

# The Rexer Automatic Machine Gun

## Introduction

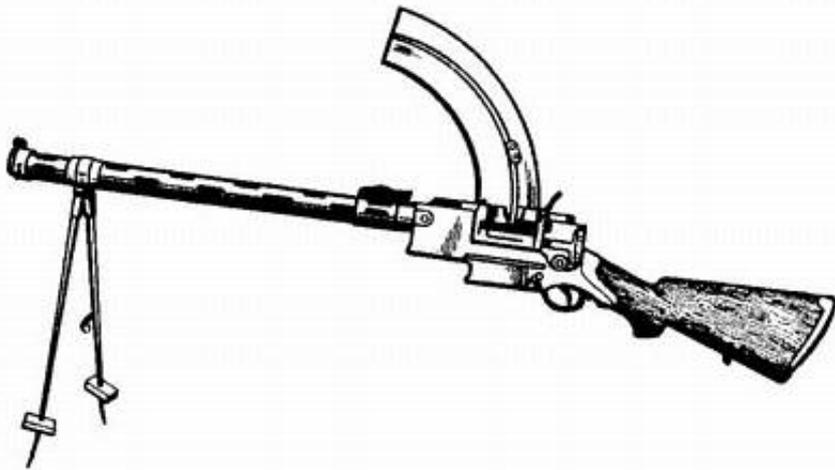
A squad of two Rexer guns is referred to in *The Story of the 1st Battalion Cape Corps (1915-1919)* (Source 1) during the Battalions service in East Africa. The squad, under command of Lieutenant J. Arnott, was attached to the Cape Corps' Machine Gun Section (equipped with 4 Maxim Machine Guns) in May 1916. Shortly afterwards, that particular weapon was discarded by the authorities as unsatisfactory, and the guns were returned to Ordnance.

However, at least one of the Rexer guns was still in service with the Battalion at the end of July 1916 and was used during two long range patrols sent out from Kangata, near Handeni, in German East Africa (now Tanzania).

Having never heard about this type of gun before, this paper is a summary of my research so far.

## The Rexer Automatic Machine Gun

The Rexer gun is a 0.303 calibre (7.7mm) light machine gun, actually a British copy of the Danish Madsen Light Machine Gun. The gun was from made from 1906 to 1911 by the *Rexer Arms Company*, hence its name. According to Source 3, the company first introduced the Madsen gun in England during a competition at Bisley, Surrey.



*Not a Rexer,  
but a Madsen Light Machine Gun in Russian service, 1902.*  
From Source 4.

The Rexer Arms Company however did not have a licence to copy the gun from the Danish manufacturer, Compagnie Madsen, and had to cease production after legal action was taken by the manufacturer.

Both the Rexer and the Madsen was tested by the British army, but neither was officially adopted for service.

## South Africa



*A Rexer carried by a mounted Sergeant.*  
According to information found in Source 2,  
the photo derives from the  
Rexer Automatic Machine Gun handbook, 1906.

In 1906, a committee of citizens from Natal, resident in London, purchased 8 Rexer guns which were afterwards sent to Natal.

Here they were issued to the mounted units of the Natal Militia for use during the Zululand Rebellion (against hut tax) of that year [1](#)).

Most of the troops participating in quelling the uprising came from the Natal colonial military and police forces, but volunteers from the Transvaal and the Cape Colony took part too.

One of the Natal units was the Zululand Mounted Rifles, to which 3 Rexer guns was issued. (Source 2).

## **South West Africa**

I am not aware whether more than 8 Rexer guns were available to South African units during the First World War, but at least one Rexer Motor Cyclist Machine Gun Section appears to have taken part in the South African campaign in German South West Africa in 1914-15 [2](#)).



*A Union Defence Force machine gun section in German South West Africa.  
From Source 6.*

J.L. Keene mentions in Source 6 that the machine gun to the left and right are Madsens, and that he is unaware of how South African units came in possession of this type of gun.

The explanation could be that it is one of the South African Rexer guns. As for the identification of the unit, perhaps the goggles worn by the men on the left could indicate that they belong to the Rexer Motor Cyclist Machine Gun Section.

## **East Africa**



*Piper of the 17th Infantry (The Loyal Regiment), 1913.*  
From a contemporary postcard issued by Gale & Polden.

In Colonel E.S. Thomson's diaries from his participation in the East African Campaign (Source 7) he mentions under the 29 December 1916 header: "... At 4.30 [16h30] we moved on through the Indian camp having a look at a Rexer gun ..."

Private Thomson, as he was then, served in the Machine Gun Section of the 7th South African Infantry Regiment, arriving in East Africa in the middle of January 1916. As a machine gunner he could have been particularly interested in such weapons, this perhaps being the reason for mentioning the Rexer.

The Indian Army unit in question could have been the 17th Infantry (The Loyal Regiment), which is referred to as cooperation with the 7th South African Infantry (mentioned under the 21 November and 22 & 24 December 1916 headers).

The following summary of the regimental history is printed on the back of the card:

*"A famous Bengal Infantry Regiment who gained their proud title in the dark days of the Indian Mutiny, and have enhanced their reputation many times since. They fought with British troops in Egypt and the Sudan. They have a parade uniform of scarlet and white."*

Two Rexer guns were also attached to the 25th (Frontiersmen) Battalion, Royal Fusiliers, which are referred to in the battalion's War Diary from 6 and 31 October, 2 November and 31 December 1916 [3](#)).

Further, a reference to Rexer guns being available in Nairobi (Kenya) is found in the War Diaries of the 2nd Battalion, Loyal North Lancashire Regiment, but no further information is given.

## Summary

Based on the available information it is impossible to make any decisive conclusions as to the usage of Rexer Automatic Machine Guns in East Africa. A number of guns were available, and apparently issued to some infantry battalions in pairs of two. Apart from participation in the Cape Corps' two long range patrols, no information on the Rexer gun's use in combat has been found.

Any information on the Rexer guns, and especially their service in East Africa, is most welcome.

## Sources

1. *The Story of 1st Battalion Cape Corps (1915-1919)* by Captain I.D. Difford, published by Hortors, Cape Town 1920. The book is available for download as a PDF file [The Story of 1st Battalion Cape Corps \(1915-1919\)](#) (Canadian Libraries).
2. Rexer Light Machine Guns by J. J. Hulme, in Editors Letter Box, *Military History Journal* -Volume 1, No. 6, July 1970 (The South African Military History Society).
3. *Machine Guns: Their History and Tactical Employment (Being Also a History of the Machine Gun Corps, 1916-1922)* by Lieut.-Col. Graham Seton Hutchinson, Macmillan, London 1938. Reprinted by Naval & Military Press in 2004.
4. *The Madsen Light Machine Gun Model 1902 in Russian Service* by S. Fedoseev. The article is written in Russian - Ручной пулемет Мадсен обр. 1902 г - but can be translated to English by help e.g. Babel Fish (AltaVista). Further information on the Madsen machine guns in Russian (and German) service can be found in [The Madsen Light Machine Gun on the Eastern and Western Front 1914-17](#) (20th Century Warfare & History Society).
5. *British Enfield Rifle Bucket and Hotchkiss Pack Saddlery* (Society of the Military Horse). Both articles contain brief information on the Rexer gun.
6. *The Problem of Munitions Supply in the First World War and its effect on the Union Defence Force* by J.L. Keene, *Military History Journal* - Volume 6, No. 4, December 1984 (The South African Military History Society).
7. *A Machine Gunner's Odyssey through German East Africa: The Diary of E. S. Thompson, Part 3, 18 September 1916 - 26 February 1917* by Colonel E.S. Thompson, *Military History Journal* - Volume 7, No. 6, December 1988 (The South African Military History Society).

## Postscript - Madsen guns used in Mexico



*Cadets from the Mexican Military College man Madsen Model 1911 light machine gun for the 'Félicistas' (followers of Félix Díaz.) during the fighting in Mexico City in February 1913 [4](#).*

The Mexican Government imported a Rexer Machine Gun in 1908.

After the production of the Rexers' ceased, at least 100 Madsen light machine guns Model 1911 were imported (from Denmark?) in 1911.

### **Postscript - Madsen guns used in Estonia**



*A British sailor shows Estonian soldiers how to use the Madsen Machine Gun. The photo was published in *The Graphic*, 11 January 1919. From *Liberating Estonia from German Domination* (Old-Print.com).*

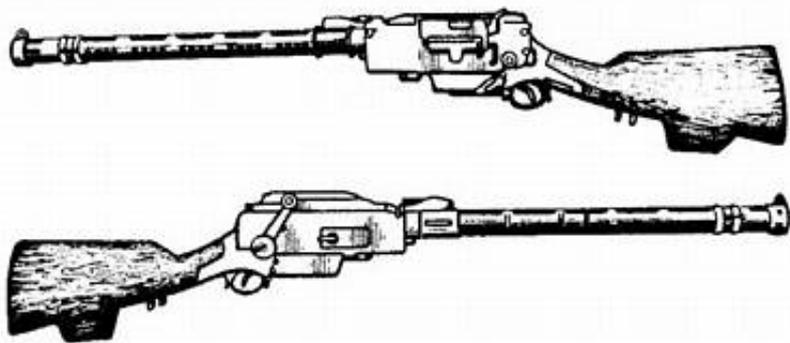
In Source 2 it is indicated that Britain ordered 900 Madsen machine guns during the First World War. Due to the Danish neutrality none was however delivered.

After the war an export license to Britain for 900 guns was granted, and approximately 600 of these were issued to Estonian troops fighting against the Russians for the freedom of their country [5](#). A number were lost at sea and a few went to England for trials.

## Postscript - Madsen guns used in Belgian Congo



*Belgian Force Publique Askaris, c.1909.*  
From a postcard sent from Belgian Congo  
to Brussels, arriving here at 24 June 1909.



*Madsen Light Machine Guns,*  
*shown here without the magazine mounted.*  
*The guns are not Belgian, but Russian.*  
From Source 4.

Further to the Madsen type of light machine guns, it may be worth noting that Madsen guns were used by the Katanga units of the Force Publique, i.e. the colonial units of the Katanga Province in Belgian Congo.

The Battalion consisted of 6 infantry companies and 1 bicycle company; in 1914 a number of Madsen machine guns were used by Battalion.

However, at present nothing further is available on the this topic.

For further reference to the Force Publique, see "[La Force Publique](#)" - or "De Openbare Weermacht" in Belgian Congo (Rudi Geudens) and Force Publique (Wikipedia).

Per Finsted

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**Noter:**

- 1) See [The Bambatha Uprising, 1906](#) and [Natal Native Rebellion Medal](#) (Wikipedia). Further information on the Bambatha Uprising can be found in *The Bambata Rebellion of 1906: Nkandla Operations and the Battle of Mome Gorge, 10 June 1906* by Kenn Gillings, *Military History Journal* - Volume 8, No. 1, June 1989, and *The "Death" of Bhambatha Zondi* by Kenn Gillings, *Military History Journal* - Volume 12, No. 4, December 2002 (The South African Military History Society).
- 2) 1914-15 South African Order-of-Battle (The Kaiser's Cross).
- 3) This information has been supplied by Harry Fecitt, Madeira.
- 4) From *The Mexican Revolution 1910-20* by Philip S. Jowett and A. M. De Quesada, No. 137 in the Osprey Publishing Elite Series, London 2006, ISBN 1-84176-989-4. The book is partly available as a Google Book. For information on the historical context refer to [Félix Díaz](#) (Wikipedia) and the [Mexican Revolution](#) (Wikipedia).
- 5) Some of these guns were used by the Danish-Baltic Auxiliary Corps, a Danish mercenary infantry unit of about 200 men which served in Estonia from May to September 1919. In June 1919 the company had 16 Madsen 0.303 calibre machine guns. See my article *For Dannebrog's Ære - Danske frivillige i Estlands og Letlands frihedskamp 1919 (Chakoten)*. According to *Taschenbuch der Heere*, by Kurt Passow, J.F. Lehmanns Verlag, München 1939, the 0.303 calibre (7,7mm) Madsen machine guns were still used by the Estonian army in 1939.