

A BENCH REFERENCE



The Refinishing *of a 1988 Izhmash SVD*

*Restoring the laminate stock & handguard set
to original combloc character — without overdoing it*

RIFLE

Izhmash SVD Dragunov

YEAR OF MANUFACTURE

1988

FINISH SYSTEM

Amber Shellac & Hand-Rubbed Wax

EMBACH ARMORY

Fairview, Texas · Prepared for the bench

On the Original Hand of the Russian Armorer

The finish on a 1988 Izhmash SVD is not a coating. It is a presence — thin, warm, hand-laid, and built to wear honestly with the rifle it belongs to. Restoring it asks for restraint, not effort.

Most modern refinishes go wrong in the same way: they treat the laminate as if it were furniture. They reach for polyurethane, or Tru-Oil, or a heavy lacquer, and they build the finish until it sits on the wood like a varnished shell. The original Russian finish never did this. It was a tinted shellac — sometimes a near-relation to it — applied thin enough that the laminate layers still read clearly through the surface, and the tool marks and milling shadows remained visible. There was a softness to it. A sheen, not a shine.

This guide is written for the patient hand. Every step has been chosen to preserve what is honest in the wood and to add no more than is needed. Read it through once before you begin. Keep it at the bench while you work.



*The factory finish was never thick.
If you cannot see the laminate lines
clearly through your shellac,
you have already put on too much.*



Materials & Tools

Everything below is on hand from your Amazon order. The smaller items — tape, rags, brush, gloves — you have in the shop already. Lay everything out on the bench before you begin. The work moves better when you do not interrupt it to fetch.

ORDERED — THE FINISH SYSTEM

- Zinsser Bullseye Amber Shellac — 1 quart, the core finish
- Klean-Strip Denatured Alcohol — 1 quart, for stripping & thinning
- Liberon Grade 0000 Steel Wool — oil-free, for cutting between coats
- 3M Sanding Sheets, 220 / 320 / 400 grit — light hand work only
- Gerson Tack Cloths — wax- and silicone-free
- Briwax Original, Clear, 16 oz — the final character coat

FROM THE SHOP

- Blue painter's tape — for buttplate screws, swivel cup, hardware edges
- Lint-free cotton rags — old white t-shirts, cut into hand-sized pieces
- Nitrile gloves
- Small flat artist brush, ½" — for inletting & handguard vents
- A clean, dust-free bench — warm room, low humidity if possible

A NOTE ON TEMPERATURE

Shellac flows best between 65°F and 80°F at moderate humidity. If your shop is cold, the finish will go on streaky and stay tacky longer than it should. Warm the room first.

Assessment

Stand the set under a strong, raking light and look at it before you touch it with anything. *Half of the wisdom in restoration is knowing when to do less than you came to do.*

Wipe the stock and handguard down with a clean cloth, dry. Then examine three things:

ORIGINAL FINISH — HOW MUCH REMAINS

If the factory shellac is largely intact and only dirty or scuffed, you do not need to strip. A wipe-down with denatured alcohol on a soft cloth will reactivate the original finish, lift the grime, and let you apply a single fresh thin coat over the top. This preserves more of the 1988 character than a full strip ever will.

CARTOUCHES, STAMPS, AND STENCILS

Locate every factory marking before you begin. Note them on a piece of paper if you must. These are the soul of the rifle, and the most common casualty of a careless refinish. Whatever you do, your abrasive must never cross them.

DAMAGE, DINGS, AND LAMINATE SEPARATION

Honest dings are part of the rifle's history and should stay. Open laminate seams or loose plies are a different matter and want a drop of thin hide glue, clamped overnight, before any finish goes on.

IF IN DOUBT — DO LESS

A revive-and-recoat takes an afternoon and preserves originality. A full strip-and-refinish takes a week and never quite gets the patina back. Choose the lighter path when the set will allow it.

Stripping the Old Finish

The original Russian finish is shellac-based, and it dissolves in denatured alcohol. This is fortunate. It means you do not need chemical strippers, which are aggressive, unfriendly to cartouches, and far too eager to lift wood fibers along with the finish.

I MASK THE HARDWARE

Cover the buttplate screw holes, sling swivel cup, and the steel parts of the handguard retainer with blue painter's tape. Press the edges down with a fingernail. Anywhere metal meets wood is a place that wants to keep its oil and not take on shellac.

2 SOAK A RAG — DO NOT FLOOD

Fold a cotton rag into a pad about the size of your palm. Saturate it with denatured alcohol — wet, not dripping. Work in sections of four or five square inches at a time. Wipe in the direction of the laminate layers, not across them.

3 LET THE FINISH LIFT, THEN TAKE IT OFF

Wait fifteen to twenty seconds. The shellac softens and turns slightly milky. Wipe it away with a clean part of the rag. Refold the rag often — you are removing finish, not redistributing it. Replace the rag entirely when it can no longer take more without smearing.

4 STUBBORN SPOTS — STEEL WOOL, LIGHTLY

Where the old finish refuses to come off cleanly, take a pinch of 0000 steel wool, dampen it with alcohol, and work the area with the grain. Light pressure. The steel wool is there to persuade, not to scour. Always lift before crossing a cartouche.

5 FINAL WIPE

When the wood reads uniform and matte, do one last clean wipe with fresh alcohol on a fresh rag. Set the pieces aside on clean newspaper or kraft paper, and let them air for at least an hour. The wood needs to give up the alcohol completely before anything else touches it.

Light Sanding

Most of the harm done to original SVD furniture happens at this step. The rule here is: as little as possible, and never with a machine.

You are not refinishing a piece of furniture. You are not building a smooth, characterless surface. You are preparing a laminate that already has all the contour and texture it ought to have, and your only task is to knock back the raised grain that the alcohol has lifted.

320 GRIT, BY HAND, IN THE DIRECTION OF THE LAYERS

Fold a quarter sheet of 320 grit into thirds. Run it along the flats of the stock with gentle pressure — the weight of your hand is enough. Three or four passes per area. You should hear and feel the paper smoothing, not cutting. If you see fresh light-colored wood appearing, you are pressing too hard. Stop.

400 GRIT ONLY WHERE NEEDED

Step up to 400 grit only on areas that will see the most contact: the cheek piece, the pistol grip area, the front of the handguard. Two passes. The point is to take the bite out of the surface, not to polish it.

VENT SLOTS AND INLETTING — DO NOT SAND

The ventilation slots in the handguard and the metal-to-wood inletting throughout the set should be left alone. Hand-sanding here only rounds the crisp factory edges. If finish residue remains in these areas, a Q-tip dampened in alcohol takes care of it.

NEVER —

Power sander, sanding block on contoured surfaces, sandpaper coarser than 320, or any abrasive crossing a cartouche. Once an Izhmash stamp is softened, no finish in the world will bring it back.

When you are finished, wipe the whole set down with a tack cloth. Press lightly — the tack cloth is sticky enough to lift fine dust without rubbing. Do not skip this. A single grain of dust under the first shellac coat will be visible from across the room.

The Shellac Coats

Two to three thin coats. No more. This is the heart of the refinish, and the place where most projects either succeed or take on a refinished-rifle look that no amount of patina will ever shake.

THIN THE SHELLAC

Zinsser Bullseye comes in a 3-pound cut, which is heavier than you want. Pour an inch or so into a clean glass jar and add denatured alcohol — one part alcohol to two parts shellac — to bring it closer to a 2-pound cut. Stir slowly with a clean stick. Do not shake; bubbles in shellac become bubbles in the finish.

1 FIRST COAT — BRUSH, FAST AND THIN

Load a small brush lightly — the bristles should be wet but not dripping. Work in long, single strokes along the length of the stock. Do not go back over a stroke once you have laid it down; shellac sets quickly, and a second pass will tear the surface. Finish each section before you move on. The first coat will look uneven, even patchy. This is correct. Let it dry forty-five minutes.

2 CUT BACK WITH STEEL WOOL

When the first coat is dry to the touch and not at all tacky, take a small pinch of 0000 steel wool and stroke it lightly along the grain. You are knocking down dust nibs and the rough texture of the first coat, not removing finish. The surface will go from glossy and uneven to soft and uniform. Wipe clean with a fresh tack cloth.

3 SECOND COAT — THE SAME, BUT THINNER STILL

Same technique, even less shellac on the brush. The second coat should flow out smoothly and look almost finished. Let it dry an hour. Cut back again with 0000 steel wool.

4

THIRD COAT — PADDED, NOT BRUSHED

Take a small folded cotton pad, dampen it lightly with thinned shellac, and apply the final coat in small overlapping circles — this is the French polish stroke, scaled down. The pad leaves a softer, more hand-laid finish than a brush ever can. Work quickly, never lift the pad once it touches down within a stroke, and never go back over a section that has begun to set. Stop when the surface looks even.

INSPECTION

Hold the stock under raking light. You should be able to read the laminate layers and the faint shadow of every tool mark clearly through the finish. The surface should have a soft sheen, not a wet shine. If it looks glassy and uniform, you have put on too much shellac. Cut it back hard with 0000 steel wool until the laminate reads again through the surface.

Let the final coat cure for at least twenty-four hours before the wax goes on. Forty-eight is better.

The Wax — The Soul of the Finish

I *f the shellac is the body of the finish, the wax is the soul. This is what separates an honest combloc service rifle from one that looks like it was refinished last weekend.*

Briwax Original Clear is a blend of beeswax and carnauba in a solvent base. It goes on as a paste, hazes as it flashes off, and buffs to a soft satin. One coat is enough. Two will start to look polished, which is the wrong direction.

I APPLY WITH A FOLDED CLOTH

Fold a clean cotton rag into a thick pad. Take up a thin film of wax on the pad — less than you think you need — and work it onto the wood in small circles, then long strokes along the grain. Cover the entire set, working in sections so nothing dries before you can come back to it.

2 LET IT HAZE, THREE TO FIVE MINUTES

The solvent will flash off and the surface will turn dull and slightly cloudy. This is the wax setting up. Do not buff it while it is still wet, and do not let it sit for half an hour either.

3 BUFF — WITH THE GRAIN, GENTLE

Take a clean part of the cotton rag and buff in long strokes along the grain. You will feel the surface change under your hand — from slightly tacky to dry and smooth, with that soft Russian-service sheen. Stop the moment it looks right. Over-buffing pushes the finish toward gloss, which you do not want.

Let the waxed set rest for another twenty-four hours before reassembly. The wax continues to harden over the first week. Resist the urge to handle the rifle more than necessary during this period.



*A satin sheen.
Laminate lines visible.
Tool marks honest.
Cartouches sharp.
This is the goal.*



Notes from the Bench

WHAT TO AVOID — ALWAYS

- **Tru-Oil and similar gunstock oils.** They build up, gloss too much, and will never look right on Russian laminate.
- **Polyurethane in any form.** The plastic-coated look is the single most common error on refinished SVDs.
- **Power tools.** No orbital, no belt, no buffer. Every step is by hand.
- **Stains.** The laminate has its own color. Tint the shellac if you must adjust, but do not stain the wood directly.

IF THE FINISH GOES WRONG

One of the kindest qualities of shellac is that it is endlessly reversible. If the color is off, the sheen too glossy, or the surface uneven, denatured alcohol on a clean rag will take the entire finish back to bare wood in an afternoon. You may strip and refinish a stock five times in a week without harming it — the laminate does not care. Make this knowledge a comfort, not a license. The fewer times you have to do it, the better the result.

IF THE LAMINATE IS TOO PALE

If your finished set reads too yellow rather than the warm orange-amber of an honest Izhmash, a small bottle of TransTint Reddish Brown dye, two or three drops into four ounces of thinned shellac, will push the color where it wants to go. Test on the inside of the buttstock first, where the cheek piece hides it.

ON PATINA

The finish you have just laid down is new. It will look new for a year, and then it will begin to do what every honest combloc rifle finish does: darken slightly in the high-contact areas, lighten in the protected corners, take on the faint sheen of human use. Do not rush this. The rifle was built in 1988. It has time.



*A rifle finished by hand
answers to the hand that finished it.
Take your time. The work shows.*



*Prepared for the bench at Embach Armory
Fairview, Texas*