bells, assembled with their shotguns for mutual defense; During the XVIII and XIX centuries the main reason for answering the call to SOMATEN was the repression of banditry, but in the early XX century, with industrialization extending into the countryside, they began to be involved in combatting the disorders caused by "worker's anarchism".

In Barcelona, "the city of bombs", repression of social disorder was the responsibility of the Police, the Civil Guard, and the local Army garrisons, fully equipped with machine guns and artillery; so it happened, during the so-called "tragic week", in July of 1909, when the Barcelona garrison had to be reinforced with troops from Valencia, Zaragoza, Burgos, and Pamplona, and, in the general strikes that followed. After the "revolutionary strike" of 1917 and specially after the 1919 general strike, known as "la Canadiense", against the Barcelona Traction and Light Power, a Canadian company which supplied the city's electricity, Barcelona found itself practically in a state of war with constant encounters between gunmen of, the CNT (Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo), the anarchist syndicates, and the Free Syndicates; It was in this periods that certain 7.65 mm pistols were nicknamed "sindicalistas".

During the "Canadian" strike, which lasted for six weeks, and which was also joined by textile and gas workers, blackouts happened with great frequency causing great alarm amongst the city's middle class, which felt defenseless in front of an imminent Bolshevik revolution; It was for this reason that the military authorities decided to establish the SOMATENT ARMAT DE CATALUNYA (Catalonian Armed Somaten) in the city itself, initially composed of 8,000 "law abiding citizens" willing to collaborate with the authorities whenever it became necessary; this Armed Somaten was initially armed with Remington rolling block rifles, discarded by the Army; its members wore civilian clothes with an identifying armband, and later on also a leather belt with an impressive brass buckle bearing the arms of Catalonia and the slogan "Pau, pau, sempre pau" (Peace, peace, always peace), a lapel pin with the same emblem, and the colors of the Spanish flag on the rifle sling.

The creation of these barcelonian Somatens created a market for "carbines for the Somaten", better suited to the urban environment than the Army rifles. The carbine designed by Colonel Génova was the ideal repeating weapon, and in 1920 its only competition came from, single shot Remington system rolling block carbines made in Eibar in 44 WCF caliber, and Winchester lever action repeaters which, being imported articles, were very expensive.



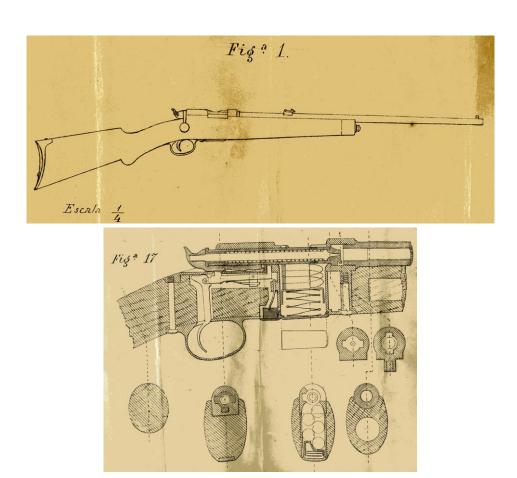
Sales brochure of the "La Bufona" (the pretty one) carbine from the Beristain shop, including an offer for a variation with "adapter for Mauser machete" (bayonet), which increased its price by 60% (!!).





Single shot carbines for Somatens, of varying quality, and, Winchester M.1892 and M.1894 lever action repeaters, offered for sale in diverse Barcelona gunshops during the 1920s.

No doubt that, in 1920, the Montserrat carbine was a sucess even beyond the hopes of its creator; The passing of Colonel Génova, and, the differences between the carbine described in the patent application and the actual production MONTSERRAT, probably dissuaded Don Genaro from launching a legal suit; but, to whom can we attribute those differences?...Surely not to Genaro Castells, and probably not to Isidro Gaztañaga either; In my opinion it was Génova himself who introduced them gradually during the development of the prototype in the Oviedo Factory.



Figures 1 and 17 depicting the actual carbine patented in 1919 by colonel Genova.

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Bibliography:

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