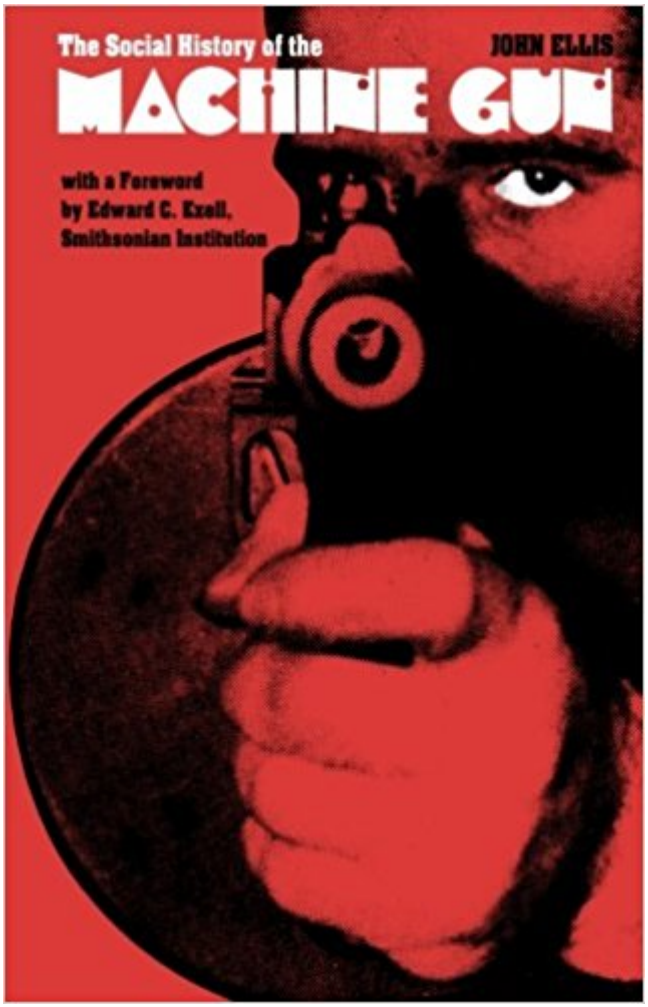
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The Social History Of The Machine Gun



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Book by Ellis, John

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Customer Reviews

"A classic study of the cultural implications of a lethal technology. Reissued with a foreword and an excellent bibliographic essay on automatic weapons by Edward Ezell, it remains provocative and persuasive." (Isis)"Arguing that the history of technology is inseparable from social history in general, Mr. Ellis weighs the machine gun’s impact on weaponry, warfare, and society." (New York Times)

I’ve been doing a lot of reading about "The Great War during the run up to its 100th anniversary. This book is an essential to understanding the significance of one of two technological advances in killing people that really did shape the war, military tactics, and grand strategy. Careful reading also provides a great insight into the nature of the colonial powers’ "wars" in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, debunking the heroic myths of fabulists like Rudyard Kipling and Winston Churchill about the nobility of the "steady" British soldier. It was the Maxim that mowed down tens of thousands of "natives" and made modern colonialism possible.By the way, John Ellis is a wonderfully clear thinker about military history, worth ten or twenty of the usual mere chronicler. He actually thinks and uses relevant data. See, for example, his later "Brute Force" which shreds many of the myths of military strategy and leadership on the part of "The Greatest Generation."

A good read, and a good explanation on how the Europeans conquered Africa with such small numbers of men. In America they used small pox and measles to conquer, in Africa, they used the machine gun

"The only thing harder than putting a new idea into a military mind is taking an old idea out." Liddell HartI consider myself exceptionally well read in military history and found most books deal with pre-conflict diplomacy, diplomatic failure, initiation of conflict, strategy, tactical considerations, campaigns, occupation, end of conflict results and the resultant impact on societies and nations. Once in a while I read a book that is so profound that I experience what I call an intellectual epiphany. The last time I had that was in 1990 when I read John Ellis's Brute Force. It studied WW II in a way I had never thought of and never seen in all the WW II books I have read. I looked forward to reading The History of the Machine Gun and was not disappointed, although I think it is not as much an intellectual tour de force as Brute Force. Ellis does not study the history of the machine gun in a Unitarian way, but weaves a story incorporating social, military and technological history into a smooth formula. He shows there is an absolute interplay between the zeitgeist of social [especially class], military and technological forces. He also shows that unless there are the proper changes and alignment of forces progress is retarded. Multiple factors created by the Civil War aided in the development of the machine gun. The author states that the American Civil War "was the first war in which both sides were able to effectively mobilize the potential, in terms of materiel and manpower" [pg 24] a point I am not sure I agree with [i.e. the Napoleonic and Crimean wars or were they an adumbration of the Civil War]. He also states that "A new emphasis was placed upon the material ability to kill as many men as possible" [pg 24] and three factors were responsible for the first machine gun to be invented in the United State. They were as follows; first, because of early 19th Century labor shortages America had to rely on streamlined mechanized processes, secondly, the arms industry readily adopted the mechanized process and third, "the dependence upon machinery created a new faith in the unlimited potential of machines"[pg 23]. As with most breakthrough inventions, there is a leit motif of multiple people who claim be the first to originate the idea. Of this group, only Richard Gatling's machine gun was reasonably reliable. He then had the task of trying to convince the U.S. Army of the practicality and advantages of this weapon as a force multiplier. The recurring theme of the machine gun was the reluctance of high military officers and procurement bureaucracies to see the tactical and strategic advantage that the machine gun imparts to the army that uses it in an attack or defense mode. Interestingly, it wasn't until 1866 that the U.S. Army adopted the Gatling gun and only in limited numbers. Unfortunately for Gatling, the

sales nationally and internationally never reached numbers that would be considered a commercial success. Many people felt the Gatling gun was not a true machine gun since it needed to be hand cranked. It was not until 1882 that Hiram Maxim, who was born in Maine, patented the first true machine gun. It would continuously fire when the trigger was pulled and stop when it was released. It used the force of the recoil to power the cycle. In 1890 the Browning machine gun was patented. It used the power of explosive gases to operate. It is interesting that the introduction of these guns was limited until the onset of WW I, even with widespread international licensing agreements. The author investigates the apparent lack of acceptance of what appears to be a very innovative and breakthrough device, that obviously to an observer looking back, would seem intuitive and should have been readily embraced. The author has some very compelling insights into the dynamics of the decision making process. For example, in 1875 the British Army was dominated by the upper class, with 18 percent aristocracy, and 32 percent gentry. In the British Army of 1912, those of Major General and higher composed respectively, 24 percent and 40 percent of the officer cohort. This type of skewing was also seen in all the major European armies. Ellis points out that the British Army was characterized by an anti-intellectualism which eschewed investigative reading and knowledge of mechanical or technical innovations. As the author states, the officer corps were "romantics in an industrial age" [pg 49]. Their concept of war was the cavalry charge, a relic of the previous century of warfare. The officer corps failed to see the effect of mechanization on warfare. "For them war still was an act of will. Military memories and traditions had been formed in the pre-industrial age when the final bayonet or cavalry charge might be decisive. For them, in the last analysis, man was the master of the battlefield" [pg 50]. The officers refused to be a cog in the military machinery because in their eyes the machine gun made them replaceable and ordinary. Their class, societal position and uniqueness were made irrelevant by the machine gun. In the late 19th Century there was a dichotomy in the use of the machine gun. The officer corps was reluctant to incorporate it in the use of European armies, but they were very receptive to using them in their colonial endeavors. There was considerable expansion of colonialism/imperialism in this era, including those new to the game such as Belgium and Germany. The reasons for imperialist expansion were for "search for markets, strategical considerations and a question of national pride" [pg 80]. The imperialistic agenda was marked by racism, paternalism and even hatred. In Asia, England was the major player, with France and Germany having minor roles, but Africa was in the game for all. In Africa, both Arab and Black, the machine gun played a significant tactical role in suppressing local insurrections with mechanical efficiency. The United States Army, similar to its European counterparts, continued to be resistant to incorporate the machine gun into its arsenal in

significant numbers. It had only minimal use in the Indian Wars, but, surprisingly, they were available to Custer and if he took them with him the Battle of the Little Big Horn may have had a different outcome. In the Spanish American War the Gatling gun was used, but had little tactical effect.By the turn of the century little progress had been made in the incorporation of the machine gun into European Armies. The British Army continued with its aristocratic detachment, the French the same, with also a fin de siecle attitude. The Germans were somewhat more receptive. Ellis then examines WW I with some very perceptive insights. He makes the distinction between limited and total wars, with WW I being the latter. He states that in total war "adversaries fight to the limits of the weaker side" [pg 112]. In WW I "the war became one of attrition in which victory could not be gained until one's enemy had been bled dry"[pg 113]. The British thought 100,000 would do the job, by September 500,000, and by December 1915 it was 3,500,000. Therefore, a weapon that could kill in numbers and do it efficiently and cheaply would be of inordinate value. Into this spot immerged the machine gun. Incredibly, even in the face of German success in use of the machine gun, the British were almost criminal in their reluctance to increase the number of machine guns per battalion. The high command continued to be profligate in the use of British soldiers attacking German machine gun nests. I have always been incensed with the aristocratic distain for the lives of enlisted soldiers, and none brings it to the fore than the totally unimaginative leadership of the British High Command. Eventually, the British and French realized the inadequacies of their offensive/defensive tactics and strategies and changed. It was the industrial might and manpower of the Allies, with American belated participation, that eventually overwhelmed the Germans. Even after the war some British Military leaders failed to admit the folly of their plans. It is incredible that General Haig in an interview in 1925 still refused to say that the machine gun played a pivotal role in the war. Unimaginative people always remain unimaginative and in this case dangerous.After the war it is of interest that again the military was reluctant to embrace the lightweight submachine gun. However, the American gangster quickly saw the utility of this weapon and used it with great success, adding a colorful page to our history. I think that Ellis very successfully shows how the machine gun was one of the most important vehicles to bring the military into the mechanical/technical age and of course killing with mechanical efficiency. He explains the reluctance of the military to accept this advance because it threatened the principles upon which it was based, both on a sociological and class basis. In the interwar years there continued to be some blindness to obvious technological advances such as mass of tank forces rejected by the British but enthusiastically incorporated by Guderian and superiority of air power being rejected by the battleship admirals of the U.S. Navy, however, during and after WW II the Allied High Command grasped the advantage of technology

and turned in the other direction where new technology was readily embraced and actively promoted. This is especially true of the U.S. military in the postwar period and beyond. My observation is that class is not a factor now and the military seems more malleable and less resistant to change. I think it is hard but more likely for forward thinking officers to bring about implementation of progressive ideas.

I've read this a couple of times. It's a classic. Font size is too small, but the content is thorough and the citations extension. Loaned it to a cop. Haven't gotten it back yet. Heard it's making the rounds. Buy it for your library.

A great read.

Great writing great subject

Throughout the book, Ellis refers to John Moses Browning as William J. Browning. I wonder how many other comparable errors are in this book.

Very interesting

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