

## The poison gas debate in the inter-war years

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Poison gas, together with nuclear and biological weapons, has been classified as a 'weapon of mass destruction'. This has not always been the case; in the years after World War I it was claimed that poison gas was the most humane weapon thinkable, as it did not kill in the numbers that machine guns and artillery did - today's 'conventional' weapons. Gas only made soldiers unconscious, so that they could be taken prisoner, and when the war was over could return safely to their friends and families. This stand was fiercely disputed in the inter-war years by those who saw gas as one step, even the final step, crossing the boundaries of civilization. Moreover, gas showed clearly that medical intervention to cure the agonies of war was senseless; prevention could be the only answer. Nevertheless, the fact remains that almost all of the nine million deaths of World War I - now mostly remembered as a war of gas and madness - were due to shells and bullets.

Keywords: inhumane weapons; International Red Cross; inter-war years; poison gas; weapons' effects; World War I

### Introduction

The German citizen Anton Fendrich described the events of 22 April 1915 in the surroundings of Ypres. Accompanied by a general and the highest military doctor, he drove to the front and saw some Canadians and 'bad smelling' Negroes lying on the ground outside a field hospital. They had suffered a mild attack, but those who suffered the full effect of the gas, were also helped by German doctors and nurses. 'Gently, as if they were babies, the men of the Red Cross carried them to the hospital, where they were given oxygen and were soon all right'<sup>1</sup>, Fendrich was sure; as well as being a militarily effective and necessary weapon (an argument highly questionable at least on the Western Front in 1914-1918), gas was also a humane weapon. His book first came out in 1917 and there is no way of telling whether these really were his feelings in 1915. Nonetheless, it makes clear that when the

war ended and gas was no longer needed, a new reason had to be found not to stop research and not to destroy the gas stockpiles all over the world. The argument of military necessity - taken up by the allies who soon after April 1915 also began to use poison gas - was no longer valid after the war, so the humane character of gas came to the fore. It was felt certain that gas warfare would be the main feature of the next war, but this was not a bad thing considering it would therefore be a fairly humane kind of war.

### 'Gas is a humane weapon'

During the war the treatment of the effects of gas was symptomatic. Gas had settled in the body and there was no way to get it out again, except with time; one could only hope that the dose was small and the gas itself not too strong. The symptoms differed with each kind of gas, of which new forms kept coming, which made it next to impossible to come up with effective treatment. This helplessness made gas warfare a medical herald of atomic warfare, in which combating some of the symptoms is also the only answer medicine can provide. Where only symptoms can be combated and even then on a very minor scale, prevention should be the way that medicine takes.

Keeping warm, giving water, saying prayers, taking time and hoping it would be alright was the essence of treatment of gas patients. It is even said that out of pity with gassed patients, the rule that 'declared healthy' was the same as 'fit for duty' was discarded, although, to my knowledge, there is no evidence for this. This argument also contrasts entirely with the argument that gas is a humane weapon.

Together with all the horror described in the soldiers' and medical accounts, clearly it would not be easy making the argument stick that gas was a humane weapon. For this the evidence was - compared to what was normal in World War I - the limited numbers of deaths resulting from chemical warfare, an argument most fiercely advocated by Amos Fries, head of the United States Chemical Corps during, and the Chemical Warfare Service after, the war. In his eyes, gas was a humane weapon, firstly because it had helped to defeat the barbarous Germans, but more importantly, because it was a very powerful weapon without causing a lot of deaths. War was, is and would always be a nasty business, but chemical warfare came closest to a civilized way of waging it<sup>2:39,53-54</sup>. Indeed it could be debated if chemical weapons should be part of what are nowadays called 'weapons of mass destruction', as conditions have to be 'favourable' to get a maximum result.

In the US, Fries did not get his way, most probably because his old military mentor, the Chief of Staff John J Pershing, took a totally opposite view, that chemical warfare was 'abhorrent to civilisation' and 'a cruel unfair and improper use of science'. So Fries and his fellow-chemists took to'

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the effect of chemical warfare on diseases such as colds, influenza, bronchitis or whooping cough. This idea originated from an observation of doctors in 1918 that soldiers in the rear who had not fallen victim to gas had suffered more from influenza than those at the front. Surprisingly, many of the sick, including several US senators, said they felt better after inhaling chlorine. This was brilliant politics, but before long it turned out to be bad science. Close examination showed that there was no relationship between treatment and recovery, and so insects became the next victims, in the hope that if disease could not be combated, it could at least be prevented. This practical shift, illuminating the fact that an institution born in times of war is not easily eliminated in times of peace, was defended with Fries' old argument: that this kind of chemical warfare must be called humane. Fighting dangerous insects was in fact '... "peaceful" war'. This also shows that the chemical industry after 1918 continued to work in the borderland between war and peace, ready to cross to either side if self-preservation made this necessary. In this politics the argument of humane warfare was not only believed in, but was very convenient

2:60-63,65-66

Fries was not alone. The British soldier Norman Gladden remarked that poison-gas caused fear 'out of all proportion to the damage done'<sup>3</sup>. Otto Muntzsch, author of *Guide into pathology and therapy of poison-gas illness* (1932), and JFC Fuller, author of *The army in my time* (1935), noted that gas was a humane weapon, Fuller even talking about mustard gas, the deadliest of all gases used in the war. Gas made the soldiers inactive instead of killing them, making it possible to capture and imprison them; in the long run the direct effects were more psychological than physical<sup>4,5</sup>.

Fries, Muntzsch and Fuller were certainly not entirely wrong. Not only the death rate but also the numbers affected by a chemical attack were less than those injured by other weaponry; the vast majority were only slightly hurt and could be declared healthy and return to duty after only a few days. One therefore could indeed say that those affected by gas were the lucky ones, compared to those running into shrapnel or heavy machine-gun fire<sup>6</sup>. This was the reason why the Swiss military man Schleich once said that 'it was better to recover from a gas poisoning than to die of a non-poisoned bullet'<sup>7</sup>.

Schleich was one of the main sources for JC Diehl, Inspector of the Military Health Service of the Dutch army, a member of the board of the Dutch Red Cross (DRC) and the National Gas Committee, in which the DRC had taken the lead. According to Diehl, gas was a legitimate weapon, as it helped to reach the military goal, and, certainly in comparison with many weapons that had not upset public opinion, gas was a humane weapon, for which he quoted Schleich: 'the use of chemical weapons had led to an important reduction of the horrors of the war'. The campaign against poison-gas was 'highly immoral': it was based on gross exaggeration, and was emotional and hysterical, not rational<sup>7</sup>.

### 'Gas is the devil's breath'

Although we will see that this last remark of Schleich and Diehl was not completely beside the point, the example of Pershing showed that the 'gas is a humane weapon' argument was attacked fiercely, and understandably so. The stories told by war-critics like Owen, Brittain or Remarque, as well as by someone like Ernst Jünger, were not false. In their view gas could and should be seen as a horrible weapon, not *because* it killed and wounded, but *because of the way* it killed and wounded and the fear it therefore spread. When released, gas was uncontrollable, blown by the wind, breathed in or dripping on to not only soldiers but noncombatants, including women and children. Also, the fear it caused was never eradicated by the masks, which firstly were not thought to be and indeed never were completely safe, and secondly were so annoying and dehumanizing that they were a cause of psychological problems in themselves. More importantly, gas was not used instead of grenades and bullets, but in combination with them. It was therefore not unconsciousness and imprisonment that determined the fate of a gas victim, but artillery or the machinegun. Hence, one must look not only at the few soldiers directly killed by gas but also at the many who indirectly fell victim to it, remembering that gas - and even more gas-masks - had made warfare more impersonal and therefore heavier. The consequences of poisoning were not always over in a couple of days - some were blinded for ever; the soldier's fear of poison gas was understandable. Bombs could be heard, and bombs mostly killed instantly and painlessly. Gas was a silent killer and the death struggle could take days or even weeks.

So most soldiers took a view opposite from Schleich's. They thought it better to die instantly from an exploding grenade, than to choke to death in a fortnight<sup>8-14</sup>, and the doctors and nurses mostly agreed, including the Dutch nurse Adrie Schipper, who worked in a hospital in France on the allied side of the front. When speaking of her patients in general her tone was modest, but this changed when referring to gas patients. She wrote:

The more one thinks about it, the more one asks oneself how the board of an army in our days can sanction and use such a weapon of assassination! Those poor soldiers brought in, resembled in their sultriness last-stage tuberculosis-patients<sup>15</sup>.

It was mainly the use of gas that brought some nurses during the war to call for a strike of medical workers. In the summer of 1918, 20 years before the Professor of Medicine at Cambridge, John Ryle, made his better-known appeal in *A Doctor's View of War*, the Dutch nurse J. van Lanschot Hubrecht advocated putting down scalpel and band-aid because nursing the

sick and wounded was no more than 'co-operating' with their 'speedy recovery ( ... ) so that they could march off to the front again, murder again and get into danger again'<sup>16</sup>. It was a call repeated in 1923 by the Dutch anti-militarist NJC Schermerhorn, probably without knowing he had a precursor. Especially during chemical and bacteriological war, healing was senseless, and doctors and nurses should therefore join the peace movement<sup>17</sup>.

### The Red Cross protest of 1918

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) did not take such a stand - let alone its national organizations, with boards mainly comprising (retired) military men, but it did emphasize the view that gas was a weapon crossing the boundaries of civilization. The First World War had just entered its last year when the ICRC protested against the use of poison-gas, which disturbed the romantic image of war as a struggle between gentlemen, who would use only those means absolutely necessary to reach the goals of war. Although the ICRC had also protested against ill-treatment of prisoners of war and the sinking of hospital ships, with this protest 3 years after the start of gas warfare it went against its usual course of action: normally it kept silent when violations of the laws of warfare were discovered. Leaving the golden way of silence was defended by pointing out that an entire population fell victim to the use of gas and not only the soldiers of the warring countries. Continued use of gas would soon lead to a situation in which warfare would be nothing 'but a ruthless work of destruction'<sup>18,19</sup>.

The use of 'poison or poisonous weapons' was, as was the use of 'projectiles causing unnecessary harm', forbidden according to The Hague Conventions, the part of the laws of war that were designed to watch over the means with which war was fought. In the eyes of the ICRC, the horrible suffering these gases caused - to look at is even more cruel than the most dreadful wounds - proved the criminal character of using poison gas. If it were used indiscriminately, the ICRC foresaw a 'struggle that would top everything in cruelty, history has seen up until this moment'<sup>18</sup>. Clearly, according to the ICRC in 1918, poison gas was anything but a humane weapon.

The response the ICRC received was the anger of all warring countries. On all sides it was accused of being partial<sup>20:113-114</sup>. This criticism would have further consequences, for instance it would play a role in the reaction to the use of mustard gas by Mussolini's Italy during the Abyssinian war. Because of its stand, the ICRC could not agree to hand over its knowledge on the matter to the League of Nations. In the Second World War its neutrality would influence its decision not to protest against the Nazi persecution of European Jews. It was difficult enough to take care of sick

and wounded soldiers and prisoners of war, without having to play referee as well<sup>20:132-134,21</sup>.

### The discussion revived

About 10 years after the war the discussion resumed, with the publication of a book by the Dutch non-violent anti-militarist Bart de Ligt<sup>22</sup>; a major disaster in Hamburg where some phosgene cylinders gave way in a storage place for poison gas; the publication of Otto Lehmann-Russbüldt's book<sup>23</sup> that showed the links during and after the war between chemical industries and the military apparatus of several countries; and by some air manoeuvres in the summer of 1930 in the vicinity of Lyon, which would have proved that every protective measure against air and chemical warfare was an impossibility. JBTh Hugenholz, a leading member of the Dutch Christian anti-militaristic organization Church and Peace, immediately attacked those 'military men' who 'fooled themselves and others by stating that gas warfare was just an innocent little outgrowth of the military annihilation apparatus'. Hugenholz asked his readers: 'Will this lesson be enough, or must first of all millions of defenseless men and women pay the toll of blinded politicians sending their peoples into the hell of war?'<sup>24</sup>. But most of all the discussion restarted because of some Red Cross conferences held at the end of the 1920s.

### The International Red Cross in the inter-war period

The first years of the inter-war period were a period in which military men and pacifists shared the certainty that a next war would be dominated by gas and aeroplanes. Not so much the question *if* all possible means, including all kinds of chemical and even bacteriological weapons would be used, but, according to De Ligt, the knowledge *that* they would be used was widespread. The pacifists therefore strove for abolition, and in the opinion of the military men it was necessary to take precautions. They should be in possession of both the best means of chemical attack and the best means of chemical defence; existing chemical weapons should be improved and new ones should be invented; gas-masks should be constantly improved and manufactured in sufficient numbers and the public should be instructed in their use; medical care should be organized and improved, which according to De Ligt implied that soldiers should be made ready for war duty again as soon as possible<sup>22</sup>.

But this was also a period dominated by calls for disarmament and support for the League of Nations. The first peace appeal signed both by the ICRC and the League of Red Cross Societies dated from 19 July 1921; its main thrust was healing the mental and moral wounds the war had struck as

well as limiting national differences, all this without hurting national feelings, which had all but disappeared after the Versailles Treaty:

It is now the task to blossom anew the foundations of internationalism in the spirit of man, that respects the love of each citizen for his city, of each patriot for his fatherland, but who also teaches each man to respect the rights of his fellow men, by enlightening everyday life of the individual through the light of universal and eternal justice<sup>25</sup>.

This appeal was followed by a number of similar calls. In November 1920, the ICRC had already asked the League of Nations to prohibit the use of poison gas. One year later this request was followed by a call to the nations to sign a similar prohibition. At an international Red Cross conference in Geneva in 1925 it was agreed that the fight against the use of poison gas must be a main task of both the international and the national societies<sup>20:146</sup>; in the same year the Gas Protocol prohibiting the use of gas was also agreed upon. This was based on an American resolution and not surprisingly was therefore signed by the American delegation, but the US Congress failed to ratify it, in part due to the strong lobbying of Amos Fries. His main argument was still that looking back at the war with some distance, it had to be said that gas warfare was a fairly humane kind of warfare<sup>2:68</sup>. Nevertheless, at the next conference in 1928 at The Hague, chemical and biological warfare was prohibited by the Red Cross, as well as, following the Briand-Kellogg pact, any form of aggressive combat<sup>26,27</sup>. In Brussels (1930) a resolution was accepted that defence against poison gas and nursing poison gas victims were impossible, so that the Red Cross could do nothing else but wage war on war itself<sup>28</sup>. It is interesting that fields of society such as the peace movement and the world of medicine use such military metaphors, in contrast to the military which tries to cloak its work as much as possible in the vocabulary of peace and medicine.

At the end of 1931 a meeting of international lawyers was held in Geneva. They concluded that it was absolutely necessary to put all the energy into the prevention of war, because 'the relativity of the value of international regulations will be a factor that in the future - sadly enough will also have to be reckoned with'<sup>29</sup>. At the 15th international Red Cross conference, in Tokyo 1934, it was declared that the Red Cross 'notwithstanding all its activities in times of war and peace, following its calling has to do whatever possible to avoid all war from breaking out'. At the same time the call was made in Japan for 'the national (Red Cross) societies to do everything within their power, to prevent war, and improve relations between nations'<sup>25</sup>. Cynically enough, Japan itself had recently occupied Manchuria, and in the subsequent war with China bombarded Red Cross hospitals<sup>30</sup>.

However, all these anti-war statements did not in any way mean that the original task of the Red Cross, taking care of sick and wounded soldiers,

was lost to sight. Of course this task had to be prepared for in times of peace, when defence against gas warfare played a major role. This was in spite of a recommendation from an ICRC expert committee of chemists, physicians and military men, which met in 1928 and 1929, that gas defence practice was undesirable because of its demoralizing effect on the population<sup>31,32</sup>. That same committee, however, also advised the offer of a prize for the best ideas on gas protection. This advice was followed. There were prizes for the best filtering apparatus or gas-mask that could be handed out to the general population, for methods ensuring gas-tight locking and air-conditioning for underground shelters, and also for the best reagent to prove the presence of mustard-gas<sup>33,34</sup>.

At the Red Cross conference in Geneva three years before mentioned above, it was decided that it remained the obligation of the Red Cross, in cooperation with military and political authorities, to continue searching for means to eliminate the dangers of poison gas<sup>20:146</sup>. At the same conference that declared this fight against gas warfare hopeless (Brussels 1930), it was also declared that Red Cross training should keep up with the times, which amongst other things meant that attention should be paid to the role of Red Cross nurses in case of attacks with chemical weapons<sup>35,36</sup>. Declarations were also accepted on defence against air attacks<sup>37</sup>. Two years before the Brussels conference, a resolution was accepted in The Hague that in its duty to help and heal, it remains the obligation of the Red Cross to look for means to lessen the consequences of air and chemical attacks<sup>38</sup>. This resolution was preceded by a recommendation of the ICRC committee of experts<sup>39</sup> to the national societies of the Red Cross, to set up committees on gas:

The Commission, seeing that the protection of the civil population is, above all, a national question, proposes the creation in each country, under the auspices of the national Red Cross society, of a mixed commission, composed of representatives of the authorities and of social groups, particularly interested in the protection of the population against chemical warfare<sup>40</sup>.

So in spite of the fact that this same commission thought broad scale practice bad for the morale of the population and despite the fact that chemical warfare was forbidden, preparation was advised, as it was not certain that everyone would stick to the prohibition.

This does not mean that the 1930 resolution opposing chemical and bacteriological warfare was not accepted, although it went against the wishes and convictions of most of the military men present, but it was indeed a step away from ideology and a return to pragmatism. Compared with November 1918, the attitude towards war had clearly changed; war no longer meant the negation of all law and justice. Every law, including international law, was built on the basis of power and therefore depended on the use of violence, military or otherwise. Once again war had become a

justified means of settling conflict and all means used in warfare were legal, if military necessity advised their use<sup>20:147,149</sup>.

Attacking the use of poison gas and preparing for it at the same time of course gave scope for interpretation. This for instance was shown in the Dutch parliament, when the Minister of Defence, LN Deckers, wholeheartedly attacked the prohibition of poison gas<sup>41,42</sup>, in answering a Social Democrat member of parliament, who had supported his disarmament convictions by drawing attention to the ICRC committee of experts. Deckers did the same: according to him the Red Cross shared his view that defense against poison gas attacks was possible - the prize question proved it. Otherwise, Deckers reasoned logically, 'holding such a contest presumably could have remained in abeyance'<sup>42</sup>.

### Protest against the Red Cross view

This dualistic view of poison gas of the Red Cross put new fire into the old controversy over humanizing and preventing war between the Red Cross and the radical peace movement. This controversy had existed since the Red Cross had come into being and would have its peak at the beginning of the 1930s in the Netherlands, when part of the peace movement made the DRC the main target of its activities, on the grounds that it was a militaristic organization<sup>20:147-149;43</sup>.

Hugenholtz for instance was furious about its position on poison gas: the 1927 decision to organize exercises although protection was declared impossible and the decision taken at the same time advising governments to inform other governments of the protective measures taken, were too insane to be true. Military programmes were secret and therefore it was impossible to know against what protection had to be sought, and no government seriously would consider sharing its measures with other governments<sup>44</sup>. In his view, the only sane action against gas was that of a chemist of Leiden University, E Cohen, who had refused all co-operation in the production of chemical weaponry<sup>45</sup>. It therefore is not surprising that one year later the prize-question made him take up his pen once more:

With all our might we must protest against this cursed comedy, this mocking of peoples. ( ... ) Now that at last it becomes clear that humanity is hopelessly lost against one of the most infernal weapons of our Christian governments, the Netherlands all but excluded, now we have to solve a prize-question ... !! A fool is he who still co-operates with such (war) work. We tear the mask off the Red Cross, so the world can see that this organisation is nothing but an accessory of militarism under the pretence of goodness<sup>33</sup>.

This was in accordance with the views of his Christian antimilitaristic soul-mate GJ Heering, to whom poison gas was just another step in the long march of brutalization of warfare, each step again and again first leading to repugnance and justification but then to normalization, agreeing with the

German soldier and writer Rudolf Binding who had said that our opponents will first be furious but then they will use the weapon themselves. For Heering, poison-gas was just another proof that war cannot be humanized, but will get worse every time it is waged. Humanizing war was contradictory to its very nature; no Red Cross could change that, and it was tragic that this organization participated in the 'comedy' of humanizing warfare<sup>46</sup>.

According to Heering it was therefore completely beside the point to view gas as a weapon that should be banned because it was too frightening, just as much as it was beside the point to say it was a rather humane weapon. In fact, Heering did not know if it was more horrible or more humane than other weapons - death is death, murder is murder. Nevertheless, at a psychological level he could understand why poison-gas had brought more revulsion and protest than any weapon before it. Until 1915, death in warfare had been considered honourable but suffocating was not honourable at all. It brought to mind hanging and drowning, the kinds of deaths in store for murderers, or that one wished upon people who were loathed. In 1915, in Ypres poison gas had therefore finally brought to the surface the loathing of life and humanity that was at the heart of warfare<sup>46</sup>.

At the same time this made it understandable why protagonists of gas warfare or those who just knew poison gas was here to stay made such an effort to convince people that gas was in fact a humane weapon. One way or another, so Heering said, this loathing of war because of the means with which it would be waged had to stop. Warfare and militarism had to remain things the vast majority of the population embraced. This was also why the Dutch government did not follow a League of Nations call to give full publicity to the means and consequences of chemical warfare, and why the professor of international law DH Wester said that gas in World War I would have led to only few deaths and wounded, if masks had been available. Heering also pointed at the difficulty of protection against gases which entered the body other than through the mouth or nose. In addition, perhaps soldiers could be protected, but gas does not discriminate between soldiers and civilians, between adults and children, between the healthy and the sick. It was still argued that gas would only be used against enemy soldiers, but every specialist, Heering wrote, could tell that this was a sheer impossibility, and in the next war, which would be dominated by the aeroplane, this would be the case even more. The claim that gas would be used only against enemy troops was a lie, as is the assurance that 'our gas' will only be used in defence<sup>46</sup>.

A confirmation of the anti-gas point of view was presented at a conference of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom; organized a short time later, on modern means of warfare and protection of the population. The Polish doctor Budzinska-Tylicka, who had treated soldiers in the First World War who had fallen victim to gas, stated that at most 10 per cent of the poisoned soldiers could be saved. 'The others had to

die, choke or burn in horrible pains<sup>47</sup>. It showed that the pacifists also believed what they wanted to believe; the numbers Budzinska- Tylicka gave were highly exaggerated, but they served the pacifist purpose.

### Conclusion and closing remarks

Although the International Red Cross in the 1920s more than once condemned the use of poison gas, the view was that preparation for the use of gas should continue and was indeed never abandoned. In the Netherlands the Red Cross played a major role in this. It followed the call for an international committee of experts to form a National Gas Committee. The members of this committee were anything but horrified by hearing the word 'gas', and were also convinced that gas would be used again in the next war, a war sure to come.

This last plea can be criticized by pointing out that wars are constantly changing and each war has a different character. But it cannot be criticized by saying, as still happens, that in World War I gas had filled mankind with so much revulsion that even the Axis powers did not come to using it in World War II, at any rate not on the battlefields. This point of view is contradicted by the discussion on gas as a humane weapon - if gas was to be considered 'humane', why not use it? US President Franklin D Roosevelt was an exception. He had seen soldiers during the war coughing out their gas-filled lungs, and could never be convinced by the argument of humane chemical warfare<sup>2:71-72</sup>. But Churchill certainly was not, and this goes without saying for men like Hitler or Stalin. Germany was stocked with nerve gas, and Churchill wanted to poison German cities to take revenge for V-bombing. That gas did not play a major role in the war of 1939-1945 was therefore not the result of revulsion or humanitarian feelings, but simply due to military considerations, technical limitations and the fear of nonconventional retaliation, on both sides of the fronts. If World War II had not been a *Blitzkrieg*, but once again a *Sitzkrieg* (static war), gas would probably have polluted the air again. Whether in that case all the preparations would have done much good, or would indeed have been the pitiful patchwork that the peace movement thought they would be, is a question that happily cannot be answered.

### Notes on contributor

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