

[The following is from a report I wrote recently for my German conversation class. I translated into English for you]

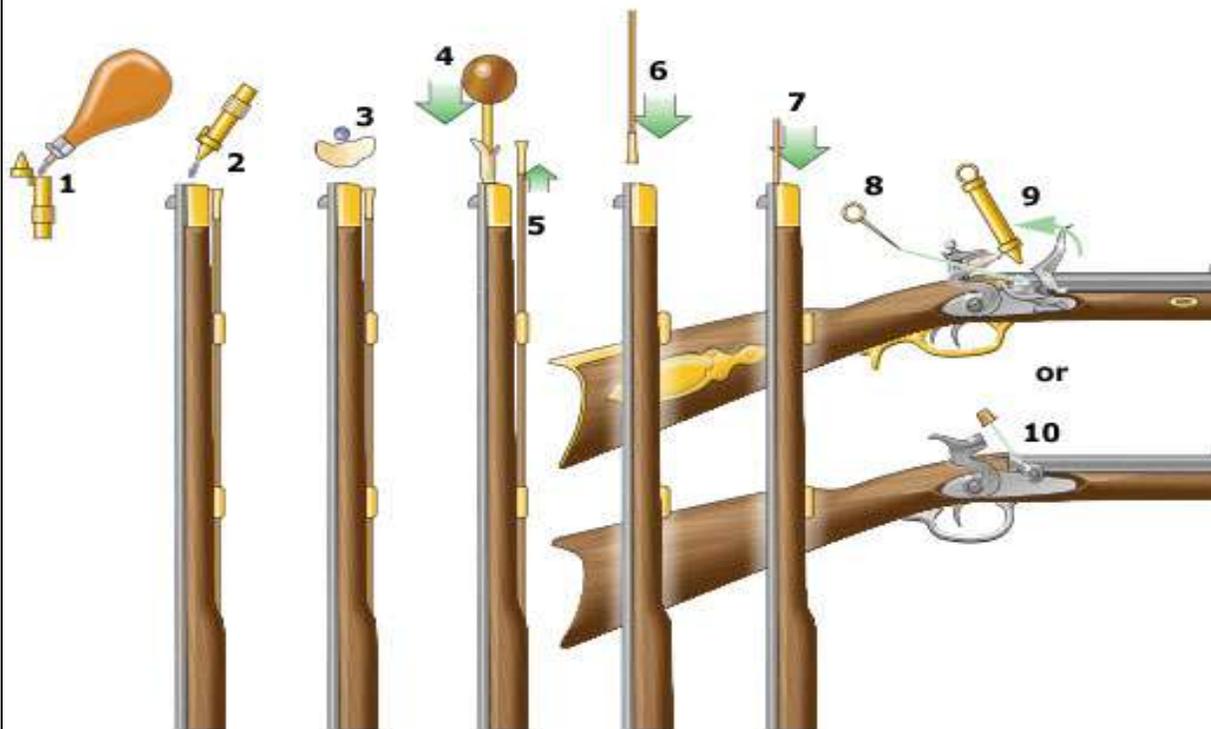
## The Dreyse Zündnadelgewehr (The Dreyse Needle-Gun)

By Walt Busch, PDC



Today, I am reporting about an important development in the art of weapons manufacturing. I am talking about the Dreyse needle gun. It was not so much a revolutionary development,

but an evolutionary one. But for a short time, this rifle was one of the most important developments in German military history.



As the 18<sup>th</sup> century changed into the 19<sup>th</sup>, most of the long guns were muskets, that had to be loaded through the muzzle of the gun. The shooter had to load powder and then a musket ball, then put a firing cap opposite the trigger. When the hammer is cocked and the trigger is pressed, the gun would fire. At best, a

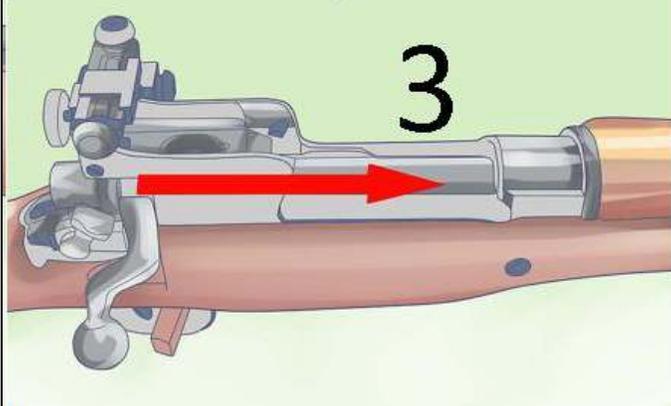
shooter could shoot three bullets per minute. In 1809 Swiss-born Jean Samuel Pauly, born as Johannes Samuel Pauli (1766 Bern – 1821), developed the first completely enclosed bullet cartridge that used a needle to discharge the primer. The weapon was also one of the first weapons that was loaded through the breech instead of the muzzle. Napoleon himself said that the Pauly-musket was before its time. It was never mass produced and I will not ramble on further about it.

Pauly had an employee...Johan (because every German in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was named Johan something) Nikolaus Dreyse. Nikolaus (because the Germans use the second name of a person otherwise you would hear on the street, "Hello Johann," "How are you doing Johann?" "Good, and how is your brother Johann and your sister Johanna?" and so on), was born in 1787 in Soemmerda, in the Archbishopic of Mainz, Germany.



In 1836, Nikolaus produced his first mass produced needle gun. But the gun still had to be loaded through the muzzle. In 1841, he produced a model that used the bolt action loading-locking principle. A bullet is loaded through an opening behind the barrel. The Dreyse bullet consisted of a lead bullet with a primer cap immediately behind it. A paper casing enclosed the primer and powder inside it. When the shooter pulled a trigger, a needle is pushed through the paper and through the powder and when it made contact with the primer, the bullet shot out of the muzzle.

The British army tested the 1841 model and found that the weapon could shoot 6 bullets per minute. It was even fairly accurate up to 1100 meters (3300 feet). But the British thought that it was not built strongly enough to withstand the demands of battle. The Prussian army thought otherwise. It was used during the German Revolution from 1848 to 1849 in fighting and proved its battle survivability during the Dresden May Uprisings. Many German states then bought the new weapon and that is the reason that many old muskets (like the Dresden or Saxon muskets) came from Germany to America in our civil war.



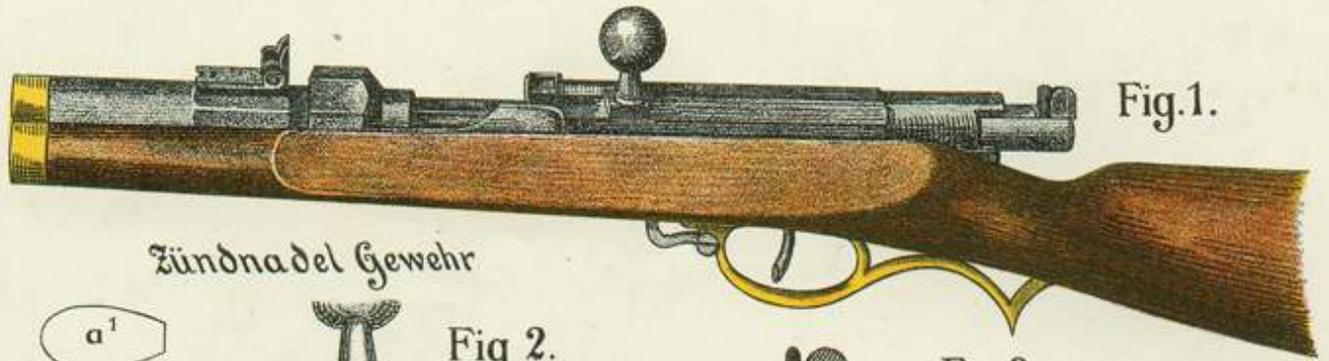


Fig. 1.

Zündnadel Gewehr

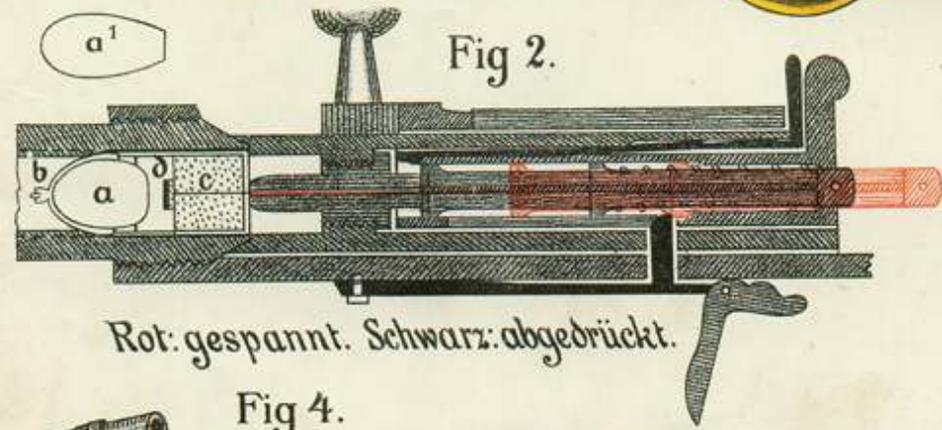


Fig 2.

Rot: gespannt. Schwarz: abgedrückt.

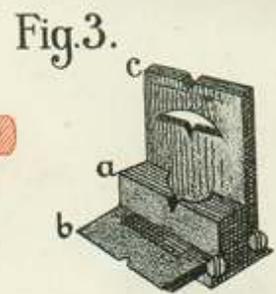


Fig. 3.

Visiereinrichtung.



Fig 4.

Bajonett.



Dresden Uprising – Prussian and Saxon Troops in the Dresden New Market. And silver commemoration medallion for the Saxon soldiers.

During the time of the wars during the 1860s known as the Bismarck wars (instigated with the help of Prince Otto von Bismarck, the German Prime Minister in an effort to build up the German nation). the opponents of German were still using muskets that fired 2 or 3 rounds per minute while the Prussians could fire 6 rounds per minute. This helped tilt the scales to Prussian winning in 1864 against Denmark and in 1866 against Austria. Bismarck rocked!

In 1870, the German states battled the French. The French army had just developed a new type of weapon, the Chassepot. This was a little better than the needle gun in operation, and a little sturdier. Nevertheless, Dreyse's invention was still good enough and Germany finally was victorious.



**2<sup>nd</sup> Schleswig War or the German – Danish War of Feb to Oct 1864**



*Prussian-Austrian War or the Seven Week War of 1866*

The needle gun was not revolutionary because its development came too late in the development of guns. Samuel Colt had already developed a repeating pistol capable of rapid fire. Metal bullet cartridges were in production by 1861 for Smith & Wesson and used in their Model 2 revolver. By 1860, Benjamin Tyler Henry had produced his repeating rifle. The time for the needle gun was passing by. But it was good enough for Germany to be victorious in the Bismarck Wars and the Franco-Prussian War and had a role in uniting the German Nation in 1871 after their victory over the French.

1870-71 Franco-Prussian War – The Battle at Sedan



Crowning the Kaiser in the Palace of Versailles near Paris in 1871 – The Birth of the German Nation

In 1864, Johann Nikolaus Dreyse was ennobled (similar to being knighted) and became Johann Nikolaus von Dreyse. He died in Soemmerda in 1867.

Why is this important to Civil War history? It isn't really. The American military observers had seen the needle gun being used in the 1840s and 50s and wanted to purchase some, but they were considered a military secret by the Germans. They refused to let copies come into America. That doesn't mean that some might not have made it here, but I haven't found a reference stating that such was the case.

The gun, however, did allow for a lot of rifled percussion muskets to be imported and although not necessarily the most modern weapon, it was a style of weapon many farmers turned soldiers would have been use to using. These imports made a difference in the early days of the war as American military production was not operating at full steam. So, the Dreyse needle gun influenced not only the German wars of unification, but also to a small extent, the American Civil War.

Munitions- u. Waffenfabrik, Akt. Gesellschaft, vorm. v. Dreyse.

Verlag E. Wirths, Sömmmerda.

Ulrich Dreyse, Sömmmerda, 1861.



N. v. Dreyse  
Erfinder des Zündnadel-Gehehrs

GRUSS  
aus Sömmmerda.

Liebe Mutter!

Ich habe die Krieg mit, ich hab' auch schon sehr viel erfahren  
sich. Ich bin noch nicht zufrieden mit dem was ich gemacht  
habe. Ich bin bei dir und ich will dir. Ich bin  
Günther Sömmmerda

### A Postcard issued in Honor of von Dreyse

