



*The Gun in Central Africa: A History of Technology and Politics* by Giacomo Macola.

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In recent years, scholars have given welcome attention to the history of technology and its social, political, and cultural influence in Africa beyond the old dyad of “driver of domination vs. manifestation” that focused on colonial division. Historian Giacomo Macola (Univ. of Kent) has made a timely contribution to the new surge of studies of the complexities of technological transfer and consequent adaptations, innovations, and responses of Africans and Euraficans. He concentrates on the half-millennium of direct Afro-European trade in firearms from modern Malawi and Zambia to the southern Congo basin, a region that witnessed great societal dynamism and disruption alike.

An introduction entitled “Firearms and the History of Technology in Africa” lays out the author’s central propositions in the context of recent work on science and technology. Macola also clarifies both the benefits of his case-studies of many polities within a relatively small, interconnected region, and the limits of his inquiry relative to environments and the imperfect available sources. He criticizes certain preoccupations of historians of technology, including theories of the “agency” of technology and technological determinism, for which I share his skepticism. The book evinces throughout a comparative perspective and a distinct affinity for structured analysis that may strike some readers as too clinical.

The book is divided into three parts. The first, “Context,” contains a single chapter, on “Power and International Trade in the Savanna,” a standard approach to situate any subject in African history. But Macola uses it to chart geographic and demographic matters as well as the larger social and cultural changes he details in the volume’s remaining chapters. Part II’s three chapters address “Guns and Society on the Upper Zambezi and in Katanga” from the standpoint of political economy. Part III, “Resisting Guns in Zambia and Malawi,” contains two chapters on reactions to the proliferation of firearms; these are more case-focused (and tantalizing) forays into the heart of the helical relations between human societies and firearms revealed by Macola .

The effects of guns on political change, trade patterns, simple economics, and cultural and social orders are at center stage throughout. The author also traces and correlates important shifts in generational politics, ideas of masculinity and honor, and even aspects of language and law in precolonial states. He reminds his readers of his opening arguments whenever he deploys a particularly powerful example. For instance, he refers to the replacement of cattle or slaves by firearms as a fundamental social and cultural currency among Kaonde society of the upper Zambesi. Sometimes these cases create a paradox that extends across the volume:

the adoption of a nondeterministic perspective results in the attribution of greater significance to firearms than has commonly been the case in the relevant specialist literature. Guns ... spread throughout the border area between Zambia and Angola in the course of the nineteenth century. The enthusiasm with which the imported technology was taken up by most of the peoples of the region was in large measure the result of their ability successfully to deploy it for a variety of both

innovative and predictable purposes.... [F]irearms acquired different meanings, and the modalities of their domestication were invariably informed by local circumstances and power relations. (72–73)

Sometimes Macola's case-studies are cautionary proofs. For example, the raiding and conquest state of Garenganze under Mwami Msiri thrived from the 1850s to 1891 in southern Katanga, because it controlled the exchange of captives and animal products for firearms. It began to collapse as soon as one group (the Sanga) rebelled and disrupted the flow of arms: lacking social legitimacy, internal sources of gunpowder and weapons, and other means of producing wealth via tributaries, clients, or commodities, the state could not long outlive its warlord or a major internal disruption. Hence, Macola notes, the Sanga rebellion that brought down Msiri's state in 1891 "in some ways, can be conceptualized as a reassertion of the rights of society over those of technology" (93), and a repudiation of simple technological determinism that is wholly African in its major actors.

The advent of colonial rule could not reverse the processes of incorporation when the primacy of local gunpowder politics declined by the 1920s, as European colonial power made its presence felt in the region. For some people in this gun-connected social and political economy, the native police and military levies allowed European colonialists to refashion African military power into their own fictions of loyal "martial" races—a process not unique to Africa. This development both increased the colonial state's need to monopolize violence as far as practicable and created a new avenue of upward mobility in what had been militarized precolonial societies.

Although the political economy of gunpowder warlordism ultimately failed, the changing meanings of firearms continued to cast long social and cultural shadows. In this respect, Macola, who sees wider applications for his reorientation of thought about guns and society, has shone new light on the groundbreaking work of Edward Alpers, Bruce Vandervoort, and Richard Reid,<sup>1</sup> especially with regard to the blurry lines between society and soldiery.

Macola closes his study of technological transfer with, naturally, a reiteration of his central points, but he also claims the changes he describes are crucial to understanding the growth of militias and armed conflicts in Africa right up to the present day. The eastern Congo, in particular, has "been there before" in terms of gun warlordism, militias, and the prestige of gun use (163–64). That said, Macola carefully stresses that guns have been "successively re-innovated, with indigenous new meanings and functions being conferred to [them], over and above the intentions of [their] western producers" (167).

Giacomo Macola has shown Africanists and historians of empire more generally that technological shock was no mere epiphenomenon of colonialism; it became deeply embedded in African social and cultural discourse beyond the realm of war-making and raiding. He reveals the limits of the theory of technological determinism and ascriptions of agency in a provocative argument about the localization of technology that removes its independent power but enhances its significance in other ways. Students of nineteenth-century history and colonial conquest in Africa will find here many challenges to received opinion as well as new entrées into the history of other eras and even technologies. There is very little to dislike about *The Gun in Central Africa*: occasional wordiness, ill-labeled maps, and endnotes instead of footnotes. But such minor blemishes do not detract from the book's central arguments or bearing on several fields of study.

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1. See, respectively, *Ivory and Slaves: Changing Pattern of International Trade in East Central Africa to the Later Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: U Calif Pr, 1975), *Wars of Imperial Conquest in Africa 1830–1914* (Bloomington: Indiana U Pr, 1998), and *Warfare in African History* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2012).