



The Social History of the Machine Gun

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From Reader Review The Social History of the Machine Gun for online ebook

Steve Scott says

An outstanding overview of the development of the machine gun through history. Moreover, it gives an insightful analysis of the use of the weapon and its social impact worldwide.

Ellis's book was used by a reference by a number of other authors I'd read recently.

The only thing I didn't like about it was the poor quality of the printing of this issue. There were times when sentences were chopped off. It wasn't that often, but enough to irk me.

Eric says

I love these concise and copiously illustrated socio-cultural histories of weapons technology. I liked Sven Lindquist's *A History of Bombing*, and must make time for Patrick Wright's *Tank*. Ellis is especially good on the watershed of the American Civil War, the conflict which produced the Gatling gun, as well as the armored, turreted warship and the tank (just a bookish hunch of mine, but during the siege of Vicksburg, Grant is said to have put sharpshooters in armored train cars which he rolled right up to the Confederate trenches; c'mon, that's a tank!). Ellis discusses the machine gun as a characteristic product of nineteenth century American society, both in peace (lack of vested interests in artisanal gunsmithing, and a precocity of machine tools and interchangeable parts) and in war (lack of a conservative military aristocracy, and a consequent willingness among leaders to fight the kind of war demanded by new technology and democratic social organization, not that demanded by static notions of knightly chivalry or sporting "fair play"; in his *Personal Memoirs*, that book of eerily calm martial arts quips, Grant wrote, "War is progressive" -- a maxim (get it, Maxim!) John Keegan said was totally abhorrent to Grant's European contemporaries). In the American Civil War

it was found that the techniques of mass production, and the enormous improvements in communications that had accompanied the expansion of the market, meant that each side in the war was able to field very large armies, and to raise and equip huge numbers of reserves to replace the casualties. The Americans found that industrialization and mass production brought with them mass war, in which an unprecedentedly large proportion of the population could be funneled to the front. It would seem to be no coincidence that it was in America, the first country to experience this new type of warfare, that the first workable machine guns appeared. For the machine gun was above all else the weapon of mass warfare, the ideal arm for a conflict in which the individual soldier was expendable. In the War Between the States warfare first showed the signs of the transition to total warfare, in which nations pitted their whole productive capacity against each other. In such wars it is essential to kill as many of the enemy as possible in the quickest, most economical way. For this the machine gun was ideal.

Military History should be terrifying to read. And Ellis is no less insightful -- in his chapter on the Tommy

gun in Hollywood gangster films -- on contemporary American fetishizing of the manliness of automatic fire:

...the machine gun has become something of a contemporary icon. The sheer violence of its action, and the indiscriminate deadliness of its effect, has made it a useful symbol for expressing modern man's frenzied attempts to assert himself in an increasingly complex and depersonalized world. [I]n the First World War the machine gun helped to engender this feeling of individual irrelevance in the face of the new technology of death. Since then, however, technological innovations have left the machine gun far behind. The machine gun has now become personalized, itself the means by which men desperately try to make their mark on a world in which they feel increasingly powerless. In the fantasy world at least technology is turned against itself.

Allan Pilch says

I had to use this book on a paper I wrote this book is very in depth and offers a great analysis

xDEAD ENDx says

Reads too much like a military history of white men. Aside from a very slim chapter about the use of machine guns by gangsters and in film, there's little else discussing how "the social" was affected.

There's sort of something interesting being said about how machine guns were seen as emasculating for the military, similar to the feeling around drones these days, but it feels only partially developed and doesn't really have resonance.

Bodicainking says

An enjoyable polemic, covering the birth of the machine gun and its relationship to society - particularly its lack of acceptance by the pre-Great War military establishment. Some sections kicked off my mental "citation needed" alarm, but it is otherwise well-referenced and makes a convincing central argument of the machine gun as the ultimate expression of the changeover from pre-industrial to industrial society.

The work shows its age however as it carries forward the depersonalising of warfare to an apocalyptic conclusion of short-circuit-led nuclear armageddon. I wonder very much what the author would feel about modern counter-insurgency and undeclared or frozen wars, with drones and such like.

As a bit of a military buff, the central thesis will, I think, not prove much of a surprise to those who study military history generally - this book comes at its subject as if the machine gun is an objective item of violence, then attempts to place the weapon in a social & historical context. I am sure to many this will be an interesting and unexpected connection, but to someone who feels you can only truly understand a weapon, an army, a campaign and a war within the complete context of the society using it, no big surprises will come

from the text.

David Maack says

The social history of the machine gun, by John Ellis was a good book. It started with the first guns that inspired the machine gun, such as the organ gun, and went all the way to one of the more amazing modern guns, the Vulcan. I liked that it was well organized because it was easy to follow. I watch the history channel a lot so that helped me understand some of the lingo going on in the book. Over all I liked the book, it got boring every now and then, but other than that it was a good book.

Joseph Hirsch says

Sam Colt may have made Men equal but John Browning made Men into Machines

This is the second flat-out masterpiece I've read from John Ellis. His thesis in "Machine Gun" is one I don't always agree with, but it's always fascinating, and well-thought out. That thesis runs thusly, in a nutshell: A general tendency by gerontocratic elites (sometimes literally old, sometimes just in their views) at first resisted the implementation of more advanced weapons, fearing it was a threat to their power. Then they accepted that these dangerous tools had a use (against colonized/or occupied people whom they considered their inferiors), but that these weapons should and would be of negligible significance in intra-European warfare. Untold millions died due to their intentional malice and later miscalculations, and the warrior's ethos was totally subsumed and (pardon the pun) outgunned by technology. Heart, courage, elan, esprit-de-corps and other martial values meant nothing in the face of increasingly devastating technology (created, supposedly, as a mutual deterrent against the kind of bloodshed that broke out and is still endemic to man).

Mr. Ellis does some good collateral work on discussing the public's fascination with the machine-gun (especially the American, movie-going public), but he does not get bogged down in pop culture or allow his study to devolve into a postmodern farce like the bulk of what passes for scholarship today. The work is lucid and clear, and while it is fairly short, it wastes no time and packs quite a punch in its graceful-yet-economic treatment of hundreds of years of social and technological advancement. The work is billed as a "social history" but it's as much a philosophical rumination on Man's ability to continuously create new problems by trying to solve old ones, through what James Kunstler called "techno-narcissism."

It should be added that the book is not a polemic or a sermon for or against gun control, and while there are enough technical details to satisfy a gear-head's desire to know the physics and mechanics of the guns in question, the author never loses sight of the fact that these are killing machines being created and Pandora's box is being prized ever wider with each new development. A handful of photos are included. Highest recommendation.

Jim says

The Industrial Revolution led directly to a military revolution, and this book does a fine job of explaining how that came to be. The cost in human lives because old-school military men were unable to understand the forces of mechanization and their affect on the battlefield are beyond staggering. Author John Ellis writes colorfully, movingly, and effectively not only about man's inhumanity to man, but about man's stupidity and

self-righteousness. This is a fascinating book.

Andre Diehl says

Bomb ass shit.

Andrew W. says

was a good read if a bit dry.

Ike Sharpless says

This book helped to shape my views on the role of technology in society - it's a fascinating overview of the machine gun's integration into warfare from the Maxim gun in the late 19th century to the brutally asymmetrical colonial wars in Africa to the absurdity of the charge of the light brigade in WW1. The central idea, that the machine gun fit poorly with the European military's ossified hierarchy, should, and hopefully did, serve as a lesson for social policy surrounding technology.

If you like this book, I'd also recommend Robert O'Connell's *Of Arms and Men*, John Keegan's *The Face of Battle*, and Barbara Ehrenreich's *Blood Rites*.

Hadrian says

The title explains well the purpose of this book. The machine gun was an instance of a technological revolution, but one which faced substantial resistance from conservative army leadership which was profoundly resistant to change and insistent upon massed infantry and cavalry tactics. Political leadership was more receptive to the machine gun, especially after demonstrations, but the military leadership continued to insist on bayonets, sabers, and cavalry. This culminated in the ultimate tragedy of the First World War, where a single German machine gun team could mow down an entire platoon with no casualties.

However, even the extremely conservative British used the machine gun in their colonial possessions, as a means of expanding and solidifying control over the native population.

The bulk of the narrative ends in 1918, although there is a brief chapter on submachine guns in the popular media, including the marketing of the Thompson SMG to homeowners for self-defense, and its subsequent use by criminal gangs in the 1920s and 1930s. The gun is a combination of multiple factors, including the industrial and technical advancement of the 19th century and the new logistics of war, and it was this gap in leadership and implementation which led to catastrophe.

The book is light on statistics and heavy on anecdotes, although its use of the former is pertinent, especially with sales figures. The illustrations and photographs are also a nice edition. A light read about a gruesome topic.

Kevin says

This is a great analyses of the role of Industrialisation and modern technology had in mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century warfare. We all know about the most famous machine guns, the Gatling gun (invented during the American Civil War of 1861-65), as well as the Thompson - the infamous 'Tommy Gun', of this period, and not to mention the Maxim gun - all were pivotal to changing the nature of the long standing methods of waging war that relied on personal bravery - an individual heroism that the traditional officer corps aspired to, that became so obsolete on the fields of France between 1914-1918 coming from the mechanisation of warfare and mass impersonal slaughter due to the Maxim guns that they became renowned for. Old methods of waging war combined with the modern technology of the period led to the trenches of World War One - not one side in this most brutal of conflicts could gain ground using parade-like advances across fields that were dominated by rapid-firing machine guns (on both sides - but the Maxim was the blueprint design that was used by various Industrialised countries of this period). And the invention of the machine gun came from America, due to lacking a workforce of craftsmen (as they were immigrants), so they relied on developing machine tools and interchangeable parts - lathes, mass production techniques and so on - that allowed the development of more refined, intricate and easily replaceable methods of production, compared to traditional hand-crafted weapons for instance coming from Britain. It became more cost-effective.

The machine gun, whilst the Gatling Gun was used to some effect in the Civil War of 1861-65, really never was accepted fully into the Military establishment, due to old-class entrenched ideas about individual heroism, that the soldier was the key figure on the battlefield, not any machine. In fact, prior to World War One, the Gatlings were used in America to suppress striking workers, or at least used as a form of intimidation to the various worker disputes by detective agencies and law enforcement. Also, the Colonial British used them to suppress Native Africans, from Egypt down to South Africa for their territorial ambitions during the late 19thC. Again, Gatlings were used to intimidate and kill on a mass scale, but whilst it showed the machine gun was an effective 'machine', mainly for imperialist 'adventures', still many of the Military Hierarchy refused to adopt them in any number for the standing Army - it took until WW1 for their ideas to (slowly) adapt, the book mentioning the Somme offensive of 1916 that, in one instance, saw several Germans with a Maxim literally decimate about two Battalions, several hundred soldiers mowed down with just one weapon and few men. It became a devastating invention - old methods and new firepower were a deadly mix, and the 19thC tactics came from the military elite who were stubborn to adapt and recognise the machine guns importance.

Whilst the book deals primarily with a big chapter on WW1 (which is where the machine gun comes into its own and proves its worth to the military), it also tips its cap briefly towards modern culture. A certain Colonel Thompson developed a weapon that was intended for clearing trenches during WW1, called the Thompson sub-machine gun, but because it was developed too late for use during the war, ended up being taken on by gangsters such as Al Capone and became the infamous weapon of the Mafia during the 1930s. The Tommy Gun, famous for its round barreled ammo cartridge. Think the St. Valentines Day gangster massacre of 1929, and we are witnessing the beginnings of automatic weapons owned by citizens - which (even though the book does not mention it) has had some devastating results in modern-day American society.

The book is a Social-History in the sense of how, culturally at least, the machine gun has implicated itself in society, of how the entrenched class-orientated Military of America and Europe refused to believe a scientific/technological invention could really replace individual heroism on the battlefield, that at least at the beginning of WW1, still believed that the Cavalry would still play a dominant force of breaking the enemy

lines and so on. One quote from the book that struck a chord was that 'the spade' became the soldiers best weapon, to dig trenches to escape the barrage of machine gun rounds, which is why WW1 became a stalemate and such a bloody massacre for all countries involved. A good study, short and could have done more with a modern update with a more social history of the effect semi-automatic weapons have had upon innocent civilians in peacetime, which I think it really lacked. 4 stars for the unique take on weaponry.

Anthony Ryan says

A fascinating insight into the destructive aspect inherent in the human facility for invention. Ellis eschews tedious technical exposition to focus on the social and political ramifications resulting from the invention of automated gunfire, ranging from the European colonisation of Africa to the slaughter of World War One and the gang violence of the Depression era. Compelling and chilling in equal measure.

Checkman says

Mr. Ellis has written a most unusual book. His thesis contends that the invention of the machine gun ,and the failure of the military to recognize it significance in the decades leading up to WWI, considering it useful only against tribesmen and other "primitives", led directly to the horrific slaughter of WWI and the static warfare of the trenches.

Ellis looks in depth at the military subculture of Victorian England and how it was incapable of recognizing the significance of the machine gun-and how those who attempted to place the weapon into the British Army's scheme of things were sanctioned and gagged. When we finally get to the chapter on WWI it is akin to reading one of Shakespeare's tragedies. The inevitability of the butchery is made all that more terrible by the knowledge that the deliberate myopia of the British and French higher command ensured that their troops used outmoded tactics against emplaced German forces and their Maxim guns.

The author gives one case where two German machine guns annihilated a six-hundred man British infantry battalion in the space of a couple of hours with no casualties sustained by the Germans. In other words six German soldiers killed and wounded hundreds.

The final chapter covers the years following WWI as well as the role of the weapon in movies of all things. Some might disagree with Mr. Ellis. To consider that the invention of one device could be responsible for such sweeping changes in both social and military circles is unrealistic. However Mr. Ellis presents a very skillful work that states just that. If you are looking for a technical history of the machine gun then this book isn't for you, but if you are curious about the impact that the industrial revolution has made on humanity then this book will be a fascinating read.
