

(especially in the area of handguns). The fact that many manufacturers of civilian firearms are also manufacturers of military firearms only reinforces this situation.

Today, the primary personal infantry small arm of most armies is a light SLR capable of firing on both semi-automatic or automatic settings (select fire). The principal weapons caliber are 9 x 18 or 19 mm (usually reserved for handguns and sub-machine guns), 5.56 x 39 mm and 45 mm (usually reserved for rifles/assault rifles¹⁸), and 7.62 x 39 mm and 51 mm (also for rifles/assault rifles and light machine guns). The most common personal combat weapons now in use are (or are variants of) the American AR-15/M16, the Russian/FSU AK-47/AK-74, the Belgian FN FAL and the German H&K G-3. These are by and large the weapons that have been used in the last three decades to inflict the majority of casualties in insurgencies and civil wars, and in their aftermath have remained to fuel both criminal and violent political conflict.¹⁹ They are circulating in an uncontrolled manner by the millions in such war zones and former war zones as the Balkans, central Africa, southern Africa, central America and south-east Asia. Retrieving most of them will be difficult, if not impossible. The issue here is not just one of political will but also the weak economic, social and political capacity in these regions needed to deal with this problem. While the weapons themselves did not create the situation for their use, one might wonder whether casualties would have been more limited if the small arms in question had been bolt action .303 Lee-Enfields, 30-06 inch Springfields, 7.9 mm Mausers or even .30 caliber semi-automatic 8 round magazine Garand M1 rifles. These weapons, while generally more lethal at longer ranges, do require considerably more skill to operate effectively and cannot lay down the same amount of fire in a given time. They are also certainly more difficult for the majority of women and children to use than assault rifles.²⁰ It should be noted that in most countries

¹⁸ The assault rifle definition is somewhat ambiguous. The name was derived from the WW II German Sturmgewehr (Assault Rifle) – a semi-automatic/automatic (selective-fire) short barreled rifle with a 30 round magazine and a rate of fire of 500 RPM. Hogg, p. 151. However, according to a U.S. Army definition, an assault rifle is a selective-fire rifle chambered for a cartridge of intermediate power. See www.infinet.com/~bmueller/Docs/Glossary. An assault rifle has a shorter barrel and a shorter effective range than a standard rifle. It falls somewhere between a sub-machine gun and a rifle.

¹⁹ The evidence supporting the assumption that small arms are the greatest casualty producers within the context described is largely hearsay and anecdotal. Statements contained in some of the advocacy literature on SALW control suggesting that 80 percent of all casualties in conflict are women and children (this does not appear to include male non-combatants) or that 90 percent of all casualties are caused by small arms are not supported by reliable statistical evidence. Most of the execution-style murders facilitated by small arms in the Balkans were directed against males, while indiscriminate casualties to women and children were the product of explosive ordnance. Casualties of such genocides as the one which occurred in Rwanda undoubtedly had a different gender and age ratio than conflicts in Central America.

²⁰ Some armies and police forces, particularly in developed countries, provide equal opportunity for women in front line police work, combat and near combat roles. A personal firearm requiring less strength to use ensures that these personnel requirements can be met. Light, low recoil small arms have benefits for men as well as women. However, making weapons easier to handle for men and women in combat also makes the use of those firearms easier for youths. Child soldiers has been an issue of considerable concern for a number of governments and NGOs.