

symbol of violence, war and culture

I have nothing to do with destruction that my invention carries with it. An armament in itself never kills anybody. It is the people using it who have to decide and that is where the fault lies. I will again repeat that I never made the machine-gun for people to fight with each other.

Mikhail Kalashnikov¹

Small arms and light weapons have irrevocably shaped the landscape of modern conflict and daily life. While there is no universally accepted definition, they are generally considered to be military weapons and commercial firearms that can be operated either by an individual or a small crew. The international community most frequently uses the United Nations' definitions of *small arms*: revolvers and self-loading pistols, rifles and carbines, assault rifles, sub-machine-guns and light machine-guns; and *light weapons*: heavy machine-guns, hand-held under-barrel and mounted grenade launchers, portable anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns, recoil-less rifles, portable launchers of anti-tank and anti-aircraft missile systems and mortars of less than 100 mm caliber.²

Among the most widely recognized weapons in the world, the AK-47, which is part of the AK family of rifles, is a staple of

modern warfare. Designed to be a reliable companion for Soviet soldiers, it has become a symbol of international resistance against colonialism and, more recently, of trans-national criminal violence, insurgency and terrorism. Although its designer, Mikhail Kalashnikov, intended it to be used to protect the Soviet Union, the AK-47 has fueled war, violence and crime across the world. The AK-47's history and its role in modern warfare make it an important starting point for a broader discussion of small arms proliferation and misuse. To this end, the following chapter examines the AK-47's cultural status, its uses during the Cold War and its legacy.

the birth of the AK-47

Mikhail Timofeevich Kalashnikov was born in 1919, shortly after the Russian Revolution, in the Siberian village of Kurya. Kalashnikov's humble beginnings gave no hint of the impact he was to have. Born into the large family of a peasant farmer, Kalashnikov and his family were exiled from their home in the Altai region to Siberia. At a young age, Kalashnikov designed items to make life easier for his family, such as a wooden mill so they could grind flour. The young inventor had only the equivalent of a high school degree when he began working for the Turkestan-Siberian railway in 1936. Two years later, he was drafted into the Soviet army where he learned to drive tanks, and, after expressing interest in firearms, was assigned to an armorer's course. Called to active duty in 1941, Kalashnikov maintained his inventive spirit as a tank driver, creating a device that counted the number of shells fired by the tank's heavy machine-gun. He also invented a tank odometer and an apparatus that allowed officers' pistols to fit through the tank's firing slots.³

In the battle for Bryansk, Kalashnikov's T-34 tank was hit by a shell and he was seriously wounded in the back and shoulder, wounds that would change the face of warfare. While he was in the hospital, Kalashnikov frequently talked with wounded soldiers about the need for a better military rifle and, based on these

conversations, he designed his own. He has said that while he was in the hospital a soldier asked: “Why do our soldiers have only one rifle for two or three of our men, when the Germans have automatics?” So I designed one. I was a soldier and I created a machine-gun for a soldier.⁴

After his hospital stay, Kalashnikov worked in the Alma Alta railway depot and began experimenting with various weapon designs. They caught the eye of his supervisors, who sent them to the Ordzhonikidze Moscow Aviation Institute. Although the designs were not accepted for further development, the Institute officials recognized Kalashnikov’s potential and he was rewarded with a transfer to the Institute’s machine shop where working conditions were better.⁵

The price of the Soviet victory in World War II was the lives of millions of its soldiers. The death toll and their experience on the battlefield convinced the Soviets they needed to replace the SKS45 rifle, which was not well suited to the close combat they had experienced during the war. Before World War II, weapons and ammunition were designed for a range of one kilometer. The war convinced the Red Army that they needed a rifle accurate and reliable for modern warfare, which they anticipated would often be fought between soldiers spaced less than 400 meters apart. When the Soviet military announced that they were looking for a rifle to replace the SKS45, Kalashnikov submitted one of his designs to the Main Artillery Commission in Moscow. In 1946, the Commission chose his design and made several prototypes. Following field tests, one of the prototypes was accepted in 1949 as the *Automat Kalashnikova obrazets 1947* – the AK-47.⁶

military specification: the AK-47

The Soviets hit the jackpot with their new weapon. The AK-47’s superb design became the international standard for reliability and utility. Its hardiness means it can operate in all weather conditions and environments. It is cheap to produce, has a high rate of fire and is simple enough for even poorly skilled soldiers to use.

The design was not accidental: Kalashnikov did extensive research on what was essential for reliable performance, and was extremely proud of his creation:

You see, with [designing] weapons, it is like a woman who bears children. For months she carries her baby and thinks about it. A designer does much the same thing with a prototype. I felt like a mother – always proud. It is a special feeling, as if you were awarded with a special award. I shot with it a lot. I still do now. That is why I am hard of hearing.⁷

The AK-47's bare-bones design is the secret to its success. While other assault rifles jam if only slightly fouled, the AK will fire as if it has just been cleaned, even after being dragged through the dirt. It has few components, making it easy to strip and maintain. It is gas-operated, which means its pistons are activated by the case ejection, feed and cocking mechanisms, while ammunition is fed from a banana-shaped magazine that holds thirty rounds – increasing the rotation of the bolt, which makes it more reliable. The original AK-47 uses the 7.62 × 39 mm round and can fire either single shots (for long distances) or up to 600 rounds per minute in automatic mode (for close ranges). It is extremely accurate out to 300 meters, the range within which small arms are typically used in modern wars.⁸

The weapon's success is also explained by continuous improvements, including enhancements to its stability and accuracy, moderation in the rate of fire, plastic magazines and grips, a muzzle compensator and a multi-purpose bayonet. Kalashnikov welcomed feedback from ordinary soldiers, whose lives rested on the effectiveness of his rifle. Although many models have been produced, each titled by the year of original manufacture, it is still universally known as the AK-47 or the AK. The best-known models are the AKM (modernized), a 7.62 caliber rifle which is currently the most widely used version and the AK-74 – an AKM modified to fire a 5.45 × 39 mm bullet (the M74). The AKM is also some 680g lighter than the AK-47, making it less of a burden for soldiers. Advances in manufacturing led to the mass production of the AKM model, which replaced the AK-47 in the late 1950s. As

the AKM was introduced into the Soviet armed forces, the original AK-47s were given to local militias around the world. Eventually, through gun trafficking networks, these weapons made their way into the hands of terrorists, criminals and other guerrilla organizations. Today, these groups also have the more modern versions of the AK-47 in their arsenals.⁹

Kalashnikov never received any royalties, only international renown and an assortment of Soviet and Russian honors, which he cherishes: 'My aim was to create armaments to protect the borders of my motherland'. In 2003, after years of turning down offers, Kalashnikov finally signed an agreement with a German company (Marken Marketing International) that authorized the use of his name on a line of 'manly products' including snowboards, umbrellas, shaving foam, watches and penknives. He would have received thirty-three per cent of the profits from this product line but the deal never materialized. Kalashnikov now lends his name to Kalashnikov Vodka (currently sold in London) and Kalashnikov Swiss watches. He has been approached by American companies but has refused to team up with them because 'I thought if an American company used my name for profit it would have been a betrayal of the motherland'.¹⁰

weapons, weapons everywhere

The Soviets were delighted with the AK-47. As explained by author Larry Kahaner:

[t]he Soviet Union had a huge conscript army of poorly trained soldiers from the various Soviet states, many of whom could not read or write and those that could often spoke different languages. This made standardized training difficult. [T]he AK suited the Soviet army because it was easy to fire, did not require a manual or training and rarely broke down.¹¹

Recognizing the AK-47's exceptional utility and reliability, the Soviet Union began to distribute it through its Cold War networks, which were comprised of Warsaw Pact countries (in

particular East Germany, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary) and non-pact allies (North Korea and Yugoslavia). These countries purchased and produced millions of AK-47s: 'Politics aside, the AK-47 was the perfect item to sell. 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'.¹²

China and Poland began production of their own versions of the AK-47 in 1956 and Hungary, Bulgaria, East Germany, North Korea and Yugoslavia followed soon after. The Soviets encouraged production and did not charge licensing fees. An estimated fifteen to twenty million of the Chinese variant, the Type 56 rifle, were produced for China's own military and for export. East Germany and Poland each produced an estimated two million; Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria together are believed to have produced an additional two million and Yugoslavia and North Korea an estimated four to five million (North Korea accounts for two-thirds of that total).¹³ This list is not exhaustive, as variants of the AK-47 have been manufactured across the world.

Kalashnikov had no idea his weapon would have such world-wide appeal:

I made it to protect the motherland. And then they spread the weapon [around the world] – not because I wanted them to. Not at my choice. Then it was like a genie out of the bottle and it began to walk all on its own and in directions I did not want.¹⁴

The widespread production of AK series rifles contributed to their proliferation. Between seventy and a hundred million rifles are in circulation – ten times the number of Uzis or M-16s. AK-47s are in the national inventories of at least fifty-eight countries and have been used by states and non-state actors in conflicts in over ninety.¹⁵

the AK-47: cultural icon

The AK-47 is more than just an effective tool of war; in many countries, it is also a cultural icon. It is featured on the coats of

arms of Zimbabwe and Mozambique and previously on that of Burkina Faso (until it adopted a more peace-oriented symbol), and appears on the Mozambican flag and currency. Not all Mozambicans are happy with their country's homage to its revolutionary past. In June 2005, the Mozambican parliament approved a law to change the flag and national emblem and ran a competition for a new design to reflect the country's return to peace. Some Mozambicans question the use of scarce resources on such an endeavor, but for many, removing the gun from the flag is an important symbol of their country's commitment to peace. As one Mozambican legislator put it, 'As a peaceful country, you can't have a flag with a gun on it. For children growing up now in peace, they see a flag with a gun on it and it doesn't make sense'.¹⁶

Non-state groups also use AK-47s and other guns in their logos. The insignias of Hamas and the An-Najah Students Cell of the Islamic Palestine Block use the M16 and three well-known terrorist groups use the AK-47 in their insignias to signify a commitment to armed struggle. The Palestinian Liberation Front, which operates in Israel, Lebanon and Egypt, has AK-47s in its emblems and the Salafist Group for Call and Combat, which operates in Algeria, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger, has a sword and an AK-47 in its symbol. Hezbollah's symbol includes a fist clutching an AK-47, with the AK forming the 'I' of 'Allah'.¹⁷

In South Africa, an anti-apartheid music group named itself AK-47. The name 'Kalash' is common in some countries in Africa. When Kalashnikov was introduced to guerrilla fighters in Mozambique, they told him that they had named babies after his weapon.¹⁸ Kalashnikov takes great pride in this:

When I met the Mozambique minister of defense, he presented me with his country's national banner, which carries the image of a Kalashnikov sub-machine-gun. And he told me that when all the liberation soldiers went home to their villages, they named their sons 'Kalash'. I think this is an honor, not just a military success. It's a success in life when people are named after me, after Mikhail Kalashnikov.¹⁹

Images of the AK-47 abound in today's conflicts. Videos of Osama Bin Laden show him firing an AK-47 or sitting with one close at hand. Film of Saddam Hussein's capture by US forces shows two AKs in his hideout. Many visitors to the Ishmash company (where the AK-47 was originally produced) wear t-shirts advertising the 'AK-47 World Destruction Tour' with Chechnya, Afghanistan, the Gaza Strip, the Congo and Nagorno-Karabakh listed as tour stops.²⁰

the AK-47: cold war tool

The reliability of the AK-47 explains its ubiquity in Cold War conflicts. In the Vietnam War, the North Vietnamese used the AK-47 (predominantly the Type 56 Chinese variant). Chris McNab claims that three AK-wielding Vietcong could fire ninety rounds in four seconds. The majority of American troops relied on the M14, and later the M16, which fared poorly in the jungle. According to Larry Kahaner, Vietcong forces were known to leave behind US rifles after killing American soldiers or raiding their caches, while US forces 'routinely took AK-47s from enemy dead and used them instead of their M16s. This practice became so commonplace that soldiers in the field officially were banned from using AK-47s, because their distinct sound attracted friendly fire'.²¹

Its reputation solidified by its successes in the Vietnam War, the AK-47 was frequently used in struggles in other regions. The 1970s and 1980s saw a huge influx of small arms, including AK-47s, into Central America. While the United States and the Soviet Union had a hand in these transfers, they tried to conceal their involvement, using proxy sources and dealers. The United States routinely purchased Soviet bloc weapons for insurgent groups. In fact, the CIA and US Department of Defense are believed still to maintain stocks of Soviet-bloc weapons, including AK-47s, which originated from Eastern Europe and entered the United States through Wilmington, North Carolina. When the US did not supply weapons, other allies picked up the slack. After the

United States officially cut off military assistance to Guatemala in 1977, Israel supplied the Guatemalan government with fifteen thousand Galil rifles (the Israeli variant of the AK), Uzis, M-79s, bazookas, mortars and production rights for the Galil. Similarly, when the United States stopped covert aid to the Nicaraguan Contras, the head of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force – the largest rebel group – claimed they had obtained ten thousand Polish AK-47s using \$15 million from a non-US source.²²

The Communist arms pipeline ran through Cuba, which received weapons from the Soviet Union, its Warsaw Pact allies and North Korea. Cuba then supplied weapons to other countries, for example to the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, who relied on the AK-47 as their main weapon of war and, it is believed, to pro-Communist rebels in Angola. In El Salvador, FMLN guerrillas received AK-47s to fight the US-backed government. These were provided by Honduran military officials from CIA weapons caches left over from the Nicaraguan civil war. According to Frank Smyth, who traveled with FMLN guerrillas, the AK-47s boosted the rebels' morale; they believed the weapons gave them tactical advantages – longer range and heavier bullets – over the American weapons both sides had been using.²³

In Central America, both sides were often armed with AK-47s. As mentioned earlier, the Nicaraguan Contras were believed to have ten thousand Polish AK-47s in their arsenal, even though Polish officials ridiculed the idea that they would sell weapons that could be used against the Marxist Sandinistas. US officials believed the weapons could have been diverted, although Poland was eager to obtain cash to pay off foreign debts. The shipment was reportedly sent from the Bulgarian port of Burgas via an unidentified Latin American country hostile to the Sandinista government. AK-47s used by the Contras are also thought to have come from stocks confiscated by Israel from the Palestinian Liberation Organization, supplied to curry favor with the United States.²⁴

Although most Cold War-related armed conflicts have ended, the effects of the arms used to fight them persist. In many former Cold War battlegrounds, the number of deaths and level of

violence has increased since the conflicts' ends. Moreover, weapons continue to flow into the region. Although some of its wars have been over for more than a decade, significant quantities of arms still stream to Central America. Between 1996 and 1999, the US government sent \$376,000 worth of small arms to Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras and Panama and authorized private industry sales totaled over \$66 million.²⁵

The availability of a wide range of guns – including handguns, rifles and machine-guns – has had a significant effect on violence and crime. Easy access has facilitated the acquisition and use of these weapons by criminals, gangs and drug traffickers. For example, ineffective disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programs in Nicaragua, which failed to prevent the re-arming of some twenty thousand men in the mid-1990s, have contributed to armed violence and crime in that country. In 2000, forty-four per cent of crimes in Nicaragua involved military-style weapons. Other Latin American countries also suffer from high levels of gun violence. Although murder rates in El Salvador have decreased since the end of the war in 1992, the proportion of murders committed with firearms rose from fifty-five per cent in 1990–95 to seventy-five per cent in 1999. In 2001 in Honduras, firearms caused eighty-two per cent of deaths in young adults. Thirty-six per cent of the deaths involved AK-47s. In comparison, of the 582 murders reported in Canada in 2002, only a quarter were committed with firearms.²⁶