

## **CHEMICAL WARFARE IN THE INTER-WAR YEARS**

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The taboo against the use of chemical weapons in warfare has existed since the end of the First World War. With a few notable exceptions, these weapons of mass destruction have never been used extensively between belligerent nations since 1918. Even Adolf Hitler, who had no compunction in using chemicals to perform mass murder on civilians, refused to engage in using chemical weapons against the Allies. Revulsion over the use of chemical weapons was so allegedly widespread that Gen. John Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Force in the First World War, gave voice to what has become the conventional wisdom regarding chemical warfare when he stated in a 1922 report that “chemical warfare should be abolished among nations, as abhorrent to civilization. It is a cruel, unfair and improper use of science. It is fraught with the gravest danger to noncombatants and demoralizes the better instincts of humanity.” Yet despite the perceived distaste for poison gas, the United States did not successfully ratify a treaty to ban the use of chemical weapons in warfare until 1975.

From 1919 to 1939 chemical warfare and chemical weapons were a hot topic in political circles and international diplomacy as well as popular culture in the western world. Particularly in the United States, Great Britain, France, and Germany, the threat of chemical weapons became a prominent subject of international relations. Between 1921 and 1932 three international conferences discussed the legitimate use and control of chemical weapons in warfare.

It is commonly believed that these disarmament conferences and the push to ban offensive chemical weapons were the inevitable result of widespread repugnance against

gas warfare caused by the experiences of soldiers in the First World War. Yet the interest in chemical weapons during the interwar period was not a one-way street. Some prominent politicians, journalists, military commanders, and even World War I veterans advocated for gas warfare. Various arguments, such as the relative humaneness of chemical weapons versus conventional weapons, the relatively minor number of deaths that occurred due to gas in World War I, the inevitability of their use in future wars, and the inability to enforce prohibition against their creation, buoyed vocal opposition to signing any treaties that forbid chemical warfare. The interwar period, then, was marked by clear divisions on the issues of chemical weapons and an inability to achieve international agreement.

The modern era of chemical warfare began on April 22, 1915 near the town of Ypres, Belgium, when the German military opened 6,000 cylinders of liquid chlorine along a four-mile front against French and French-Algerian soldiers. This initial attack of 168 metric tons of toxic gas killed approximately 5,000 Allied soldiers with 10,000 more wounded. The attack was so effective that after months of stalemate trench warfare a four-mile-wide hole was opened in the Allied line in just 36 hours. So surprised were the Germans by the overwhelming effectiveness of this new weapon they were unable to fully exploit the massive opportunity chemical weapons had created. The German high command had initiated this treaty-breaking chemical warfare, and eventually the Allies would respond in kind. According to some estimates, by the end of the war one-third of all artillery munitions contained gas.

Although incredibly effective in the early stages of use, chemical weapon defenses, mainly in the form of continually improved gas masks, advanced rapidly throughout the war. Thus, by the end of the conflict, as the use of chemical weapons increased, the number of casualties attributed to these weapons declined. By the time the armistice was

declared on November 11, 1918, an estimated 124,000 metric tons of 21 different chemicals were used by both sides, delivered mainly via 66 million artillery shells. As much as one million casualties had been caused by these weapons with approximately 90,000 fatalities and many more blinded and disfigured. Of the American Expeditionary Force's (AEF) 272,000 casualties, approximately 27 percent were caused by chemical weapons. However, only 2 percent of these casualties were fatal. During the interwar period, the low fatality rate of the AEF would be a prime argument for the continued use of chemical weapons in warfare.

### **Between the World Wars**

Immediately following the war, pressure increased to prohibit the use of chemical weapons. Undoubtedly the mass slaughter and extraordinary violence of trench warfare took its toll on the public. With casualty rates in excess of anything in human history, pressure intensified to mitigate warfare by international treaty. Newspapers, photographs, and returning veterans all reminded people of the costs of war and the especially gruesome effects of chemical weapons.

Despite the war fatigue experienced by many after the Great War, and the call for a general military disarmament, when it came to chemical warfare the path forward was anything but straightforward. Publicly, at least in Great Britain and the United States, some groups advocated for continued development and use of chemical weapons while others argued for an international chemical warfare ban.

Those in favor of further developing chemical weapons held various beliefs. Among the most popular arguments were that (1) treaties banning the use of weapons employed in war were worthless because, as Germany had proven, belligerent nations would simply

ignore international accords if militarily advantageous; (2) efforts to regulate chemical weapons production were unenforceable because any nation with a peaceful domestic chemical production industry could easily convert to weapons production in a short period of time; and, (3) due to the relatively minor number of deaths caused by chemical weapons in the Great War and the defenses against gas, these munitions were less harmful and more defensible than conventional weapons and therefore were actually more humane than bullets, bombs, artillery, and bayonets.

Arguing for the international regulation of chemical weapons, anti-gas activists tended to focus on the horrifying possibilities of chemical warfare in the future. Most opponents called for the abolition of chemical warfare based on three main reasons:

- 1) It is an uncontrollable weapon, whose effects cannot be limited to combatants.
- 2) It is an “unclean” weapon, condemning its victims to death by long, drawn-out torture, and,
- 3) The further development of chemical weapons may lead to the devising of an agent which can blot out entire populations.

### **1919 Treaty of Versailles**

Beginning with the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, the subsequent decade saw an increasing attempt to regulate warfare by international agreement. Various armament reductions imposed on the Central powers were agreed to by all sides, and the Treaty contained a provision specifically punishing German chemical warfare capabilities. This was done largely to combat the large size and sophistication of the German chemical industry. With the signing of the Treaty, many of the Allied powers also began periods of general disarmament.

Starting in 1919, the United States, with much of the public advocating a return to international isolationism, began a period of military disarmament as well. This included

pressure to disband the Chemical Warfare Service (or CWS). The CWS was formed during the war with the primary mission of conducting offensive and defensive chemical operations. In 1919, Brig. Gen. Amos Fries, appointed during the war by General Pershing to organize the 1st U.S. Gas Regiment, lobbied the government to keep the CWS a permanent part of the military. Fries gave speeches and wrote articles advocating for the use of chemical weapons and sensationalizing the danger to the United States of disbanding the CWS. He also used the domestic chemical industry and the American Chemical Society to advocate on behalf of the CWS. Fries succeeded in his task when the CWS was made a permanent branch of the U.S. Army by the National Defense Act of 1920.

Controversy over chemical weapons continued over the next two years. Advocates and adversaries of gas warfare squared off in print, writing editorials and articles defending their positions. While the propaganda battle waged on in the popular media, many of the major world powers called a meeting to discuss the potential reduction of each nation's army and navy. This conference, commonly known as the Washington Naval Conference, took place from November 1921 to February 1922 in Washington, D.C.

### **1921–1922 Washington Naval Conference**

The Washington Conference, attended by the United States, United Kingdom, France, Italy, and Japan, convened to discuss reductions in naval armament, rules by which submarines and “noxious gases” would be used in warfare, and to formalize protections for noncombatants. Though the economic burden of an increasing naval arms race was the main topic of conversation, the American delegation, so influenced by the debate in the popular press and government/military circles over chemical weapons, suggested examining the question of gas warfare.

Despite an increasing public awareness of the escalating dangers of chemical weapons, consensus at the Washington Conference was difficult to establish. All sides agreed that a general prohibition was unrealistic for three main reasons. First, since many conventional weapons and explosives emit noxious gasses any outright ban on chemicals would potentially cause confusion among international military authorities. Second, comprehensive supervision and regulation of chemical research and development was impossible. Third, those nations who honestly obeyed a chemical weapons ban would be at a major disadvantage against unscrupulous states that ignored the treaty. In fact, opposition to the regulation of chemical warfare was so strong that most members of the Washington Conference agreed that chemical weapons were no more or less dangerous than conventional weapons. Once again, despite the growing international will to ban gas warfare, abolition was stalled by national governments who saw little hope in regulating chemicals.

The Washington Conference exhibited the dichotomy existing between competing chemical warfare theories. Morally, the revulsion over the indiscriminate nature of gas, a threat to soldier and civilian alike, was the cornerstone of anti-chemical weapon sentiment. Militarily, the use of chemical weapons was still deemed as legitimate as any other form of armament. And practically, the international community saw little hope in successfully regulating and enforcing any type of ban on chemical weapons research and production.

After the Washington Conference concluded a committee of the League of Nations conducted an in-depth study on the chemical warfare threat querying various experts on the dangers of chemical weapons. Already building consensus against chemical warfare, the committee questioned these experts in an attempt to increase awareness of the dangers of chemical weapons. The resulting 1923 report stated that (1) "Poisonous gases marked

the appearance of a terrible weapon”; (2) “chemical weapons gave an immense superiority to any power with hostile intentions”; and (3) “the possibilities of camouflaging chemical preparedness were very great.”

This report, along with the prior work of the Washington Naval Conference, provided the necessary momentum for the 1925 League of Nations Conference. From this conference emerged the Protocol on the Prohibition of the Use of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or Other Gases, and of Bacteriological Methods of Warfare, commonly known as the Geneva Protocol.

### **1925 Geneva Protocol**

While chemical weapons were of secondary importance to the 1925 conference, the Geneva Protocol was the only successful treaty to emerge from the negotiations. As opposed to prior debates in the League of Nations, a consensus, fragile though it was, emerged concerning chemical warfare.

Using language from the unsuccessful Washington Naval Conference and referring to previously agreed provisions of the Treaty of Versailles, member states finally agreed to prohibit the use of chemical weapons in war. The Geneva Protocol states:

*the use in war of asphyxiating, poisonous or other gases, has been justly condemned by the general opinion of the civilized world; and prohibition shall be universally accepted as a part of International Law.*

In addition, the Protocol extends the prohibition to biological warfare as well.

With this agreement, many believed the Geneva Protocol was the beginning of the end of chemical weapons. However, immediately following the conference chemical warfare advocates began a concerted campaign to keep the United States Senate from ratifying the treaty.

Led by the aforementioned Gen. Amos Fries, the domestic chemical industry, various veterans groups, and the American Chemical Society, chemical warfare advocates lobbied Congress in opposition to the Geneva Protocol. Most surprising about the opposition to the Protocol was the involvement of veterans' organizations. Many individuals who had actually experienced chemical warfare opposed the treaty. The American Legion, for instance, officially opposed ratification of the protocol. In one article, the American Legion legislative committee claimed "it was the experience of hundreds of thousands engaged in the last war that gas was one of the most humane weapons of warfare and also the most effective in bringing any war to an end." In the end, opposition to the treaty was successful. Even with the backing of the White House, the Geneva Protocol remained marooned in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and never came up for a vote before the full Senate. The Geneva Protocol would not be ratified by the United States until 1975.

After the failure of the United States to ratify the Protocol, both sides of the chemical warfare issue continued their advocacy. The arguments were the same, but as the 1930s progressed the international climate began to change. Japan continued military expansion in East Asia and left the League of Nations in 1933. In the same year, Germany inaugurated Adolph Hitler as chancellor and joined Japan in leaving the League. In addition, the 1930s saw the first breaches of the Geneva Protocol when Italy used poison gas during its 1935–36 invasion of Ethiopia, and Japan employed chemical weapons in Manchuria starting in 1937. Although both Italy and Japan were widely condemned for their actions, the looming specter of a larger war soon overshadowed these events.

## **Conclusion**

Today, condemnation of the use of chemical and biological weapons in warfare is nearly universal. Yet this was not always the case. The first half of the 20th century saw

the industrialized production and use of chemical weapons on a scale never before seen in warfare. Following the First World War, many advocated for an increased role for gas weapons in future conflicts. Others deemed the use of chemical weapons an abomination. The years between the World Wars proved to be the pivotal era for the debate over the legitimacy of chemical warfare.

Because of the inability of nations to monitor and enforce arms limitation treaties, any proposition to abolish the use of chemical weapons would have to rely on mutual trust, and faith among nations was not something politicians could rely on in the post-World War I world. Over twenty years after the end of the “war to end all wars” Germany would once again use chemicals in wartime, not on the battlefield, but in the mass murder of millions of innocent men, women, and children. It was a chilling reminder of the danger of industrialized poison gas. With the creation of these merchants of death during the First World War, the international community began debating how to control such weapons of mass destruction lest proliferation spiral out of control and threaten the very existence of humanity.