Kalashnikov Semi-Automatic Rifle – I

Lead: The world’s greatest killing machine, with some 250,000 victims a year, is a Russian invention, the Ak-47, Mr. Kalashnikov’s semi-automatic assault rifle.

Intro: A Moment in Time with Dan Roberts

Content: At the high-point of Operation Barbarossa, Adolf Hitler’s ultimately disastrous invasion of Russia that began in 1941, units of the German Army were approaching the outskirts of Moscow. In
September they arrived at Bryansk, a city buried in the forest along the Desna River southwest of Moscow. Nazi bombing nearly wiped out the town, killing more than 80,000. Nearly 200,000 were taken into slave camps.

During the battle a young Soviet tank commander, Mikhail Kalashnikov, was trying to skirt around the edge of the enemy advance when his tank was disabled by incoming artillery. His shoulder was impaled by a dislodged a piece of the tank’s armor. Disoriented and bleeding, he and other wounded were being evacuated to a nearby hospital when the truck carrying them paused briefly in a nearby village. Kalashnikov and the driver dismounted and began to check the area for Germans. When they returned they found a scene of carnage so horrendous that Kalashnikov became ill. In their absence Nazi soldiers on motorcycles blew by the truck riddling it with
submachine fire leaving all in it, doctors and patients, horribly wounded or close to death. For days the two survivors wandered, trying not to get caught, hoping to find help. When they found a hospital, Kalashnikov spent his recovery nights brooding over the slaughter he had witnessed.

Born to a family exiled to Siberia by the Bolsheviks in a political purge, as a teenager Kalashnikov developed a mechanical bent with a particular interest in firearms. He demonstrated his skill by making improvements to his tank until he was taken out of the war because of his injuries. While convalescing his obsession became to create a weapon to counteract the German firearm that had caused the massacre he had witnessed outside Bryansk. What Russian soldiers came to fear most was the German *Sturmgewehr* or “storm rifle,” the first modern semi-automatic assault weapon
eventually designated the MP44 and designed in part by Hugo Schmeisser.

Because of his wounds, Kalashnikov was out of the conflict and returned to his pre-war job working for the railroad. Assigned to the metal shop, he and his fellow workers pursued his passion to find a weapon to counteract the Sturmgewehr’s light weight and fast, automatic fire. As he worked he came up with additional requirements. It had to be cheap and simple to make, but more importantly it had to reliably perform in extreme conditions, to be shot, stripped and cleaned with gloves on, and work whether hot or cold, wet or dry, or full of mud and sand. Here was where Kalashnikov found his special talent. He was not a creative firearms genius like Browning, rather he was able to take existing technology, adapt and improve it to fit the needs of first the Soviet Army and then,
remarkably, insurgent armies world-wide. The father of the AK-47 was, in fact, Hugo Schmeisser because the AK was a knock-off of the StG44 created by Schmeisser’s design team in 1944 and produced in large but insufficient numbers to affect the war’s outcome. Next time: the miracle weapon.

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Resources


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