

Commentary...

The Gun That Shook The World

By Jim Cornelius
News Editor

“Whatever happens, we have got The Maxim Gun — and they have not...”
— Hilaire Belloc

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On October 25, 1893, a huge impi of the Matabele Nation attacked a small British South Africa Company paramilitary force in what would become Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe).

Under the auspices of British tycoon and imperialist Cecil Rhodes, settlers had moved across southern Africa’s Limpopo River into Mashonaland in 1890. Relations with the Matabele, a powerful warrior nation related to the Zulu, had grown tense. The Matabele traditionally raided the Mashona people for slaves and bloodsport, a practice the new, mostly British, settlers of Mashonaland would not tolerate. A brutal massacre of Mashona by King Lobengula’s Matabele sparked war — and the invasion of Matabeleland by Rhodes’ paramilitaries, who brought a long five brand-new Maxim machine guns, mounted on horse-drawn

wagons.

The invaders forted up in a laager — very much like the classic “circle the wagons” scenario seen in old Western movies. The Matabele, armed primarily with assegai stabbing spears, though also with single-shot Martini-Henry rifles, charged the wagons at night, hoping to overwhelm the laagered force by sheer numbers and ferocity.

The laager defenders worked the Maxims, hammering out streams of lead. The result was devastating carnage. Some 1,500 Matabele — the flower of the nation — went down in windrows. The laager defenders suffered four killed and a handful of wounded. Another similar attack against a pioneer fort met the same fate, and the Matabele were broken, their lands thrown open for Rhodes’ company to settle and develop for mining and agriculture.

The First Matabele War of 1893 marked the first deployment of a true machine gun in combat.

The Maxim gun gave the European imperialists of the late Victorian Age an unassailable advantage

over adversaries that in most cases could field only Iron Age technology supplemented by a few trade rifles. The Maxim gun, field artillery and the railroad allowed Euro-American civilization to plant the flag in the deepest back-of-beyond, where the nations and empires of the West could exploit even the most remote hinterlands for minerals, furs, timber and other resources and commodities.

Then, in 1914, the nations and empires of the West used the same gun to attempt suicide.

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Battle becomes a very different thing when your adversary is armed not with spears and trade rifles, but with the same lethal technology that you possess. Evenly matched in firepower as they went to war in August 1914, the European powers were soon locked in a grotesque war of attrition, where machine-gun fire and fast-firing artillery swept the battlefield with such a lethal storm of steel that it was nearly impossible to advance over open ground.

Men died in their thousands, tens of thousands,



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Hiram Maxim’s machine gun rocked the world in the 20th century.

hundreds of thousands — falling in windrows before the roaring guns of their enemies. On August 22, 1914, 27,000 French soldiers died charging into German fire in the Battle of the Frontiers. On July 1, 1916, 20,000 British soldiers fell on a single day at The Somme, in a slaughter that forever after traumatized the British Empire. Germans, Austro-Hungarians, Russians, Turks all experienced the horror of advancing directly into the arc of the Grim Reaper’s scythe.

The industrial-scale killing of the Great War permanently scarred Western Civilization. It swung open the gates of hell and the twin scourges of Bolshevism and Fascism vomited forth into the world. The war and its

violent aftermath eroded and collapsed whatever moral authority the West could claim in its dominion over the peoples of the world. Indeed, it sowed the seeds of nationalism that would undermine Western dominance for all time.

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One hundred years later, we still live in the long shadow of the Great War. Eastern Europe faces a resurgent Russia that seeks to regain the power and prestige that it lost, won, and lost again in a century of fallout from the war. The Middle East continues to convulse in the aftershocks from the earthquake of 1918 that toppled the Ottoman Empire, which had dominated the

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