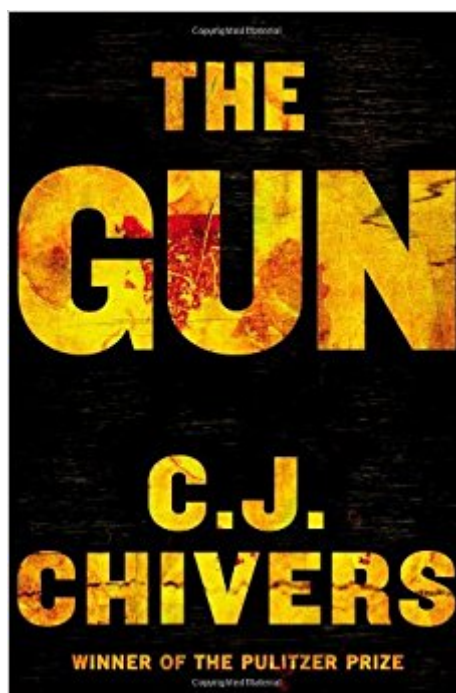


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The Gun



Synopsis

In a tour de force, prize-winning New York Times reporter C.J. Chivers traces the invention of the assault rifle, following the miniaturization of rapid-fire arms from the American Civil War, through WWI, Vietnam, to present day Afghanistan when Kalashnikovs and their knock-offs number as many as 100 million, one for every seventy persons on earth. At a secret arms-design contest in Stalin's Soviet Union, army technicians submitted a stubby rifle with a curved magazine. Dubbed the AK-47, it was selected as the Eastern Bloc's standard arm. Scoffed at in the Pentagon as crude and unimpressive, it was in fact a breakthrough—a compact automatic that could be mastered by almost anyone, last decades in the field, and would rarely jam.

Manufactured by tens of millions in planned economies, it became first an instrument of repression and then the most lethal weapon of the Cold War. Soon it was in the hands of terrorists. In a searing examination of modern conflict and official folly, C. J. Chivers mixes meticulous historical research, investigative reporting, and battlefield reportage to illuminate the origins of the world's most abundant firearm and the consequences of its spread. The result, a tour de force of history and storytelling, sweeps through the miniaturization and distribution of automatic firepower, and puts an iconic object in fuller context than ever before. The Gun dismantles myths as it moves from the naive optimism of the Industrial Revolution through the treacherous milieu of the Soviet Union to the inside records of the Taliban. Chivers tells of the 19th-century inventor in Indianapolis who designs a Civil War killing machine, insisting that more-efficient slaughter will save lives. A German attaché who observes British machine guns killing Islamic warriors along the Nile advises his government to amass the weapons that would later flatten British ranks in World War I. In communist Hungary, a locksmith acquires an AK-47 to help wrest his country from the Kremlin's yoke, beginning a journey to the gallows. The Pentagon suppresses the results of firing tests on severed human heads that might have prevented faulty rifles from being rushed to G.I.s in Vietnam. In Africa, a millennial madman arms abducted children and turns them on their neighbors, setting his country ablaze. Neither pro-gun nor anti-gun, The Gun builds to a terrifying sequence, in which a young man who confronts a trio of assassins is shattered by 23 bullets at close range. The man survives to ask questions that Chivers examines with rigor and flair. Throughout, The Gun animates unforgettable characters—inventors, salesmen, heroes, megalomaniacs, racists, dictators, gunrunners, terrorists, child soldiers, government careerists, and fools. Drawing from years of research, interviews, and from declassified records revealed for the first time, he presents a richly human account of an evolution in the very experience of war. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

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Customer Reviews

The AK-47 assault rifle is the defining weapon of the post-WWII era, thanks to its reliability, simplicity, and effectiveness. Over a hundred million units have been manufactured in enough variants-including imitations-to provide one for every 70 people in the world. It is praised in equal measure by soldiers, insurgents, hunters, and police. In his first book Chivers, a Marine Corps vet and senior writer at the New York Times who has reported extensively from Afghanistan and Pakistan, combines recently declassified documents with extensive personal accounts of AK-47 users from around the world. Without denying the familiar contributions of Mikhail Kalashnikov, Chivers describes the AK-47 as a product of the Soviet system. The quest for an individual weapon with the firepower of a light machine gun and the portability of a machine pistol dated from the First World War, but Stalin gave it top priority with the beginning of the Cold War. Chivers vividly depicts the false starts and the eventual success, as when the gun aided in suppressing the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, and its subsequent global distribution and evolution into "everyman's gun." An extensive comparison with the US M-16 enhances this outstanding history of an exceptional instrument of war. (c) Copyright PWxyz, LLC. All rights reserved.

This superior history of the AK family of assault rifles begins with the invention of the machine gun by Hiram Maxim and traces automatic weapons through WWII. In 1947, Russian army officer Mikhail Kalashnikov adapted a German design of automatic infantry rifle to become the AK (for Avtomat Kalashnikov). It first attracted world attention in Vietnam by proving superior to the

American M-16. Since then it has developed several relatives and been produced in many other countries, the total running into the hundreds of millions. It has armed regular armies, irregular armies, police forces, terrorists, common criminals, and ordinary householders in the majority of the world's countries, creating a proliferation problem that has to date killed far more people than the nuclear kind. The author is a former U.S. Marine officer and prizewinning journalist who has written incisively and researched exhaustively. It lends force to his arguments that some of his informants have been assassinated with assault rifles for talking. --Roland Green

It may seem odd to think that an entire book devoted to a single firearm could have interest beyond the hardcore weapons buff. And although devotees of weapons will indeed find this interesting, it deserves a broader audience. Particularly in a post Cold War world, it turns out that the AK-47 is more influential than the nuclear weapon, despite its seemingly lower scale of lethality. This book explores both the origin and the geopolitical implications surrounding what is undisputedly the most widely distributed automatic weapon on the planet. It explains why it was successful from a mechanical standpoint, how it came to be so ubiquitous, and the consequences of its widespread dissemination. There's also a fairly lengthy (and heartbreaking) section devoted to the early history of the M-16, America's intended answer to the AK. It's not exactly uplifting, but it is a very realistic and thoughtful examination of how something as simple as a gun has changed the course of whole societies. Usually not for the better, but that's real life...and death.

This manages to be a history of automatic weapons in general, the AK-47, and also the M-16. It is three books in one. All are quite good. The history of early machine guns and the Gatling Gun are especially well done, with many colorful characters. The main part of the book concerns Kalashnikov, who turns out to be a more complex person than the usual "Hero of the Proletariat" story put out by Pravda. The story of the M-16 is depressing, especially if you are an American. I look at the F-35, and all I see is an M-16 with wings. Many of our pilots are going to be killed by the F-35. I recommend this book.

Overall, I enjoyed this book very much. The author's style is very readable, and he manages to tell a complex story in a short span. Some of the minor details are incorrect, such as those regarding restrictions on Germany's arms production, but I always cross-reference other sources when reading a book like this, and they are admittedly minor errors. The early chapters regarding the Gatling and Maxim guns did become tedious after awhile, but the writing does pick up afterward. My

final complaint is that the author states in the beginning that he will not make an attempt to moralize for or against the weapons mentioned in the book, yet at times he does exactly that, albeit in an offhand way. Still, it was a pleasant read, and fairly informative while simultaneously being entertaining. I enjoyed the way in which the author provided glimpses into the personalities and feelings of many of the individuals presented. I would recommend this book to anyone who would like a crash course introduction to the history of automatic weapons in war.

Sudan/2002 & 2007-08; Uganda/2008 & 2011; Afghanistan/2003; Iraq/2005; Bosnia/1996-98 The book provides a unique insight to one of the world's most famous (and perhaps the most reliable) weapon made to date. What was particularly troublesome was the background of the early days of the introduction of the M-16 which was supposed to be the answer to the AK-47's use in Vietnam. The bottom line is that the USG sought to introduce a weapons which was far inferior to the AK-47..in part, due to the malfunction of the weapon because of design and manufacturing deficiencies. Military history of years 1965 through late 1967 in Vietnam tell of horrific stories of Marines and Soldiers found dead with their weapons broken down in an effort to clear a jam. The dead as a direct result of the in-efficiencies of product development and testing are not well documented...but, only in the visual context of those who say their buddies dead...with the weapon close-by. Or, in the course of the close quarters battle with NVA or VC, the M-16 was used a club rather than a weapon. Frankly, our government at that time failed us..in an effort to field a weapon to compete with the AK-47, so many decisive faults occurred with the Army procurement system..and as a direct result, many of our Soldiers and Marines died needlessly. Even after almost 50 years, we use the M4 which is a modified version of the original M-16 weapon with the basic design unchanged. As this is written (02 Feb 2011), according to the Army Times, the Army will be testing new weapons to replace the M4 and M-16. (Note: Most of the Reserves/Guard called to active duty in Iraq and Afghanistan were deployed with the M-16A2..and not the modified M4). Having spend alot of time in both Sudan and Uganda..the AK is the weapon of absolute choice. Virtually everyone carries an AK-47; and yet, in Sudan with the SPLA or in Uganda with the UPDF..I have never seen (emphasis added) a cleaning kit, nor seen anyone cleaning a weapon. And lastly, while in Afghanistan in 2003..and on the road in those Toyota HyLux trucks bumping around Paktia, Khost and Ghazni Provinces, I decided to field a short stock (hand grip only) AK-47 while in the vehicle. Easy to access, plenty of take down power, very easy to clean (yep, I cleaned it every night..about 30 or less seconds to break down)..and I knew absolutely it would not fail. (Note: I fired full auto several times to test the weapon prior to implementation). Checking the barrel stamp after procuring

the weapon courtesy of the OGA compound nearby...the date stamp indicated my AK-47 was manufactured in the year 1969. Enough said...Emphasis on the new weapon to replace the M4 and M-16A2 should exclude political emphasis..or other which detracts from the objective to provide our military the absolute best weapon..as we now move into the 10th year in Afghanistan.Chivers provides in-depth insight to some of the comments above as his experience in the Marines and an award winning journalist reinforces the historical context of the AK-47 and other infantry weapons. Many like Chivers remain active in the field in Afghanistan and earlier in Iraq providing a proof source to the comments supported directly from those "trigger pullers" who walk the walk..everyday in arms way.Randy Hampton

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