

A Recognition and Identification guide for Yugoslav SKS Rifle, M59/66

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There is large number of M59/66 rifles being offered for sale in the U.S. lately. The primary purpose of this write-up is to facilitate the selection of rifles for collectors.

The excellent survey on M59/66 is given on <http://users.cableaz.com/~mjbvrb/Survey%20Results.htm>. There you can find the relationship of the serial number to the year of manufacture. However, there is a huge number of M59/66 being sold as new, while in fact they are “Arsenal Refurbished” rifles. Given that these rifles have new barrels, I prefer to call them overhauled.

For shooters, the arsenal refurbished M59/66 should shoot just as good as brand new rifle, but for collectors, the refurbished rifle may or may not be as valuable.

So, how to distinguish the new from refurbished rifle? First of all let's divide the presently available rifles to 4 categories,

1. Overhauled and unissued
2. Overhauled and used
3. New (non-overhauled) and unissued
4. Non-overhauled but used

To check the history of each rifle one should first look into the “Log Book” or “Tehnički Karton”, Figure 1., a grey-cover, hardbound booklet accompanying each rifle in the crate.

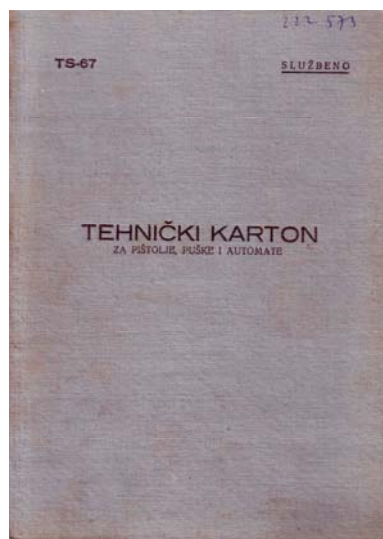


Figure 1. Log Book Cover

The crates used by former Yugoslav Army held 10 rifles, together with the accessories and these books, Figure 2. Unfortunately, upon arrival to US, many log books are thrown away by importers or distributors. Some dealers do not bother to offer them to customers buying the rifle. This is unfortunate as one does not need to know the foreign language to understand the content of the booklet. A lot of data in this book is self-explanatory.

I have found that C7XXXXX series (the last M59/66A1 series ever made), imported by KBI, Inc. have come with log books in English. The translation is excellent. Log book contains no stamps. It appears that this last M59/66 series (and possibly the B7XXXXX series preceding it as well) was the only “commercial” order for M59/66.



Figure 2. The M59/66 in original crate, with accessories and log books. (photo courtesy of Jim’s Gun Shop)

Recognizing the rifle category from the accompanying log book

First, new rifles were only coming from Zavodi Crvena Zastava manufacturing facility in town of Kragujevac in Serbia. If all pages are stamped with stamps bearing “Crvena Zastava” name, then the book is issued by manufacturer and belongs to categories 3 or 4, i.e. it was not overhauled. The two types of Zastava stamps are given on Figures 3 and 4.



Figure 3. Late Crvena Zastava stamp, in Cyrillic alphabet. In translation "Red Banner Enterprise, Kragujevac, Quality Control".



Figure 4. Earlier Crvena Zastava stamp, In Latin alphabet.

There are probably more, some may be in Latin and some in Cyrillic alphabet but the content on the stamp is the same. To date I have identified two locations in which overhaul of M59/66 rifles was performed. Those facilities are named "Tehnički Remontni Zavod", in translation Technical Overhaul Facility, and one is located in town of Čačak in Serbia and another in town of Hadžići in Bosnia. The stamps from these two facilities are given on Figures 5 and 6. The new log book was always issued after the overhaul (but not repair), for the simple reason of barrel being replaced. Obviously, the barrel replacement makes the old book meaningless as test firings and maintenance records are tied to the original barrel. The date on the front page will thus be the date of the overhaul and will not match the rifle's year of manufacture from the web page given above. Frequently, overhaul facility would only replace relevant pages from the log book, so the log book might contain mix of pages stamped by Zastava Arsenal as well as by overhaul facility.



Figure 5. Stamp of the Overhaul Facility Čačak, in Serbia.

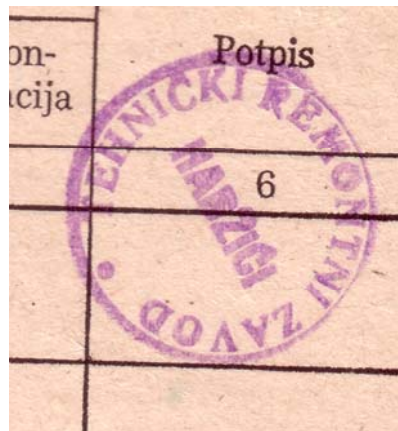


Figure 6. Stamp of the Overhaul Facility Hadžići, in Bosnia.

For example, on the Figure 7, the first page of the log book is displayed. The log book is for the H-series rifle which was manufactured in 1971, but page bears the date from 1989, the date it left the overhaul facility Čačak. This rifle is thus clearly overhauled. The date of manufacture (“Datum izrade”) field is left empty.

Recognizing the rifle category without accompanying log book

In order to classify the rifle which came with no accompanying documentation, some detective work is necessary. Luckily, it does not even involve disassembly.

The primary way of recognizing the refurbished rifle is the look at the stock. The highly accurate method of recognizing refurbished M59/66 is the presence of streaks from sanding on the stock, as well wood ground very close or all the way to the front stock-reinforcing crossbolt (or better said - screw), on both sides, as shown on Figure 8. Another sign is the presence of fine sanding streaks on the rubber

buttplate, Figure 9. These streaks are aligned to the grain of wood as sanding was done with the buttplate attached. The reason for doing so is to keep the edges of the stock and buttplate aligned after the sanding. It appears that this method was used in the manufacture of new rifles, but fine sanding paper was used, as opposite to relatively coarse used on overhauled rifles. The width of the new SKS stock is around 41.5 mm at the front stock reinforcing screw, and about 42.5 mm at the butt as measured across the center of the buttstock trap door.

Measurements on the overhauled rifles indicate the typical stock width of about 38 mm at the front stock screw, definitely less than 40.0 mm. The measurements across the buttstock trap door indicate typical width of about 41 mm. Please use these numbers as a guideline only, as wood expands and shrinks with moisture and oil content. However, I measured these numbers on 5 sanded stocks and they were quite consistent.

Sometimes, if stock needed replacement, a new stock was paired with the overhauled action. Typically in that case, there is a significant difference in the grain between the stock and gas-tube cover, or handguard. Typically handguard will also be much darker, as it is older and thus more soaked with oil or cosmoline. For example, on Figure 10, one can see the example of the new "blonde" stock, typical for M59/66 with serial numbers S and later. Yet it bears the 1XXXXX number from the much older, E-series rifle.

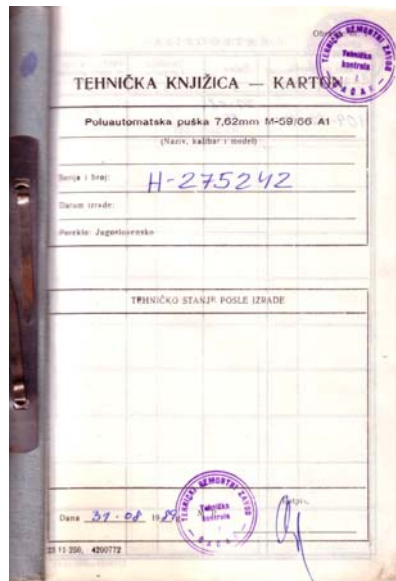


Figure 7. The typical front page of the log book issued for an overhauled rifle. The Date of Manuf. "Datum izrade" field is left empty. Page bears stamps from Overhaul Facility Čačak. H-series files were made in 1971 while the only date on this page is the date of overhaul, in 1989.

Although I have seen no such case, it is plausible that new handguard could be installed on the rifle, with stock being resanded. The grain difference and color will again be different between the stock and handguard. Here, we are talking about significant difference in color and grain. Small differences are present in new rifles in many cases.

Another strong indicator of overhauled rifle is the poor alignment of the individual numbers in the serial number engraving on metal parts. No number restamping was ever seen on M59/66, so the old serial number markings must have been lapped off from all parts (stock included!) carrying them. That was actually easy, as unlike in the case of M48 mauser, no deep stamping was done, and thus no deep markings in the steel were left. The same number was then reapplied. The misaligned digits are shown on Figure 11. Making was done after blueing, before the final assembly.



Figure 8. The excessive sanding of the wood around the front stock reinforcing screw. On overhauled rifles, upper two pictures, the stock is sanded all the way to the screw heads. The lower two pictures are taken on the new stock. Screw is recessed in the case of non-overhauled rifle or overhauled rifle with the new stock.

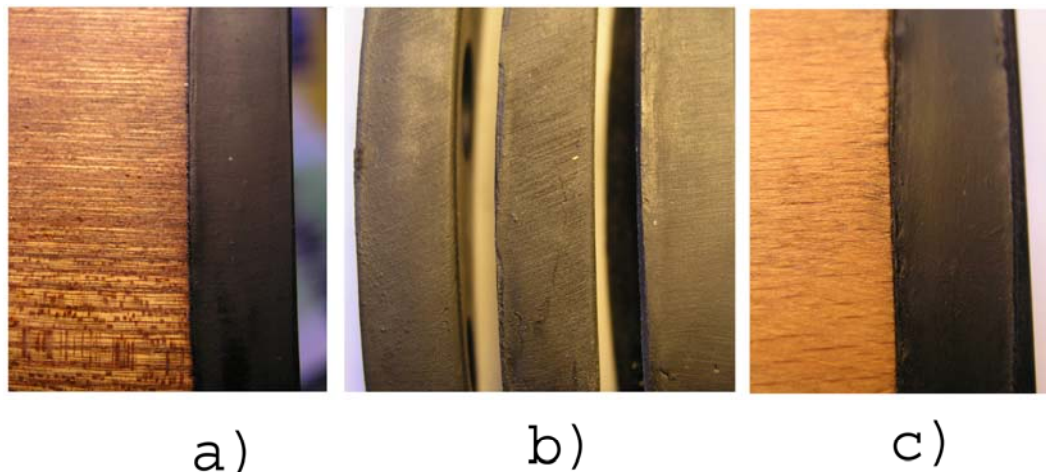


Figure 9. On overhauled rifles, streaks on rubber buttplate are clearly visible, a) and b). Figure c) shows the new stock with smooth rubber surface. (Zoom-in to see better!)



Figure 10. Typical late-model "blonde" stock, but the number indicates E-series rifle. This overhauled rifle received the new stock.

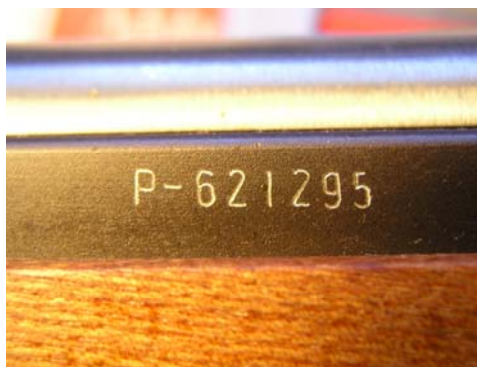


Figure 11. The serial number of the overhauled rifle. Note the vertical misalignment of the individual numbers. Alignment on new rifles coming from Zastava is perfect.

It seems that overhauled rifles typically come with serial numbers earlier than R or S-series. The S-series and later were not used enough to warrant their overhaul, so they will most likely be in non-overhauled category, whether new or used.

About used M59/66 rifles

It is relatively easy to recognize un-issued M59/66 whether new or rebuilt. Cosmoline, 99% blueing, no dings on metal parts, bright and shiny bore, etc... but what about used ones.

No later than early 80's or probably even earlier, the M59/66 were replaced in all infantry units with M70 automatic rifles and M59/66 were relegated to non-infantry troops - artillery, Navy (except Marines) and Air Force as well as to long-term war-reserve storage or for the territorial defense units. A conscript serving 12-month military service in these units would shoot no more than 100 rounds, typically about 50. With the breakup of Yugoslavia and the onset of war, some M59/66 ended-up on Croatian and Bosnian sides, but overwhelming majority ended up on Serbian side.

Serbian side really had no use for them as they had enough of M70 rifles (Yugoslav version of AK-47), to fight the war. The situation on the Croatian and Bosnian side was exactly opposite. Starved for any weapons, those rifles were pressed into service, immediately at the outbreak of the war. The handling marks and carvings, as well as pretty bad shape of these rifles were simple indication that they were used in the battle. Barrel condition should also reflect this. In one stock I found heavy powder deposits. The exceptions however always exist. I have found one late U-series rifle with carving indicating the Croatian name. (Stock carving or marking of rifle in any way was strictly prohibited in the Yugoslav Army - while it existed). Rifle had few dings and bent front

sight guard as well as bent rear sight leaf. After fixing the bent metal, sanding the stock (carving and dents were shallow), and some rebluing I had a rifle which can pass for very-good to excellent. As an interesting side-note, the use of cleaning rod for cleaning was forbidden in Yugoslav Army. The brush in the cleaning kit of M59/66 is so soft that it is only useful for lubricating the barrel. Cleaning was done exclusively with the cleaning rope accompanying every M59/66. Reason, of course, was to avoid the damage to the muzzle crown. For that reason, used rifles can still have very sharp rifling, provided they've seen no fighting.

The significant number of rifles were imported in the used condition but with no battle-marks. They show just handling marks, and bores are in very good condition. These rifles were most likely in the Yugoslav Army units at the time of breakup of Yugoslavia. They ended in Serbia as Yugoslavia disintegrated, and were placed in storage until sold.

Proofs

Unlike rifles from other countries, rifles made in former Yugoslavia are devoid of colorful and interesting proofs. The most probable reason is the fact that, unlike Germany, U.S., or USSR, Yugoslavia had only one production facility. So, the origin of each rifle was certain. The M59/66 especially comes with very few proofs. Occasionally, there would be "1.TRZ" proof stamped onto the stock. That stands for "Prvi Technicki Remontni Zavod", or "First Technical Overhaul Facility". In the earlier days, the names of various defense-related production facilities were referred to by the number. (Zastava was known as "Preduzeće 44" or "Enterprise 44"). The location of First TRZ is unknown at this time. Another proof sometimes found on overhauled rifles (to date I have not seen one on non-overhauled rifles) is "BK" or "VK" in the square or circle. The "B" is Cyrillic letter "V", while letter "K" is the same in Latin and Cyrillic alphabet, so these two proofs have the same meaning. They probably translate to "Vojna Kontrola" or "Military Control". Occasionally in the neck area of the stock, behind trigger guard, there would be proof consisting of the sole number "2". What does it stand for is uncertain at this time.