



## The Gun

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Autor předkládá historii vývoje a výroby automatických zbraní od Gatlingova kulometu přes neblaze proslulé AK-47 a M-16 až po moderní typy. Postupuje historicky, všímá si použití samopalu Kalašnikov (který v oblasti automatických zbraní stále dominuje) ve Vietnamu i v Afghánistánu, v Irsku i v Iráku a objasňuje jejich roli v dnešním terorismu. Popisuje jak masové rozšíření automatických zbraní a industrializaci zabíjení, tak úinky, jaké mají projektily na lidské tělo. Hovoří také o podnikatelském aspektu, o rozpadu sovětského bloku a následném uvolnění obrovského množství automatických zbraní do oběhu. Kniha není oslavou Kalašnikovova vynálezu, pouze střízlivě popisuje jeho rozšíření a politický a vojenský dopad jakožto "zbožňlého" zástupce tohoto druhu zbraní.

## **The Gun Details**

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## From Reader Review The Gun for online ebook

### I. Merey says

*"I would like to ask Mr. Kalashnikov, what made you think about making such a horrible machine? What were you thinking about? Helping people or destroying their lives? I'm sure that you are a smart guy. Why didn't you go for finding a way to bring peace to life again? What we had--all those kind of guns through history--wasn't enough to make a man think about something more useful for people's lives rather than finding another killing machine?" (-asked by a man almost killed by AK47 fire.*

Almost a century before the AK47 (*Automat Kalashnikov*, first prototype released in 1947) was conceived in an arms design contest kicked off by Stalin, Richard J. Gatling saw the carnage of the American Civil War and it made him dream of creating an automated gun that could do the work of many men and thus save countless lives. Oh and make him very rich. His priorities on this project are negligible.

And then peace has never been profitable.

The Gatling Gun was the very first point on an arms trajectory that sought to miniaturize, improve, simplify, simplify, until the quest for automatic fire came to a grand halt at the AK47. Designed by Kalashnikov (and a whole Soviet war machine purring behind him), the firearm has become one of the most recognized symbols in the entire world and the time of its creation (post WWII Cold-War era) was perfect for imitation, stock-piling, and mass world-wide proliferation. Today, the gun once designed to be a friend and protector of the Soviet State has become a symbol of guerrilla warfare, civil unrest, revolution and terrorism.

*"Arms-control specialists and students of conflict look to the price of Kalashnikov assault rifles in a nation's open-market arms bazaars to determine both the degree to which destabilized lands are awash in small arms and the state of risk. When prices rise, public anxiety is considered high. When they sink, the decline can indicate a conflict is ebbing. Because there is no surer sign that a country has gone sour than the appearance of Kalashnikovs in the public's grip. {...}]...when Kalashnikovs turn up in the hands of mobs, it is time to leave." (pg 13)*

Why the AK47? Why this gun? What made the second half of the 20th century so perfect for the spread of this particular firearm, until urban arms legend claimed (however untrue) that you could procure one in certain places for the price of a chicken?

Chivers explains all in a book one of the blurbs likened to a Tolstoyan epic. Really fascinating.

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### Darwin8u says

Like McPhee, Chivers is able to (with capable narrative flair) revisit a subject you thought you already knew and show you just what you didn't understand. Not only does Chivers deliver the goods on the AK-47 and Kalashnikov (despite all the propaganda surrounding 'Everyman's Gun' and its maker) but explores the AK-47 in terms of the world, the nations, the armies and the people impacted by this tool of modern war and global conflict.

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And today, 4/10/27, Chivers won the Pulitzer for his writing at the NYTIMES.

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## **Stephan Bolton says**

A terrific narrative and analysis of the development and impact of automatic weapons on warfare and political violence over the last 120+ years. Delivers an excellent comparative history of the development and proliferation of the AK-47 and the M-16, the two most prominent assault rifles in military lore.

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## **Eric\_W says**

The AK-47 holds almost mythological status in the world. Terrorists, revolutionaries, and insurrectionists all brandish this Russian-made weapon in defiance of those in power. Chivers calls it “a ready equalizer against morally or materially superior foes.” The U.S. decided to be more sophisticated and complicated and outfitted its soldiers with the M-16, a weapon I remember hearing it being loathed by soldiers just returned from Vietnam as chronically unreliable. A theme of the book is the United States’ failure to design a gun of similar technical merits to the AK-47. Chivers estimates there are currently over 100 million of these lethal weapons floating around out there, a staggering number., a weapon he describes as “the most lethal instrument of the Cold War.” It was first produced the same year as the Russians detonated their own atomic bomb.

The AK-47 could be considered a form of machine gun, so Chivers spends a considerable portion of the book to the history of machine guns. Ironically invented by a southern slave-holder, Richard Gatling, it was offered by the inventor to Lincoln in 1864 to support the Union cause. His reasons were philanthropic if naive. He reasoned that if one man could control the firepower of several with his Gatling gun, there would be need for fewer soldiers on the battlefield and thus fewer casualties. He was distraught over the number of wounded returning from the front. The US Army purchased the first Gatling guns in 1866. Foreign governments found them particularly useful in destroying native uprisings. even though they were notoriously unreliable. There was nothing worse than to have a machine gun jam while being descended upon by thousands of screaming natives. “The Gatlings jammed and the colonel dead,” was Sir Henry Newbolt’s line in 1897.

Hiram Maxim’s gun (“the most dreadful instrument I have ever seen or imagined,” was the Archduke William of Austria’s comment) took killing to a new level. His gun was much more reliable (he had been born in Maine, then emigrated to the UK) water-cooled and belt-fed design was lighter, requiring not a carriage but merely a tripod and variations remained in use well into the 1960’s. Thinking they had a huge advantage, the British knighted Maxim (his gun was renamed the Vickers) but in German hands it proved to be quite useful in mowing down British soldiers. The British actually mistrusted the machine gun as being extraordinarily wasteful of ammunition. One of the most mind numbing aspects of WW I is the willingness of troops to attack barbed wire emplacements defended by machine guns. It was wholesale slaughter on an unimaginable scale.

The forerunner of the AK-47 and M-16 was the Schmeisser, an assault rifle that entered the war in 1944. The AK-47 was designed by Mikhail Kalashnikov and while his name has always been associated with the gun, Chivers says it was really a product of the Stalinist state. Chivers also asserts that much of what we think we know about Kalashnikov was reworked to fit the requirements of Communist propaganda. The Russians, contrary to those in the west who championed the more accurate rifles, believed in mass assaults and required weapons with high rates of fire. What makes the Kalashnikov so different is the almost loose fitting

of the parts. They clank around and rattle but it would work even after being subjected to extremes of the battlefield and weather.

The U.S. decision to ignore the lessons of the Kalashnikov lies at the feet of Robert McNamara who had heard of an incredibly lethal weapon (the lethality tests were conducted on live goats and cadavers imported from India, an extremely sensitive topic) produced by the ArmaLite Company in California. The impact of its bullets was so messy and destructive that the Americans just had to have it for the nascent war in southeast Asia. That it required a different bullet than the standard 7.62 NATO round even though that standardization had been imposed on NATO by the U.S. The M-16's malfunctions became a scandal during the Vietnam War, but Colt, maker of the gun, blamed the soldiers' poor cleaning habits. By this time, the top brass had become so linked with the decision to manufacture the weapon, they supported Colt. One soldier when asked by his commander why he carried a captured AK-47 instead of the M-16 simply replied, "because it works." According to Chivers, the Army in Afghanistan uses the M-4 carbine but the current generation's platoon has much more firepower in the form of other types of weapons than the Taliban who use the AK-47. Still, he wonders if the unsophisticated IED may yet cause the downfall of the more technologically advanced. Another triumph of the simple over the complex. (See <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/12/was...> for another example.)

A more depressing theme of this book is how American exceptionalism prevents us from connecting to peoples whose motivations are high and technologies unsophisticated, yet in the end, as in Vietnam and elsewhere, manage to beat the more technologically advanced.

Chivers is a former Marine officer and war correspondent. He writes well, if frighteningly, in this fascinating work that details the political and psychic effects of the Cold War on policy and decision-making, often to our detriment.

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### **David Mazzocco says**

As books about guns and military history go, it doesn't get much better than this. The author manages to make this a general-audience book (at least for those who are interested) while also getting almost all of the technical details that he does include correct. He starts with Mr. Gatling's hand-cranked gun and takes you all the way through to modern arms trafficking.

If you want to know why the world is flooded with automatic rifles and where they came from in the first place, read this book.

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### **Eugene Miya says**

I first heard of this book when publicity from NPR interviewed its author. I briefly thumbed through a hard bound copy at Books, Inc., and it cross my "consider to read" threshold (when I had time). I chanced to find a discounted paper back copy at Eliot Bay during a business trip/conference in Seattle. Publicity worked.

The Gun is mostly a threaded history of automatic weapons leading up to the AK-47, Kalashikov the man, and issues which make the AK social symbol (mostly notably on flags {the au

I was pretty intrigued when I had come across this book – a book about a gun, even if it happens to be one of the most recognized and probably most feared guns in the world. I found that the author had served in the US Marines and won a shared Pulitzer for covering the Afghan war. Hmm! Probably the best person to write such a book.

The name AK-47 in this book encompasses original and all the derivatives and knock-offs of the gun.

The book not only tries to chronicle the origin and widespread use of the rifle, but tries to set the *richer context* - how the miniaturization and simplification of rapid-fire weapons, politics and national arming decisions have shaped war and influenced security in large sections of the world.

The book delves into how the earlier precursors to the machine guns such as the Gatling and the Maxim guns came into existence. Initially such guns were used by the colonial forces against the native soldiers as the former sought to “civilize” the “savages”. Later some countries would realize their value as efficient killing machines in conventional warfare.

The author has a commendable job of tracing the origin of the AK-47, the rifle he refers to as “Stalin’s gun” and which changed warfare forever. Though Mikhail Kalashnikov is regarded as the inventor of this weapon, the author shows how it was a child of the Soviet political climate and ambitions, and how the Soviet policies would make it the most ubiquitous weapon in the world.

The story of the AK-47 is remarkable indeed, and I liked the way the author had presented the usage of the weapon in wars, rebellions and terrorist attacks. Slowly the governments would lose control over the gun and it would end up as the weapon of choice for terrorists, insurgents, and criminals. There are quite a few “horror” stories where the rifle was used as a tool of death - its use by the African child soldiers was more horrifying than its use by Eastern Bloc forces and terrorists. The author’s depiction of the weapon’s symbolism was great – when terrorists wield or do not wield their AK-47s in front of the camera, they are trying to send out a message. The gun has found place in the flag of a country and not surprisingly in the flags of terrorist groups.

The author has made a valid point – the AK-47 is probably the biggest brand of the Soviet. Look at movies, shooting games, TV series, and comics – if there is a terrorist or a Russian soldier, he will carry the AK-47. It is a legacy which had outlived the state that had created it. An AK-47 rifles has a longevity of decades.

The author ends with the hope that the guns out in the market – in the hands of child soldiers, terrorists, gangsters would one day break down and the rifle would cease to be a significant factor in war and terrorism. A wonderful hope, but knowing the deviousness of the human mind bent on inflicting death and misery on fellow humans, some other weapon, maybe something even more lethal, would surely find its way into the hands of the killers.

As I have mentioned before, the book is well-written and it is thoroughly researched. Kings, dictators, soldiers, rebels, profiteers and terrorists populate the pages of the book and there are tales of bloodshed, massacres and wars. It made for a compelling read, and it made me aware of the evolution of the rifle, and enhanced my understanding of how modern firearms affected the history of mankind.

I do understand this book would not appeal to everybody, but I think readers who have an interest in military history would like the book.

## David Dinaburg says

While cutting edge quantum mechanics may hint that object permanence is not existentially true, it remains a developmental milestone that signifies depth in a child's understanding of the structure of the world. Things outside of immediate visible range still exist; this takes care of the "spatial" component of spacetime, but the "time" portion can remain a messy bundle well into adulthood. It is something with which I often struggle, feeling like I have a child's problem with history, a difficulty in conceiving the world before I existed or how things now taken for granted were not yet imagined. A mental image of battle before assault rifles exists in my mind solely because of cultural imagery: swords or whips or lightsabers or lances are the weapons of heroes. I can picture Agincourt without the M4A and Waterloo with an effective cavalry charge, but guns of war beyond muskets become automatic rifles through syllogism.

Non-projectile weapons—archaic weapons of a more heroic aura—have their own issues. The conceptual problems that I had as a child still have not been resolved; when Leonardo from Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles unsheathes a katana, what's he going to do with it? The action—the childhood promise of satisfactorily acrobatic action, anyway—dies. Maybe Leo blocks some laserblasts or cuts a rope holding something heavy that falls onto a bad guy but you're not going to see him decapitate The Shredder. No, he will always use the flat of the blade to knock someone out, expending a portion of his focus in each battle trying to not use lethal force. At least Raphael could use his pointy sais to pin people's wrists and ankles.

It is the impracticality of these weapons, their purposeful malignancy and impetus to cause damage, that still gives me pause. It doesn't fit the setting. You can't just slice and dice in a cartoon! You can't just start shooting wildly if you're the hero! You can, Batman-style, bludgeon and cripple a thousand villains and skate by on the illusion of non-lethality, I suppose. But a bullet? You're limited by the threat of death, of too much violence, of overkill. Smash a man's face and he may live. Give a G.I. Joe a laser pistol and his or her enemies fall over in gust of sparkly lights and scorched camo. Actual guns firing real bullets cannot be downplayed and will never, in the zeitgeist, come across as less than lethally efficient. They cannot be used the way something like nunchucks or a quarterstaff or a fist can be used.

In fiction, at least. In reality, guns and bullets are not just shockingly simple, they are everywhere. They are the de facto usable tools of combat, the everyfist of the wartime world:

During this time, the American intelligence community would fixate, understandably and properly, on the Soviet Union's nuclear programs. The activities in Izhevsk [where the AK-47 was manufactured] would be missed. As the mushroom cloud towered over the Kazakh steppe, no one noticed the arrival of Stalin's new firearm. No one would pay much mind as these rifle plants, and others across the Eastern bloc and in nations aligned with the Soviet Union or the socialist ideal, would ship off their automatic rifles by the untold millions during the years ahead. And no one would have predicted, as the world worried over nuclear war, that these rifles, with their cartridges of reduced size, would become the most lethal instrument of the Cold War. Unlike the nuclear arsenal and the infrastructure that would rise around them—the warheads, the mobile launders, the strategic bombers and submarines—an automatic rifle was a weapon that could actually be used.

Nuclear stockpiles are sharp blades in a kids' show—no one really wants to use them because then it won't be a kids' show any longer. But a rifle? That can be employed. And is employed. By anyone and everyone.

The most startling revelation while reading The Gun was not that I knew very little about modern weaponry—I don't—or that I can recognize the AK-47 and its descendants immediately—I do—but that

before my life the automatic rifle wasn't the ubiquitous ur-image of infantry fighting that it is in my paradigm of violence. There are so many small details and fascinating facts in the book that the pages zip by, and learning little bon mots are the rhyme and reason to easy non-fiction. These big conceptual shifts, though, they are few and far between; when you find a book that changes your landscape and hammers it home over three-hundred pages of fascinating detail, you know you've picked up a winner. The little bits, you never know what they're going to be:

Bin Laden's selection of this design (it is less than twenty inches long and weighs not quite six pounds) was on technical merits a strange endorsement. An AKSU-74 is inaccurate and fires rounds with less muzzle velocity than an AK-74, making it potentially less useful and lethal than many available choices. But people who regard themselves as warriors inhabit worlds in which symbols matter. And in the particular history of bin Laden's martial surroundings—western Pakistan and Afghanistan of the last three decades—a short-barreled Kalashnikov emanated a trophy's distinction. Relatively new, the AKSU-74 had been carried in the Soviet-Afghan War by specialized soldiers, including helicopter and armor crews, for whom a smaller weapon was useful in the tight confines of their transit. For an Afghan fighter, possession of one of these rifles signals bravery and action. It implied that the holder had participated in destroying an armored vehicle or aircraft; the rifle was akin to a scalp. By choosing it, bin Laden silently signaled to his followers: *I am authentic*, even if his actual combat experience was not what his prop suggested.

A deep knowledge of Afghani culture and guerilla symbolism is required, as well as baseline weapons-system recognition; I wouldn't have known there was a language in that image to parse, let alone how to do it, without the book. The mixture of high-level conceptual displacement and cool cocktail-party fact makes this potentially disastrous material a breeze to read. The Gun is accessible and simple in conveying its trenchant insights, edging into must read territory for anyone interesting in global history or modern politics. It, like the gun it describes, can be picked up by anyone to devastating effect. This is information that can be used.

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### **Smith Nickerson says**

I picked this up while browsing in the UW bookstore. The title was not very appealing and the reviews only encouraged me to skim a couple of pages. But just by chance I started reading about the initial distribution of the M-16 to soldiers in Vietnam and the total disregard for the lives of service members who tried to use them.

Even though Mr Chivers focuses on the development and distribution of the AK-47, he gives an accurate description the low ethical value of the commonly termed Military Industrial Complex.

I would particularly recommend this book to anyone interested in the Cold War era.

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### **Aaron Bright says**

This book won't be everyone's cup-o-tea, but it was definitely mine. The stories imparted are well written, engaging, and on several occasions, infuriating. I've learned a lot, not just about the K and its history/legacy, but training, leadership, and how not to treat people as well.

## Bookmarks Magazine says

Although the title may initially put off some readers, *The Gun* is a far-ranging work of war reporting, military history, sociology, and politics. The automatic weapon is, of course, the focus, but Chivers goes far beyond a mere technical history to offer "an engrossing yet plainspoken exploration of what guns are and what they do," from their psychological effects to their economic and political impacts (*Salon*). Chivers, whose firsthand reportorial and military experiences informed his book, left few sources uncovered; he even interviewed the aging Kalashnikov. Despite general praise, a few critics thought the broad historical perspective (such as the long sections on the American M-16 assault rifle) too digressive, but most agreed that *The Gun* is a riveting, well-handled look at one of the modern world's most influential -- and destructive -- technologies. This is an excerpt from a review published in Bookmarks magazine.

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## Ruediger Landmann says

Chivers sets out to provide a history of the Soviet AK-47 assault rifle. He promises to provide not just an account of the weapon and its users, but the broader political context of the widespread availability of cheap, reliable assault rifles, to militaries, to paramilitaries and to criminals too. This availability has, Chivers writes, "influenced security and development in large sections of the world." For the most part, I think he succeeds in what he sets out to do.

*The Gun* is extremely accessible. Chivers does not rely on any background interest or knowledge of military subjects. This is a history written by a journalist, not a historian, and this has a profound impact on the style. He often dramatises key events like a novelist, giving the book the feel of a television documentary where certain events have been re-enacted. I think this was usually well handled, although in at least one of these passages (the attempted assassination of Barham Salih in 2002) the writing seemed a bit sensationalist to me, bordering on pornographic. Chivers also is not afraid to editorialise and offer judgement in places where facts might have been allowed to speak for themselves, making this much closer to *Rolling Stone* than to *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Nevertheless, the writing is always clear, straightforward, and precise; I found the text a joy to read.

I also very much liked Chivers' extensive and thoughtful use of primary sources right throughout the book. He is also critical of his sources, and points out their inconsistencies to demonstrate some of the difficulties in separating fact from myth in a subject as iconic as the AK-47.

In the course of *The Gun*, Chivers provides two lengthy digressions. First, he starts the book with a long survey of the history of automatic weapons through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Second, he includes a detailed history of the American Cold-War competitor to the AK-47, the M-16. The first of these digressions was of particular personal interest to me, and the second one I found scandalously compelling: a heady mix of incompetence, corruption, and lies.

I think that Chivers tells the story of the AK-47 itself well, but I'm less certain that he succeeds at conveying the broader context. He presents a number of case studies of incidents around the world where AK-47 has played a part, outside of the hands of traditional militaries. He examines this phenomenon first in the context of the Soviet Union attempting to influence other states politically, and then in describing the opportunities that enormous stockpiles of Cold-War weapons have created for arms dealers. However, there's little evaluation here of social ramifications, or even the effect on global development that he hinted at in the

book's introduction.

It's this lack of synthesis and evaluation that makes me give *The Gun* only four stars instead of the five that I was expecting to give right up to the end of the book. Still, a great read, and one I highly recommend!

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### **Paul says**

The AK47 was first manufactured way back in the early 1950's and some of these very early models are still in use. It is a gun that has been used by armies, revolutionaries, hoodlums and criminals. It's simple construction gives it a robustness and longevity that mean that these weapons will be around for a long time to come.

In the biography of the gun, and the man Kalashnikov who invented it, Chivers takes us through the murky world of the arms industry, and Soviet cold war secrets. Form how the initial concept was conceived and developed to the modern iterations of the weapon. Along the way he writes about the times these guns have been seen by the public, normally some terrorist atrocity, and the history of arms that lead to the lightweight sub machine gun.

The history and anecdotes about this are fairly interesting, but in there is 200 pages of history about the earlier guns such as the Gatling, and a lot of the failure of the M-16 in battle. Interesting in its own way, and necessary to set the context, but it is half the book.

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### **Brian says**

Great book, highly recommended. This is not an engineering treatise or a book about the battlefield; it is a book about people. Although guns are the author's unifying theme, the stories are all about individuals: heroes, charlatans, arms merchants, tribesmen, terrorist, victims, and their courage, fear, pain, joys and so on. Oddly, I found the least interesting person to be Comrade Kalashnikov. The latter part of the book is quite engaging as it describes the consequences of proliferating the "world's most popular killing machine" into the hands of unskilled individuals into almost every corner of the earth. Of course those consequences are tragic, but compelling to read and understand.

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### **Vinh-Thang says**

A history of death and destruction, but beautifully written, even poetic at times

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