

Gun Country: Gun Capitalism, Culture, and Control in Cold War America. By Andrew C. McKevitt. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2023. 336 pp. Paperback, \$24.95. ISBN: 978-1-4696-7724-8.

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Although there are more civilian-owned guns than people in the United States, it was not always the case that the average consumer could, with relative ease and minimal expense, purchase multiple guns for their household. Scholars have traced the history of the gun and gun markets in many times and places, but none have explained why gun numbers quadrupled in the United States following World War II. This explosion in the gun market, according to Andrew C. McKevitt, is the specific result of entrepreneurs who took advantage of post-World War II arms surpluses in Europe, along with an American populace agitated by racial fears and Cold War paranoia. McKevitt is a historian of American foreign relations interested in global consumer politics, but business historians will be interested to engage with McKevitt's analysis of how different segments of the gun industry took advantage of geopolitical realities and post-war consumer culture to expand the market for firearms. He skillfully analyzes a range of primary sources, including business papers, trade publications, newspapers, census records, police reports, and legislative materials, to draw convincing conclusions about the path of millions of guns over the last half-century-plus, and in the process reveals a gun culture based in Cold War consumerism rather than Second Amendment precedent.

After a short preface that cues the reader into the scope and purpose of the book, McKevitt opens the more substantial introduction with a chilling recounting of the shooting of a Japanese exchange student in Baton Rouge, LA, in 1992 by a white gunowner. The themes of racism, paranoid urban homeowners and white masculinity that this incident evokes will likely not surprise readers. What will, however, is that McKevitt locates origins of this modern gun culture, and what he calls gun capitalism, in Finland and the experience of entrepreneur Sam Cummings, who bought up tremendous amounts of post-World War 2 surplus for cheap and offloaded them to American consumers who were intrigued by killing machines produced by foreign governments. This growth and affordability of guns at first jived with the National Rifle Association's base, but soon the traditional American gun makers, especially in the Connecticut River Valley, felt threatened and advocated for some form of gun regulation. Their agitation contributed to the Gun Control Act of 1968, which represented an odd combination of interests:

those of domestic gun manufacturers and citizens concerned about violence. It marked a major turning point, according to McKevitt: “both an end and a beginning, the culmination of a half-decade debate about the role of guns in society and the starting point for political and cultural clashes in the decades to follow” (p. 17). In the following decades, domestic manufacturers underwent an uneasy transition from priding American industry above all else to siding with imported gun dealers.

Throughout, McKevitt connects surplus arms to well-known instances of violence, like the assassination of John F. Kennedy, whom Lee Harvey Oswald killed with an Italian Mannlicher-Carcano fitted with a Japanese telescopic sight. The second gun, which he used to kill the officer, was an American-made Smith & Wesson, purchased from Canadian Wholesaler for much cheaper than Smith & Wesson sold it for. Its origins in post-World War II Europe were obscured by the act that Canadian imports did not require an import license from the State Department’s Office of Munitions Control. For the 1967 Detroit Uprising, McKevitt analyzes police records of the guns to estimate that 62 percent were imports. Cheap foreign imports became associated with black urban violence, sparking an arms race in which white residents in and around cities proudly armed themselves. It also sparked backlash against dangerous imports.

While the traditional domestic manufacturers bemoaned competition and were reluctant to innovate or update their marketing strategies, Cummings argued that his business helped create a class of gun collectors, who would start with cheap imports and move onto more expensive, for example, Winchester models. Nonetheless, a law passed, influenced by data collected from other countries, but regulations always have a loophole, which is the subject of chapter 5. The 1968 law restricted the importation of guns “unsuitable for sporting purposes” (p. 106). The loophole only prohibited cheap imports, not imported foreign parts or cheap guns generally. The loophole created new business opportunities. For example, a West German exporter of guns created a Miami-based company—RG Industries— which churned out Saturday night specials (inexpensive, poorly made, small-caliber handguns used by criminals and in low-income neighborhoods), including the Röhm RG-14 used in the 1981 attempt to assassinate Ronald Reagan. RG Industries became the third largest domestic handgun manufacturer behind Smith & Wesson and Sturm, Ruger & Co., which were both based in Connecticut.

McKevitt divides the two major civic responses to gun capitalism into separate chapters. The first (chapter 6), covers the movements organized by “old ladies in tennis shoes,” which had their roots in Chicago’s white, upper-middle class neighborhood Hyde Park. The Civic

Disarmament Committee, founded in 1971 by Laura Fermi, focused on international disarmament and used modernization language influenced by the University of Chicago. The next chapter turns to the “mothers” who tackled the masculine problem of too many dangerous guns in society with “gendered consumerism,” a phrase that McKevitt uses only once, but perhaps could have been more explicit about, especially because he convincingly employs gender analysis throughout the book, and scholars have used consumerism as a way to talk about women’s politics in different times and places.

In the penultimate chapter, McKevitt returns to the significance of the opening vignette. Gun rights fundraiser and lobbyist Alan Gottlieb mobilized a consumer boycott of Japanese products in retaliation for their attempt to limit guns in the US, a response to the killing of the Japanese boy. Even more nefarious than the gun-control activism of a nation with growing economic power were the efforts of the United Nations, which gun proponents saw as communist attempts to create a gun-free global dictatorship. By the twenty-first century, racialized gun capitalism had emerged—“perpetual fear of terrorists and foreign others” (p. 256).

By the time I reached the epilogue, titled “This American Carnage” after Donald Trump’s inaugural address, I was thoroughly convinced by the book’s narrative arc that the geopolitics of the Cold War bred a culture, political economy, and ideological commitment to the second amendment that was all about enemies everywhere and the need for individual vigilance. As violent crime rates in general decreased nationwide—even as horrific acts of gun violence became the norm—and gun sales ebbed and flowed based on politics (spike during Obama, slump during Trump), the industry responded by creating demand for more lethal, “tactical” weapons that “blurred the lines between gun owners and soldiers—between citizen-consumers and citizen-soldiers” (p. 257). McKevitt’s convincing analysis of hard-won data on specific types of gun sales and business strategies and skillful crafting of an interesting narrative will be welcome reading to business historians and general readers alike.

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