

Ak-47:the true weapon of mass destruction



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AK-47: The True Weapon of Mass Destruction How does one counter a gun that makes an average civilian as deadly as a professional soldier? This unanswered question has been puzzling superpowers for years. The AK-47 is the most readily available and easily fired gun in the world.

It is quite indestructible and cheap to produce. No other gun comes close to it in its simplicity, which is what makes the gun world renowned. But the AK wasn't always in the spotlight. For decades, the world's leading powers failed to see the destructive forces of the AK-47, and even stimulated the small arms trade to the point of no return.

The AK-47 now kills 250, 000 people a year and there are more or less 100 million of these guns spread out across the entire world (Al Jazeera English). As one of the catalysts in world conflicts, the AK-47 has affected the world by arming rebel groups and average civilians with an unprecedented power that they would not otherwise have, causing millions of casualties, and revolutionizing governments. In addition, the AK-47 affects the Middle East by empowering terrorist groups, Africa by shattering already unsteady tribal life, and Latin America by building the largest drug organization in the world. Before the spread and effects of the weapon can be discussed, a brief history of the AK must be known in order to understand its later influence. Injured in a Soviet tank while fighting the Germans in World War II, Mikhail Kalashnikov was sent to a Soviet hospital. He had seen the success the Germans had with their Blitzkrieg warfare firsthand, and Kalashnikov devoted his life to building a firearm that would defend the Motherland from the Germans.

Kalashnikov ingeniously visualized a firearm that was simpler than the rest of the guns that were trying to be complex and high-tech. The AK was the complete opposite of these guns, and in 1947, the gun called Avtomat Kalashnikova 1947 was complete, but the war was over. Nonetheless, the soviets approved of the firearm and began producing them in small scales (Kahaner 23-25). Although the AK-47 had been used in little skirmishes before in Russia, its first true test would come in Vietnam.

The soviets gave away AK's to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam to fight the US with their supposedly superior M-16's. These M-16's that the US government was extremely proud of jammed easily in the wet jungle conditions of Vietnam, and US soldiers would pick up the reliable AK's from dead Vietnamese rebels until the army banned the practice, partly since it would shame their own gun. The US army did not make progress in Vietnam, and in March 1973 US troops were pulled out of Vietnam (Kahaner 53). The communist AK-47 had trumped the democratic M-16. Every rebel group wanted this prized gun, and the US still didn't recognize the power of the AK, making its spread possible. The Cold war was in full swing in the seventies, captivating the world.

The United States and the Soviet Union wanted to topple each other, but not directly. After seeing the devastating effects of the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, both nations feared a nuclear war. Their solution was to gain the support of subordinate countries with their capitalist and socialist ideas, and have those nations do the fighting for the two superpowers. Afghanistan seems to be a key nation for the US and the

Soviets as they bribe the country with irrigation systems, roads, and airfields. In December 1979, the Soviet Union invades Afghanistan.

Their tactics using the AK's were so quick and deadly that the Soviets literally obliterated villages, killing everyone and forcing the rebels to go into hiding. The Mujahideen, a rebel group supported by Osama bin Laden which translates to "strugglers" requests US assistance. The United States relents, as they were then working with bin Laden, and the CIA arm the rebels with Enfield rifles. The problem is that once again, the Soviets' AK's are far superior to the US's rifles. After constant pleadings from the Mujahideen, Howard Hart, the leader of the CIA decides to secretly arm the rebels with hundreds of thousands of AK-47's.

The CIA failed to see a problem arising from all of these AK's being placed in an unstable nation. Their main concern was that the AK's didn't get traced back to them. This is now widely regarded as the most important factor in the spread of the AK-47. The CIA paid China and Poland to funnel these weapons, which apparently couldn't possibly be traced back to the CIA, to the Mujahideen through Pakistan.

Soon millions of AK's were coming to Afghanistan. Pandora's Box had been opened (Kahaner 58-63). With these AK's, the rebels use surprise hit and run tactics, unleashing sprays of bullets on the Soviets. The Soviets could no longer fend for themselves and left Afghanistan in February 1989 without their weapons (Kahaner 67). In addition, with the arms pipeline from Pakistan still in full swing, an influx of AK-47's filled the Middle East. AK's were

extremely easy to come by, and were even sold by the hour in Peshawar, Pakistan, for quick robberies or a murder.

Aftab Sheikh, talking about AK-47's, says that " The people who have them rule supreme. They can kill anybody. " The situation in the Middle East looks shaky, but takes a turn for the worse when the Soviet Union collapses in 1991. Millions of AK's standing around in warehouses were stolen and sold, some for as low as \$100 (Kahaner 68-69). AK-47's are now readily available in the Middle East for anyone who needs them.

The Taliban group in Afghanistan follows Islamic beliefs extremely closely, and because of this, receives Pakistan's support. Pakistan arms the Taliban and in 1994, they acquire 18, 000 AK-47's. With major firepower, the Taliban overshadow their rivals uncontested, the Northern Alliance, and swiftly become the sole government in an already unstable Afghanistan. The Taliban rule ruthlessly, taking away virtually all women's rights and killing people publicly who don't follow the rules of the Qur'an.

The Taliban also allow the terrorist group, Al Qaeda, to grow. The faction set up as many as twenty training camps, training about 50, 000 people, teaching them to use the AK-47, along with bomb making and other activities that would further help the terrorist group. On September 11, 2001, Al Qaeda took the world by surprise with their terrorist attacks on the United States, orchestrated by Osama bin Laden, an old ally of the CIA. The US shortly declared war on Afghanistan to end terrorism and find Osama bin Laden(Kahaner 70).

Bin Laden's videos almost always show him with an AK-47, his favorite weapon. This intensifies the AK-47 as being a symbol of anti-imperialism and of US hatred. . People in the Middle East are proud to own an AK-47.

They wear them everywhere they go and young boys can't wait for their next birthday when they get their AK, since they will become men. This mentality, coupled with the arms pipeline in Pakistan, makes the AK-47 part of every day culture. Even now, with the US present in Afghanistan and Iraq, they are having trouble with civilian and guerilla tactics. These people fight in the streets, firing 600 rounds a minute at anything moving. The great amount of firepower is proving too much for the US army at times. The tactics used by the army aren't ideal for trudging through huge sprays of bullets in narrow streets.

Also, the AK requires so little training, a civilian can get the feel for an AK in a few hours, and be ready for battle (Kahaner 3). With their AK, they are just as deadly as any US soldier. Many natives believe that it's heroic to be fighting against the US and a lot of people are willing to die for this cause. On the other hand, it is hard to find US citizens who want to join the army and fight in these wars in the Middle East. Another strong point of the AK is that it's so durable; the guns can float from conflict to conflict. A good percent of the guns that are being used by the people in Afghanistan and Iraq are funded originally funded by the CIA, ironically (Al Jazeera English).

AK's, not bombs, kill the most people in Iraq, although the bombs always make headlines since they contain a greater magnitude of deaths (Kahaner 3). AK-47's arm civilians and rebels who are wrapped up in religious and

ethnic conflicts, making the Middle East more volatile. In the 19th and 20th centuries, resource rich Africa was ravaged by Europe and then left hanging. The continent was also expected to form nations out of what had always been divided by tribal regions and African Empires.

With Africa's instability, the door for the AK-47's presence was wide open, and a man named Charles Taylor walked right in. Born in Liberia, Taylor moved to the United States and went to college in Massachusetts. In 1979, in New York, Taylor vowed to the Liberian president, who was present for a conference, that he would rule Liberia. Later, in Libya, Taylor was armed by Muammar al-Gaddafi, the figure head of Libya. Charles Taylor had only 100 men armed with AK-47's, but he felt like he was ready to take over Liberia.

Taylor would end up being the main cause of both Liberian civil wars. The rebel group marched onwards, slaughtering entire villages. Taylor had no reason to kill civilians as they weren't providing any resistance. He just killed for the sake of killing. Charles Taylor recruited his troops in a way that would be followed, years to come. He simply gave his men an AK-47 and told them to kill.

But men weren't the only people to receive AK's. Charles Taylor set the model in every way for rebel groups in Africa, but one certain aspect of this model was truly horrific. Taylor employed child soldiers, and this was all possible because of the AK-47. Before, children didn't have the physical capability or skill to fire a gun and kill.

The AK is light, has little recoil, and is incredibly durable. All kids have to do is aim in a direction and spray bullets. With the option of using child soldiers,

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Charles Taylor took it. The majority of these children were forced into the guerilla forces and were then drugged with marijuana or cocaine to make them feel invincible in battle. Ishmael Beah, a former child soldier in Sierra Leone says that he was trained to use his AK in less than a week and some kids in his group were barely taller than their firearm.

He also explains the effect these guns had on the kids. “ The weapon became your protector, provider, and power,” Beah said. He went everywhere with his AK, and when Beah was rescued by UNICEF, he said he missed his AK-47 at first. Beah, just a young teen, was addicted to marijuana, cocaine, and alcohol when he was rescued (Al Jazeera English). These children in rebel groups are brainwashed to kill, and nothing more. The menacing look on this child in a rebel group shows that these kids are being totally controlled by their warlords and can be as dangerous as a full grown man when they have an AK-47.

They live life in a haze with all of the drugs forced upon on them, and the bulk of the children don't realize what they are doing by killing innocent civilians. With his group of men and soldiers, Taylor marched into the capital city, Monrovia, and with much bloodshed, became the leader of Liberia. Taylor becomes president in 1997 and keeps his power for six years, during the years of the Second Liberian Civil war, by arming anyone with an AK-47 who was willing to serve him. The Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia groups finally prove too much for Taylor as he loses his head spot. During his rule, 200, 000 people were killed along with 1. 25 million displaced.

Taylor had made approximately \$400 million ravaging Liberia of its resources and trading conflict diamonds coming from Sierra Leone (Kahaner 82-84).

Conflicts in Africa became more common when the AK was introduced on the continent. These conflicts may have happened anyways, but with the AK, the conflicts turned more explosive. Some of the major ones were involved in the situation in Sierra Leone. Warlords made tens of millions of dollars exploiting workers and selling blood diamonds. Also, Congo's civil war had killed four million people, a figure that wouldn't have been possible without AK-47's.

Many of these AK's came into Africa after the Soviet Union collapses, who supply 1.5 million AK-47's to Mozambique. Countries like Mozambique adapt to accommodate the possession of the new AK's. (Vines 191-192) AK prices become incredibly cheap and easy to find. Benjamin Pauker, a US citizen, travels to Congo to learn about the AK's devastating effects.

During his trip, he meets a rebel group and buys an AK for \$100, showing the straightforwardness of buying AK's in Africa (Pauker). In places like Mozambique with a great amount of AK's, they jack up the prices and sell them to places in conflict. When AK's are really abundant, they are used as a monetary value, trading for cattle, or food supplies (Kahaner 98-100). The people often trading the livestock and food are members of various tribes. If the AK-47 has changed the lives of any group the most, it would be the African tribes.

Although Europe's influence hurt the tribes, the AK-47 changed the key principles of tribes. For as long as anyone could remember, tribes fought each other with spears and similar weapons. When tribes get AK's they are

still battling the same people, but many more deaths are resulting from these battles. The Karimojong, a tribe in northeast Uganda has always believed that they own all of the cattle in the world by divine right, but they had never really stepped out of their bounds.

Once the tribe obtains 40, 000 AK's, the young men of the tribe no longer has to follow their elders and can perform as many cattle raids on other tribes as they want. If the attacked tribes don't comply many people end up dieing. The Karimojong make enemies with clans that don't have AK-47's and angers Kenya and Sudan for raiding cattle in their countries (Mirzeler, Young 407-410). Once again, the people with the AK's have all of the power, which the elders of the tribes are supposed to have.

The AK-47 ends up multiplying the magnitude of the conflicts and helps create new types of warfare. Latin America has a long history of dictators ruling their countries with absolute power through use of militarism. The balance of power in Latin America changes with the emergence of the AK-47, and it is only fitting that the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, bring the AK to Latin America. With the US's support, Anastasio Somoza Garcia comes to power in Nicaragua. Somoza would remain anti-communist for the gain of military and financial aid from the US. In late 1972, an earthquake ravages most of the capital, Managua.

Instead of using the millions of dollars of relief money being sent to him, Somoza keeps the money for his own personal benefit. The Sandinista National Liberation Front, an opposing paramilitary group supported by the Soviets, gains popularity because of this outrage. In July 1979, the

Sandinistas had enough leverage to force Somoza out of his dictator position, having him assassinated shortly thereafter. The Sandinistas have control of the country, but cannot develop the economy. The Contras, a counterrevolutionary group supported by the Reagan administration, are looking to gain control of the country, but in 1983 congress passes a bill making it illegal to fund the Contras. The CIA doesn't cut funding the Contras, they just use third parties, which doesn't break the bill's laws exactly.

This is an example of a gray market trade, where the government will find loopholes in laws to make an "under the table" deal with another nation that shouldn't necessarily be receiving the supplies coming to them. In this case, a paramilitary group shouldn't be receiving vast quantities of firearms. The gray market is one of the leading causes for the spread of the AK-47 (Karp 175-176). After a US plane filled with AK's was discovered, the world learned that the United States had been selling weapons to Iran, and used the proceeds to finance the Contras.

The AK-47 had entered Latin America by the tens of thousands (Kahaner 106-115). As the conflict in Nicaragua was winding down, the AK's were needed elsewhere; El Salvador. Civil war had broken out between the Salvadoran government, sponsored by the US, and a guerilla group, the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front. This group receives AK-47's from Honduran officials who had stolen them once the civil war in Nicaragua calmed down.

Armed with AK's that trump the government's M-16's from the US, the FMLN successfully performed guerilla tactics throughout El Salvador. These rebel attacks simply overwhelm the government. The Salvadoran government eventually signs a peace treaty that makes the FMLN the main government in El Salvador. Armed with thousands of AK's a paramilitary group had taken over a legitimate government. Salvador wasn't the only country to receive weapons after the Nicaraguan conflict.

The majority of the AK's going to Colombia went to the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or the FARC. This antigovernment group protects drug dealers so they can continue with their activities. Colombia received \$344 million of weapons in 1991-93 (Klare 867). The rebels now have all of the firepower they need, and are getting huge sums of money from the evergrowing cocaine industry. The FARC now has 20, 000 armed soldiers, some of them being child soldiers. In addition, these once small drug operations are now enormous drug cartels trafficking cocaine by the tons.

The cartels, specifically the Medellin and Cali cartels became powerful enough to fund their own armies with AK's and fend off the Colombian government themselves (Ceballos Melguizo 123-124). These cartels export their drugs primarily to the United States, and despite the US and Colombian efforts to eradicate the industry, more and more cocaine is on the street everyday. In 1986 a gram of cocaine cost \$100, but in 2003 one gram only cost \$38(Kahaner 128). Feeling the wrath of the AK, Colombia gave birth to the biggest drug cartel in the world. By flooding revolutionary groups and common civilians with a catastrophic amount of guns, and being the reason

for millions of casualties, and altering governments, the AK-47 has truly changed the world.

The worst part is that with some thinking, the AK didn't have to spread. If the United States had remembered the muscle the AK-47 had coupled with guerilla tactics in Vietnam, they wouldn't have funded the Mujahideen, but the cold war was all they could focus on. In the end, the Mujahideen were successful and the Soviet Union collapses shortly after. Now millions of AK's are being sold from Russia and the chain reaction makes the AK-47 one of the most commonly used guns and a global symbol of anti-imperialism. Once the AK got around, it became impossible to stop its influence, or disarm the people. Larry Kahaner explains why the AK is so viable for everyone.

" The reliable AK became the perfect weapon for Guerilla fighters and terrorists. Politics aside, the AK was the perfect item from a seller's point of view. It was cheap, easy to produce in great quantities, simple to transport, good value for the price, easily repairable, and it came with a ready market. " (Kahaner 70) Governments in economic shambles could easily make millions by transporting AK's to rebels in shaky nations. Even the Soviet Bloc nations sold to anti-communist countries if they needed the money badly enough. Both sides benefit at the expense of innocent civilians and any peace and sanctity the country might have had before.

While the superpowers were worried about the nuclear war and weapons of mass destruction, they passed one off to the rebels everywhere. An easily accessible weapon that can quickly kill many people makes a tragically

deadly combination. The AK-47 has shocked the world and will not stop shocking the world for many years to come.