

## Weapon of Mass Destruction

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In the grand narrative of World War II, the Battle of Bryansk is a minor conflict, barely deserving of a footnote. But Bryansk has another place in history. It was there that a then-unknown tank commander named Mikhail Kalashnikov decided that his Russian comrades would never again be defeated. In the years following the Great Patriotic War, as Soviet propagandists dubbed it, he was to conceive and fabricate a weapon so simple, and yet so revolutionary, that it would change the way wars were fought and won. It was the AK-47 assault rifle.

The AK-47 has become the world's most prolific and effective combat weapon, a device so cheap and simple that it can be bought in many countries for less than the cost of a live chicken. Depicted on the flag and currency of several countries, waved by guerrillas and rebels everywhere, the AK is responsible for about a quarter-million deaths every year. It is the firearm of choice for at least 50 legitimate standing armies and countless fighting forces from Africa and the Middle East to Central America and Los Angeles. It has become a cultural icon, its signature form -- that banana-shaped magazine -- defining in our consciousness the contours of a deadly weapon.

This week, the U.S. military's presence in Iraq will surpass the length of time that American forces were engaged in World War II. And the AK-47 will forever link the two conflicts. The story of the gun itself, from inspiration in Bryansk to bloody insurgency in Iraq, is also the story of the transformation of modern warfare. The AK blew away old battlefield calculations of military superiority, of tactics and strategy, of who could be a soldier, of whose technology would triumph.

Ironically, the weapon that helped end World War II, the atomic bomb, paved the way for the rise of the lower-tech but deadlier AK-47. The A-bomb's guarantee of mass destruction compelled the two Cold War superpowers to wage proxy wars in poor countries, with ill-trained combatants exchanging fire -- usually with cheap, lightweight and durable AKs.

When one war ended, arms brokers gathered up the AKs and sold them to fighters in the next hot spot. The weapon's spread helps explain why, since World War II, so many "small wars" have lingered far beyond the months and years one might expect. Indeed, for all of the billions of dollars Washington has spent on space-age weapons and military technology, the AK still remains the most devastating weapon on the planet, transforming conflicts from Vietnam to Afghanistan to Iraq. With these assault rifles, well-armed fighters can dominate a country, terrorize citizens, grab the spoils -- and even keep superpowers at bay.

When German forces employed the lightning war, or blitzkrieg, in World War II, it was a marked change from how wars had been fought. Instead of static fighting -- hunkering down in trenches

for weeks or months at a time as in World War I -- the blitzkrieg concentrated forces at one point in an enemy's defensive line, broke a hole and then thrust deep into enemy territory, catching opponents off guard and subjecting them to waves of brutally efficient invaders.

In late September 1941, the German juggernaut reached the outskirts of Bryansk, hard against the Desna River southwest of Moscow. In the battle, the Nazis destroyed about 80 percent of the town and killed more than 80,000 people. Kalashnikov, who was 21, was wounded in his left shoulder when his tank came under artillery fire. He eventually made it to a hospital on foot after a harrowing two-day trip. He suffered nightmares about the Germans slaughtering his comrades.

Kalashnikov became obsessed with creating a submachine gun that would drive the Germans from his homeland. In his hospital bed, he sketched out the simplest automatic weapon possible. His obsession would later lead him to a metal shop, where he developed a prototype submachine gun; later to a technical school, where he invented a carbine; and finally, to the creation of the Avtomat Kalashnikova 1947 (AK-47), approved for production that year. It combined the best characteristics of a submachine gun (light weight and durability) and a machine gun (killing power). By the end of 1949, arms plants had turned out about 80,000 AKs.

Although the AK came too late to see action in World War II, the Soviets knew their assault rifle could become the most important weapon of the modern era, and they worked hard to keep it hidden from the West. Soviet soldiers carried their AKs in special pouches that disguised their shape; they picked up spent cartridges to keep the newly sized ammunition a secret.

The 1956 uprising in Hungary compelled Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev to dispatch the Red Army to Budapest. The episode required the first large-scale public use of the AK, and it performed well in an urban environment where tanks became bogged down in narrow streets against crowds wielding Molotov cocktails. The protests were squelched, and as many as 50,000 Hungarians were killed compared with about 7,000 Soviet soldiers.

By the late 1950s, the Soviet Union had begun using the AK to spread communism. In the early years of the Cold War, both Moscow and Washington tried to curry favor with uncommitted countries through sales and gifts of arms. Compared with the United States's offering of the M-1 and later the M-14, the AK proved vastly superior; its ruggedness was well suited to severe environmental conditions and the lack of gun repair facilities in poorer countries. The Soviets also distributed free licenses to produce the AK-47 to "fraternal countries," including Bulgaria, China, East Germany, Hungary, North Korea, Poland and Yugoslavia.

U.S. weapons experts did not embrace the superiority of the AK, clinging instead to old notions of warfare embodied in the M-1. The rifle had performed flawlessly during World War II, prompting Gen. George S. Patton to call it "the greatest battle implement ever devised." But it was heavy, clunky and held only eight rounds in its magazine, and was not an automatic weapon. Warfare was changing, and the M-1 was falling behind.

It was not until the Vietnam War -- the first major proxy battle against the Soviets -- that U.S. troops faced the AK-47 in action. They would pay dearly for their government's failure to recognize the power of Kalashnikov's simple weapon.

One key problem the United States faced in Vietnam involved basic weaponry: For all their military might, U.S. forces did not have an infantry weapon that could stand up to the AK in the pattern of warfare that was emerging. Confrontations often consisted of jungle patrols from both sides finding themselves unexpectedly face to face, and the side that could pump out the most rounds the fastest won.

After many years of bureaucratic wrangling, the U.S. military had finally introduced its own assault rifle, the sleek and sophisticated M-16. More than 100,000 of them were ordered by the summer of 1966 and shipped to the Asian war zone. By October, however, some unexpected reports were coming in.

M-16s were jamming in combat.

U.S. troops were found dead with their rifles in mid-breakdown, trying to undo the cause of the misfire while under attack. Morale plunged as they thought they could not trust their weapon. And as the Viet Cong learned of these problems, they became emboldened: The sight of the "black rifle," as they called it, was now less threatening. Although the Army tried to minimize the public relations fallout, reports reached Congress through the parents of servicemen as well as from soldiers who felt betrayed. A congressional subcommittee investigating the issue heard testimony about American troops routinely removing AKs from enemy dead and using them instead of their own M-16s.

The culprit, it turns out, wasn't the gun, but the ammunition. M-16s jammed because authorities had insisted on changing the cartridge propellant, and residue clogged the mechanism after repeated firing. But even after problems were addressed, it was too late. The AK came to be perceived widely as the world's top infantry weapon, and one that could beat the West's best offering. It was low-tech Soviet style vs. high-tech American style, and the communists won the war of perception.

If the Vietnam War gave the AK its credibility, it was the Soviet war in Afghanistan and the subsequent demise of the Soviet empire that accelerated the weapon's dissemination, placing it in the hands of insurgents and terrorists who embraced it as an icon of anti-imperialism.

Strategically, the initial Soviet invasion of Afghanistan seemed successful: Fewer than 70 Soviet troops died, most of them from non-combat-related accidents. Soviet planners anticipated a stay of no more than three years -- a timetable that seemed realistic considering that the Afghan fighters were short of modern weapons.

But that changed when the CIA began funneling extensive aid to the guerrilla fighters via Pakistan, including hundreds of thousands of AKs (mainly from China, where production of the Soviet weapon was booming). The CIA favored AKs because of their reliability, low cost and availability. In addition, Soviet weapons in the hands of the mujaheddin would not be easily traced to the United States, thus offering Washington official deniability. Years later in congressional testimony, CIA officials estimated that by 1984, \$200 million had been sent to the Afghan mujaheddin, and that by 1988 the sum had reached \$2 billion through CIA channels alone.

Graft and corruption notwithstanding, the CIA-led arms pipeline helped keep the rebels well stocked. By the mid-1980s, the war was stalemating, despite at least 100,000 Soviet troops on the ground, and the public back home was increasingly unhappy with what seemed like a no-win conflict.

When the last Soviet troops left Afghanistan on Feb. 15, 1989, the vast arms infrastructure did not disappear. Operating for a decade, it had become ingrained in the economy and culture of Afghanistan and neighboring countries. Even before the Soviet withdrawal, Western newspapers took note of the huge supply of AKs in the region, and the notion of a "Kalashnikov culture" entered the lexicon. In Pakistan, for example, a substantial part of the country's economy -- including gangs who robbed and kidnapped, drug kingpins who followed established arms routes, and the small village arms makers who bought, sold, repaired and produced their homemade versions -- depended on the ubiquitous AK.

The AK's international reach expanded further as the USSR collapsed and former Soviet bloc countries auctioned off their arms stockpiles. AKs began selling for bargain-basement prices throughout Africa, where countries were fragmented into tribal groups with long-standing ethnic resentments. In Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia and elsewhere, AKs prolonged small conflicts that previously would have petered out. The weapon became so much a part of daily life in some areas that it was dubbed the "African credit card" -- you could not leave home without it.

In Latin America, AKs ended up in the hands of drug cartels and anti-government rebels. Just as the CIA shipped AKs to Afghanistan, it did the same in Nicaragua in the early 1980s, sending arms to the contras in their fight against the Soviet-backed Sandinistas. AKs fueled civil war in El Salvador as well as political and drug-related violence in Colombia. Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez recently announced the purchase of 100,000 AKs from Russian stockpiles. He also announced plans to produce AKs in his own factory -- the first time the weapon will be made in the Western Hemisphere.

Before the Soviet invasion, Afghanistan had been considered a moderate Islamic country, but the war emboldened a more virulent strain of Islam, one fueled by accessible weapons and a devastated economy. In the mountainous border area near Pakistan, Saudi-born millionaire Osama bin Laden grew more radical in his views on a holy war -- first against the Soviet invaders, and later against the United States and the West.

Just before the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan that followed the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, bin Laden distributed the first of several videotapes warning the West about reprisals. In these tapes, the al-Qaeda leader is seen with an AK either next to him or propped up in the background. The typical stock footage shows a white-robed bin Laden firing an AK, a symbol to the world that he is a true anti-imperialist fighter.

In their battles against U.S. forces, many al-Qaeda fighters and tribal groups still carry the same AKs that the CIA had purchased more than a decade earlier. The first U.S. soldier to die by hostile fire in Afghanistan -- Sgt. 1st Class Nathan Ross Chapman of San Antonio -- was killed by a teenager shooting an AK.

The AK is also the weapon of choice in the latest "small war" that a superpower believed would be brief and painless: Iraq.

Although coalition bombing in 1991 destroyed much of Iraq's air force, Scud missiles and tanks, Saddam Hussein's regime retained its small weapons, including AKs. By March 2003, when Operation Iraqi Freedom began, Iraqi arsenals included seven to eight million small arms. These weapons -- which U.S. planners did not consider a major threat when the invasion began -- would prove deadly for American troops once major hostilities ended. During the chaos that followed the swift victory, millions of small weapons (mainly AKs) were looted from Hussein's armories. They landed in the hands of nervous law-abiding citizens, but also in the hands of Baathist loyalists and other opponents of the U.S. occupation who used them to start a protracted urban war.

In Iraq, the AK had taken on symbolic power, too. Hussein had been so enamored with the weapon that he had built a Baghdad mosque sporting minarets in the unique shape of AK barrels. His son Uday commissioned gold-plated AKs. And when Hussein was captured, two AKs were found in his underground hideout.

Even the newly forming Iraqi army -- trained by the U.S. military and civilian contractors -- refused American-made M-16s and M-4s. When the Coalition Provisional Authority was planning to outfit Iraqi forces, they were surprised to find that the Iraqis insisted on AKs.

"For better or worse, the AK-47 is the weapon of choice in that part of the world," said Walter Slocombe, senior adviser to the CPA. "It turns out that every Iraqi male above the age of 12 can take them apart and put them together blindfolded and is a pretty good shot."

Now 85, tiny, feeble, nearly deaf, his right hand losing control because of tremors, Kalashnikov is often haunted by the killing machine he has bestowed upon the world. "I wish I had invented a lawnmower," he told the Guardian in 2002.

In Iraq, Sierra Leone, Sudan and elsewhere, today's wars are hot conflicts in urban areas, with guerrillas holding their own against better trained troops. Sophisticated, expensive arms seem no match for AK-wielding rebels who need little training and know the local terrain better. Some call this the new reality of small conflicts.

This sentiment was expressed by Maj. Gen. William J. Livsey Jr. the commandant of Fort Benning, Ga., in the early 1980s, when the military was first integrating computer chips into smart weapons. "Despite all the sophisticated weapons we or the Soviets come up with," he warned, "you still have to get that one lone infantryman, with his rifle, off his piece of land. It's the damn hardest thing in the world to do."

The AK has pierced through popular culture, too. In 2004, Playboy magazine dubbed it one of the "50 Products That Changed the World," ranking it behind the Apple Macintosh desktop, the birth-control pill and the Sony Betamax video machine. Rappers Ice Cube and Eminem mention AKs in their lyrics. And in the movie "Jackie Brown," actor Samuel L. Jackson captures the weapon's global cachet: "AK-47. The very best there is. When you absolutely, positively got to kill every [expletive] in the room."

Yet, for all of his weapon's influence, Kalashnikov receives no royalties for his invention. Recently, he began selling his own name brand of vodka, which has been a hit in Europe and the Middle East and is slated to reach the United States next year.

At times, he remains defiant and aloof, blaming others for the AK's misuse.

"I invented it for protection of the motherland," Kalashnikov told an interviewer. "I have no regrets and bear no responsibility for how politicians have used it."

Larry Kahaner is the author of "AK-47: The Weapon That Changed the Face of War" (Wiley).