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Chemical Weapons: The Taboo of the Battlefield

Chemical weapons have been used in war for millennia, with the first recorded instance being when the Athenians poisoned the water supply of the city of Kirrha. However, they received the most recognition, and also the most notoriety, during their usage in the First World War. By the time the bloody war came to an end, it seemed that the entire world agreed that chemical weapons were an abomination and should not be used in combat.

The man credited with developing the primary chemical weapons used in World War I was Fritz Gruber. Gruber argued that chemical weapons should not be taboo, and rather were a more humane form of warfare than traditional weapons. However, descriptions of those affected by chemical weapons paint a different picture. One soldier described the effects of Gruber's chlorine gas attack as "blinded, coughing, chests heaving, faces an ugly purple color, lips speechless with agony." Another described survivors, "Complexion here was an ashed blueish grey, the expression most anxious and distressed with the eye-balls staring, and the lids half closed. Respiration was extremely laboured and noisy with frequent efforts to expel copious amounts of tenacious yellowish green frothy fluid which threatened to drown them, and through which they inhaled and exhaled air into and out of their lungs with a gurgling noise." While one may argue that this is not a more painful fate than being blasted apart by a grenade, it is difficult

to read such descriptions and attempt to describe chemical weapons as anything close to “humane.”

Nearly as devastating as the deaths that it caused in World War I was another effect of the chemical weapons commonly referred to as “gas fright.” The constant knowledge that each breath could lead to a painful demise led to extreme paranoia and, in many cases, mental breakdowns among the soldiers. This psychological component likely also played a large part in establishing chemical weapons as taboo, because although it is certainly not more dangerous than, for example, a nuclear weapon, nuclear weapons can be seen approaching. With many chemical weapons, by the time the victims realize that something is amiss, it is already too late. Living in a world in which those weapons were used in warfare would result in both sides of the war suffering from extreme paranoia, and likely a deadly stalemate, which was precisely what was seen in World War I.

After World War I came to an end, the Geneva Protocol in 1925 banned the use of deadly chemical weapons in an attempt to finally curb the gas fright that gripped all the nations of the time. Eventually, the United Nations banned possession of such weapons in 1993. However, it seems as though time has lightened the fear of chemical weapons. Most of those who have seen its effects in World War I firsthand are now very old or have passed on. Now, though, such weapons are beginning to experience a resurgence in popularity, particularly in Syria. Several countries are known to be in possession of chemical weapons, but the United Nations has taken no real action to enforce the Geneva protocol. Thus far, little action has been taken against those using the forbidden weapons, but increasing tensions may see a change in that.

In 2017, an assassination was carried out in an airport by use of a chemical agent. The perpetrator blatantly ignored all international laws in place regarding the banning of chemical weapons, and re-introduced the world to the very real threat of chemical warfare. Now, it has been shown that several countries possess significant amounts of extremely deadly gases, and now the world must face a choice: find a way to enforce the laws currently in place and eradicate chemical weapons for good, or prepare for a future of near constant gas fright.

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