

EVEN THE FLOWERS ARE KILLED:
IMAGINING POISON GAS IN ALLY NEWSPAPERS, 1915-1919

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In mid-August of 2013, news media and nongovernmental organizations working in Syria reported a devastating attack with the use of chemical weapons that resulted in the deaths of hundreds, including children. Tests of victims and the area in which the attack was carried out confirmed the use of sarin, a fast acting, deadly nerve agent, and other chemical weapons. Syria's use of chemical weapons, banned by international treaty, shows the continued relevance of discourse about chemical warfare.

The first use of poison gas occurred nearly a hundred years ago during World War I, at the Second Battle of Ypres in April 1915. The Germans attacked and dispersed chlorine gas to maim and kill the French and Canadian troops fighting there. According to an article in the London newspaper, *The Times*, printed on May 15, 1915, when the wind carried the vapor cloud of poisonous gas across the terrain "even the flowers are killed, while grass and vegetation of all kinds become withered."¹ This article continues to explain how, due to the German use of poison gas and the "torpedoing of the Lusitania," the previously "chivalrous attitude always displayed by British soldiers all over the world" towards the Germans changed into an "intense bitterness against an enemy who has fallen so low as to make use of such devices."²

This essay investigates how the British, Australian, and American newspapers imagined poison gas in World War I, from 1915-1919. Because using gas as a weapon was a new concept, authors had significant leeway for how to portray poison gas in print. Initially, poison gas was depicted to strike alarm in soldiers and citizens alike as a feared and

¹ *The Times*, "British Troops and Poison Gas. Reprisals Demanded" 15 May 1915.

² *Ibid.*

immoral weapon of total war, but as the war progressed and more information about chemical weapons was understood, journalists were able to use media to recreate the image of poison gas as just another new reality of the war and the times that they lived in.

Several newspaper articles recounted the experiences of soldiers with poison gas attacks and the effects this new weapon had on their units. An article in *The Times* printed on May 19, 1915 included the experience of an officer had only just “sufficiently recovered to write about it.”³ The officer’s description of the attack highlights how soldiers were mentally unprepared to react to the horrifying experience. “I fear it will be impossible for me to give you an idea of the terror, of the awful horror, that this loathsome, noiseless wall of filthiness spread among us all.”⁴ The emotional reaction of the soldier to the actual experience of the vapor cloud exceeded the “fear” and “horror of gas” that had only been in the officer’s “imagination,” since the Germans had first used gas on the French about a month earlier. Significantly, this early article highlights the unique impact of this new weapon on the soldiers through the officer’s viewpoint of having “never before seen brave men become suddenly panic-stricken, look round like frightened animals and, forget their manhood and their duty, and run away.”⁵

Another British newspaper article that dealt with poison gas is a report on the “After Effects of the Fumes” on the “Victims in Hospital,” by a medical correspondent for *The Times* stationed in Northern France around April 29, 1915 (the article is dated 1 May 1915).⁶ The medical correspondent observed the less immediate effects of poison gas on six victims, and-described one of the long-term effects as “very difficult breathing, the kind one associates with acute bronchitis” as well as a “subtle type of poisoning of the blood.” He compared this to “the later stages of severe diseases like diabetes.” The medical correspondent used his expertise to help civilian readers completely unfamiliar with this new weapon more easily comprehend the health effects of poison gas.⁷ Once the nature of poison gas had become more familiar, English language newspapers began to emphasize the moral implications of the use of poison gas on the battlefield as a barbaric outrage. The 1 May 1915 article

³ *The Times*. “Poison in the Air,” Wednesday, May 19, 1915; pg. 5; Issue 40858.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ “The Poison Gas. After Effects of the Fumes. Victims in Hospital.” *The Times*, (1 May 1915).

⁷ *Ibid.*

in *The Times* used the report on the after effects of poison gas to vilify the German enemies, who had “carefully” tested and deployed “chlorine, bromine, [or one of their] derivative” gasses as a new “barbarous form of attack.” The use of poison gas was portrayed as an “outrage.”⁸ One medical correspondent declared that “the extent of the new German “frightfulness” was not, even yet, realized by the public.”⁹ He took it upon himself to enlighten the public for whom poison gas was a new and alien method of warfare.

Throughout the course of World War I, technological advances allowed for the introduction of multiple weapons. The use of poison gas in war had been prohibited in international agreements such as the Hague Declaration of 1899 and the Hague Convention of 1907.¹⁰ The treaties acted more as a justification used to explain why the use of poison gas was an outrage, however, and do not explain the actual inspiration of the moral outrage. In *The New York Times* on May 7, 1915, an officer refers to poison gas as “the most awful form of scientific torture” and elaborates on the agony endured by those exposed this new weapon:

Not one of the men I saw in the hospital had a scratch or wound. The Germans have given out that it is a rapid, painless death—the liars! No torture could be worse than to give them a dose of their own gas.

The officer’s quote speaks both to how the effects of poison gas were experienced, as well as to how poison gas became a moral issue. This article raised the question of whether or not the British should retaliate and use poison gas against the Germans, inviting the beginnings of a moral debate.

The use of gas by the allies in World War I is conspicuously absent from most of the allied newspapers. There is one exception in an Australian newspaper article printed on September 11, 1915 in the *Border*

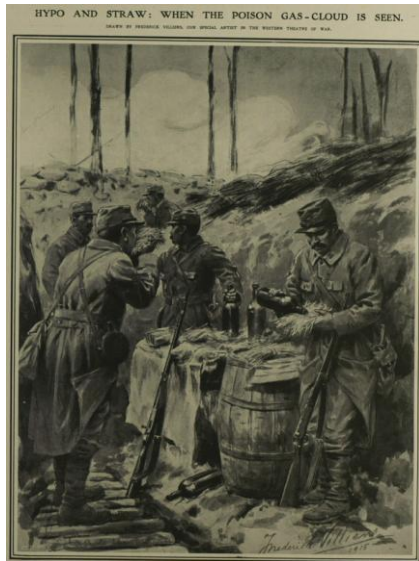
⁸ In *No Place to Run: The Canadian Corps and Gas Warfare in the First World War* (Vancouver: UCB Press, 1999), page 5. Tim Cook reaches a similar conclusion that: “The initial shock of poison gas had soldiers, civilians, and politicians immediately labeling it as a barbarous method of waging war.” The newspaper article would have contributed to the civilians’ and politicians’ initial understanding of the use of poison gas as barbaric.

⁹ “The Poison Gas. After Effects of the Fumes. Victims in Hospital.” *The Times*, (1 May 1915).

¹⁰ Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1989), 161.

Watch.¹¹ The article titled “Gas Poison for Soldiers: Who Invented It,” commented on the British army’s decision to use asphyxiating gas at the front against the “Huns.”¹² The article discredited the German chemical industry’s scientific prowess by claiming, “there is no difficulty about producing chlorine gas.” And then “any of our [read British] manufacturing chemists could produce enough chlorine in a day or two to suffocate the whole German army from the Yser to the Vistula.” This represents an important shift in allied thinking from gas as a morally reprehensible tool of the enemy, to a simple and effective weapon of war that should be used.

An important factor in the transformation of poison gas to a legitimate weapon was the invention of a means to defend against it. In the image “Hypo and Straw: When the Poison Gas-Cloud Is Seen” two soldiers have hypo-saturated straw held up to their faces, two men do not yet have the primitive hypo and straw respirators and the fifth soldier is pouring hypo on a bundle of straw to make another respirator. The soldiers seem rather nonchalant considering the vapor cloud that is looming in the background. The image



contradicts previous descriptions of poison gas attacks. Where is the panic and fear that crippled the bravest men? This image tells a contradictory story to the accounts of soldiers. It tells a story of a weapon that while effective on those who are unprepared can be handily defeated by the intelligence and quick thinking of brave Allied soldiers.

The evolution of gas mask technology in the years that followed was widely publicized. It permeated the home front’s imagination so

¹¹ *Border Watch* is based out of Mount Gambier and was founded in 1861; according to the website, it is “South Australia’s largest regional newspaper.”

¹² *Border Watch*, “Gas Poison for Soldiers: who invented it.” (Mount Gambier, South Australia), 11 September 1915.

much that it even appeared in advertising for Beecham's Pills.¹³ Even in a cartoonish advertisement, in an artistic drawing on exhibition, or in a wartime photograph, a man wearing a gas mask is a strange sight. Yet, gas masks were prevalent in images of chemical warfare in World War I.¹⁴ Masks were "less gruesome to depict than suffocating soldiers and easier to capture than battle scenes." Gas masks "became an accepted, if disliked part of war; photographers took group pictures of men wearing masks, and jokes were made about them in cartoons, but there was almost always a negative understanding to the visual images published."¹⁵

By 1917 the gas mask could even be seen on the snout of man's best friend. Rolfe, the canine soldier, wore his mask at the French front. The war dog symbolized the all-encompassing mobilization called for by total war. In 1915 the newspapers used images of hypo-saturated hay and narratives about bits of flannel soaked with water to cover gas. By 1917 the stories of gas warfare had changed. There are photos of more advanced gas masks on dogs, horses, and even on the Orientalized Russian soldiers: "a photographic subject new to this country."¹⁶



By turning dogs wearing gas masks into a typical sight in newspaper photographs, journalists effectively normalized the mask, and by doing so, normalized the poison gas itself. Chemical warfare, although still feared,



¹³ *Illustrated London News*, "Don't GAS Take BEECHAM'S PILLS" advertisement, 13 January 1917.

¹⁴ Marion Girard, *A Strange and Formidable Weapon: British Responses to World War I Poison Gas*, (Lincoln: Nebraska UP, 2008), 146. In *A Strange and Formidable Weapon* Marion Girard argues that "overall, as Churchill said in Parliament, chemical warfare emerged in 'strange and formidable forms,'" 7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Illustrated London News*, "Russian Soldiers in Gas Masks: A Photographic Subject New to This Country," May 26, 1917.

penetrated everyday life and its use became a regular, quotidian idea. Once the Allies could defend against poison gas effectively, it became less horrifying. Newspapers portrayed gas in a light that focused less on the horror of the experience of gas warfare, and instead, presented the banality of poison gas and of the gas mask. This is exemplified by the appearance of poison gas in humorous cartoons such as the image below where women soldiers are coming to the realization that, "Poison Gas will probably be the least troublesome way of killing a chicken."¹⁷ This is the complete reversal from the first introduction of poison gas a mere three years prior.

The presence of gas warfare as a topic in advertisements is another example of the new commonplace appearance of poison gas in a more



lighthearted everyday context. On April 18, 1916 *The Times* contained an advertisement for the Burberry Trench-Warm. The ad stated that, "the greatest danger that the soldier has to face on active service is not the poison gas and liquid fire of the enemy, but bad weather—the insidious foe that undermines health and efficiency."¹⁸ This advertisement further normalizes poison gas into a commonplace

topic and a familiar practice.

Newspapers occasionally presented the more scientific aspects of gas. The image in the *Daily News* from Perth, Australia, titled "Experimenting with Poison Gas" was published on March 9, 1916. The image shows "heavy" Bromine vapor falling as it is poured from a bottle.

¹⁷ "Scenes from Fort Square: A military training camp for Ladies Only. — 'Cartoons Magazine,'" *Leader* (Melbourne), 16 February 1918.

¹⁸ "Burberrys: The Greatest Danger," *The Times* (London), 18 April 1916. The underscore for poison gas is my emphasis.

The gas falls just like it would from “a trench-crest before being blown toward the enemy by the wind.”¹⁹ The visual article and text argues that there is scientific understanding that is needed to use gas effectively. The idea that gas was just a scientific development makes British retaliation with poison gas against the Germans more digestible. Chemical warfare was no longer barbaric; it was then simply scientific.

Throughout World War One the media dealt with the use of poison gas in two distinct ways. Initially, poison gas was new, frightening and terrifying. The vision of the monstrous “green wall” rapidly approaching to suffocate the troops and kill even the flowers was horrifying. The newspapers used personal accounts to describe how the soldiers went mad with fear from the gas.²⁰ In the morality that was part of this first interpretation, poison gas should be feared as it represented a threat to civilization. In the second interpretation, gas, though new, became accepted, familiar, and normal through its appearances in advertisements, cartoons, and photographs of horses and dogs.

At times both of these notions overlapped in British, American, and Australian newspaper images and articles throughout the World War I period. The newspaper coverage at the beginning of World War I sends a clear message that poison gas was a taboo subject and that the German Army was violating international treaties by using it. However, once both sides had used gas, the newspaper coverage presented poison gas with a new degree of familiarity. This shift was largely the result of increased defense technology that allowed soldiers and citizens to feel confident in their ability to protect themselves in case of a gas attack. Additionally, scientific research turned poison gas from an unknown weapon of terror into an understood weapon of war, no different than advancements in machine gun or artillery technology. Thus, by the end of the war, gas was still feared, but also tolerated, and perhaps even condoned as a fact of everyday life – a reality of living with total war.

¹⁹ “Experimenting with Poison Gas.” *The Daily News* (Perth), 9 March 1916.

²⁰ *The Times*. “Poison in the Air,” Wednesday, May 19, 1915; pg. 5; Issue