

Chemical Weapons in World War 1

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The First World War was one of the greatest upheavals of the 20th century. The conflict had a far reaching effect that was felt long after the Allied-German Armistice of 1918. The human cost of the war that raged from 1914-1918 was profound; of the 70 million men mobilized, an estimated 9 million perished. In the first modern war, the scale on which people could annihilate one another increased greatly due to the technological and scientific advancements and the introduction of new weapons on the battlefields of Europe. These combined factors led to the advancement of pure science that ultimately converged with military ideologies on the Eastern and Western fronts of World War I and resulted in the invention of chemical weapons.

The morality of chemical warfare and larger conceptual discussion of the rules of combat were explored at the Hague Peace Conference of 1899, the delegates on hand agreed to abstain from using projectiles that would diffuse "asphyxiating or deleterious gases." However, the United States rejected the declaration on the basis that "poison gas might be more humane than existing weapons...and could produce a decisive result." The second Hague Conference that met in 1907, reaffirmed prior notions and further denounced weapons that had the potential to cause widespread suffering. Regardless, the conditions of trench warfare, a realization by 1914 and the antiquated frontal assaults on fortified positions necessitated a change.

German use of chlorine gas first appeared in 1915 at the Battle of Ypres. Between late April and early August of 1915, the Germans released 1,200 tons of gas, with over two-thirds of it deployed on the Eastern Front alone. The offensive value of chemical gas has been questioned by historians, but the Germans immediately recognized the psychological value of chemical warfare.

"I wish those people who write so glibly about this being a holy war could see a case of mustard gas...could see the poor things burnt and blistered all over with great mustard coloured suppurating blisters with blind eyes all sticky...stuck together, and always fighting for breath, with voices a mere whisper, saying that their throats are closing and they all know they will choke."

By September of 1915, the British were able to discharge their own chlorine gas at the Battle of Loos. The use of chemical weapons continued throughout the conflict with Mustard, Phosgene and Chlorine gas employed by both the Allied and the Central powers alike.

Many other weapons saw their debut in World War I and contributed to the horrific experience that manifested itself between the years of 1914-1918. Aerial Warfare, tanks, large bore artillery played a role in the outcome and so did poison gas. Following the Great War, the Committee on Chemical Warfare Organization asserted that gas was a legitimate and effective weapon. The strategic and psychological value of chemical warfare in World War 1 is significant to understand the horrors of this profound conflict.



Humans and animals in WWI had to protect themselves from the continual threat of gas attacks



A Canadian Soldier with outward wounds from a poison gas attack (1916)



A German poison gas attack at the Battle of Ypres (1915)

Work Cited

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