

As sporting clays shooters we can be guilty of having a somewhat narrow view of the wider world of shotgunning. We have our National and World Championships and, yes, it is a big deal. The fact is, however, that no form of sporting is a truly worldwide game; for that you have to look to the Olympics and the exacting disciplines of

Olympic (bunker) Trap and Skeet. They may be minority interests within the sporting strongholds of Britain and the United States, but worldwide they are the shotgun sports that really matter, with competitors from every continent vying for those elusive gold medals.

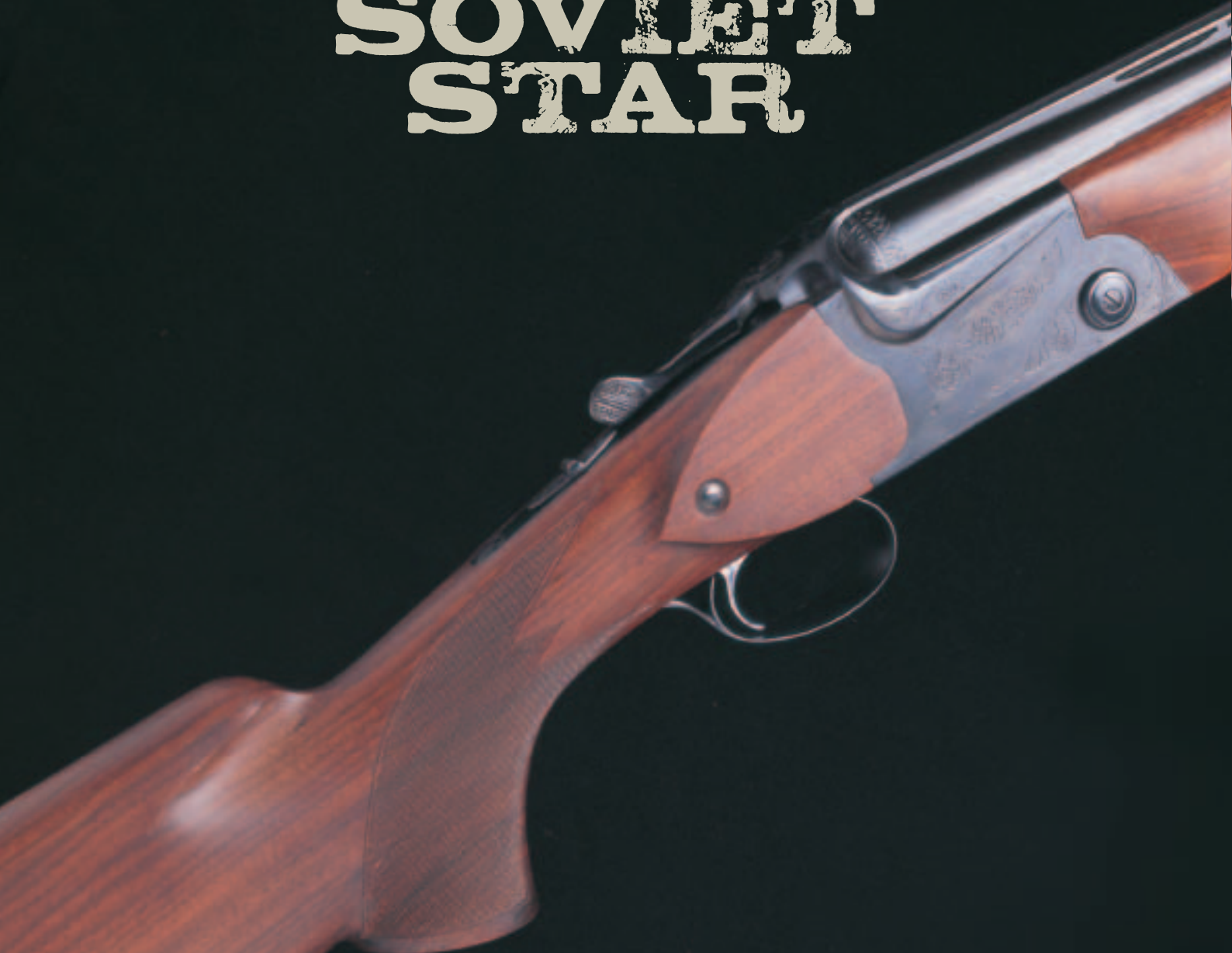
Olympic success is still hugely

prestigious and a source of national pride. They don't produce all those league tables of medals won by each country for nothing. It is not that long ago, however, that an Olympic gold medal was not just proof of a nation's athletic ability, but a weapon in the propaganda war. In post-war Europe, as Winston Churchill's

'Iron Curtain' descended across Europe, two competing ideologies stood toe-to-toe in what we now know as the Cold War. Unlike real warfare though, the Cold War was not about bombs and bullets but intangibles such as freedom and democracy. The Eastern and Western blocs used any means to score political points.

RICHARD RAWLINGSON LOOKS AT THE EXTRAORDINARY SUCCESS OF A COLD WAR RELIC

SOVIET STAR



Sport became a key Cold War battleground, especially for the Communist world. If their athletes could stand proudly on every podium it would proclaim the superiority of the system that selected and trained them. Western decadence could surely not hope to compete with State controlled efficiency.

All international sport was important, but none more so than the Olympic Games. Every four years, the entire world focused on the performance of its elite athletes. In propaganda terms, medals were worth much more than their weight in gold. In the Soviet Union every single Olympic sport became a priority and that

included target shooting and the shotgun disciplines.

Soviet shotgunners however would need Soviet shotguns; there would be no kudos attached to medals won with Western equipment. The vast resources of the Russian arms industry were directed to provide the tools needed, not just for the shotgun disciplines but target pistol and rifle shooting too. The grandly titled TsKIB SOO (Central Research and Design Bureau of Sporting and Hunting Guns) got to work and had their first products ready for the Helsinki Olympics of 1952. They achieved immediate success and Soviet shooters went on winning – by 2000 their medal tally in Olympic, World and European competition stood at 120 gold, 103 silver and 80 bronze.

The shotgun responsible for all this success was a unique design, and one that continues in production today in modified form.

Forget the normal concept of pivoting barrels on a hinge pin (Browning style) or stub pins (Beretta), the Soviet gun carried them in a cradle, the entire unit rotating as the gun opens. The receiver is very deep, even compared to a Browning, in part due to a massive recess in the floor into which the barrel lump locates. If ever the term ‘over-engineered’ applied to a shotgun it is to this design. Three separate locking bolts give it the durability of a T-55 tank (and similar aesthetics!).

The guns evolved during the 1950s and 60s, gaining a detachable trigger mechanism along the way. The Skeet models became synonymous with their distinctive choke design, usually referred to as ‘retro chokes’ or sometimes ‘Tula’ after the Russian city in which the guns are made. The design incorporated an over-bored section of about six inches in length, directly behind the muzzle.



IT MAY NOT BE SUBTLE BUT IT'S ANYTHING BUT CRUDE! THE FACTORY NOW ALSO PRODUCES HIGH GRADE VERSIONS (BELOW LEFT) AND IN BRIGHT FINISH (RIGHT).



As Bob Brister noted, it was remarkably similar to having a Cutts Compensator built into the barrel. And by over-boring, I don't mean opening out the bore by 10 thou or so – the retro section of a .729" bore is usually in excess of .790". Its effect was to lengthen the shot string, thus providing the optimum pattern for the close range, acute angles found on the Skeet layout. As Soviet shooters swept the board, Western shooters rushed to copy the new wonder chokes.

So what do we call this gun? A trickle of them did find their way to Western markets. The Soviet industry used the Baikal and Vostok brands on export guns and it seems likely that the same gun was sold under both in different parts of the world. British shooters

and MTs200 – the model that remains in current production.

Unlike the fairly basic Baikal models that are most people's only taste of Russian guns, the MTs series has always been a low volume model, with a large amount of hand working in its construction. Stories abound of how they were scarce and highly prized, given only to shooters who reached national team standard – to get there you first had to shoot a Baikal!

To Western eyes it may appear crude and inelegant, but that is to allow ourselves to be deceived by the superficial. It may be ugly and there may be massive screws in plain view, but that is just aesthetics. Where it matters, these guns are superbly made, with

supplier to the Soviet team. Then came the fall of the Berlin Wall and soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union itself.

Without state assistance and subsidy, the Russian gun industry has had to find its feet in the world market. Central marketing has ended and individual companies are trying to develop export sales. To date it looks as if a low cost platform is the most likely to work. If ever there was proof that the Cold War days are long gone, it is

specialist in military hardware based in Tula. It is currently Russia's only maker of high quality sporting shotguns, producing English style side-by-sides as well as the o/u. Efforts have been made to sell overseas and a few have found their way to Britain in recent years, but it is unlikely that they will find too many takers at a starting price tag in excess of \$3500. Nor, I suspect, will Russia's fast growing taste for sporting clays produce a domestic sales



MASSIVE LOCKING SURFACES GIVE LONG LIFE.



NOT A THING OF BEAUTY PERHAPS, BUT VERY EFFECTIVE.

are most likely to know them as Vostoks, Baikal is more likely in North American markets, although trade restrictions prevented them arriving in any quantity, the majority being private imports.

Model descriptions are equally vague, often caused by errors in transcription from the Cyrillic alphabet. In the West the original gun was known as the MU6 (more correctly MTs6 in Russian), with later versions designated MTs108

excellent trigger pulls. I know of some examples that have been in the hands of British shooters for 30 years and tens of thousands of cartridges and they simply refuse to wear out.

Eventually however, even the Soviet team turned against their own product. The emergence of Perazzi as a major force in international competition turned their heads, and Perazzi would eventually land a propaganda coup of their own by becoming the

in the unlikely alliance of the Izhevsky Mekhanchesky Zavod (current owners of the Baikal brand) and Remington with the recent Spartan range of guns. Two brands that seemingly had as little in common as vegetarian and T-bone steak are now joined in a common marketing effort.

Will this lead to the wider marketing of the MTs guns? The TsKIB SOO factory that makes them is now a subsidiary of a conglomerate called KBP, a

explosion. The newly empowered Russian consumer wants sophisticated Western products, not homespun utility. Some of the high grade hunting guns are, however, very attractive and may find buyers with a taste for the unusual.

Chances are then that you will never see one of these guns in the flesh. But be in no doubt, in the annals of clay target shooting this is one of the greats and a true modern classic. ■