

Leading Myths:

“Churchill Advocated the First Use of Lethal Gas”

Outrage over use of chemical weapons in Syria has led the world media to Winston Churchill. Reports have circulated to the effect that Britain and Churchill were no different from Syria and Assad: that Churchill favored and/or used initiating the use of “poison gas” from World War I through World War II, notably on the Indians and Bolsheviks in 1919, and the Iraqis in the 1920s. What’s more, he wanted to “drench” German cities with gas in 1943.

The BBC, planning to cover all this, asked: was the matter something we might wish to discuss? Well, yes—before it all gets out of hand.

“Uncivilised Tribes” vs. Welfare of Troops

At the Second Battle of Ypres in April 1915, the horrors of German poison gas broke upon a shocked world. The outraged Allies retaliated in kind, although British manufacture of lethal gas—chlorine, and later phosgene—was a small fraction of that produced by the French and Germans.

RICHARD M. LANGWORTH

Historians from Martin Gilbert forward have published the facts about Churchill and chemical warfare so often in the last forty years that one is surprised this myth continues to perturb the innocent. No doubt the shock value of the claim is high, given what’s been going on in Syria.

Though the killing capacity of those gases was limited to only 4% of combat casualties, revulsion over their insidious effects and the suffering they caused was widespread.¹

After the war, with Churchill at the War Office, Britain was faced with the question of using gas against rebel tribesmen in Northwest India and in Mesopotamia, now Iraq. It was never proposed to use chlorine or phosgene, but

Churchill confused the matter when he used the general term “poison gas” in a departmental minute in 1919 (italics mine):

It is sheer affectation to lacerate a man with the poisonous fragment of a bursting shell and to boggle at making his eyes water by means of lachrymatory gas. I am strongly in favour of using poisoned gas against uncivilised tribes. The moral effect should be so good that the loss of life should be reduced to a minimum. *It is not necessary to use only the most deadly gasses: gasses can be used which cause great inconvenience and would spread a lively terror and yet would leave no serious permanent effects on most of those affected.*²

If it is fair war for an Afghan to shoot down a British soldier behind a rock and cut him in pieces as he lies wounded on the ground, why is it not fair for a British artilleryman to fire a shell which makes the said native sneeze? It is really too silly.” —WSC, 1919

Ten days later, Churchill addressed the India Office's reluctance to use tear gas against rebel tribesmen on the Northwest Frontier:

Gas is a more merciful weapon than high explosive shell, and compels an enemy to accept a decision with less loss of life than any other agency of war. The moral effect is also very great. There can be no conceivable reason why it should not be resorted to. We have definitely taken the position of maintaining gas as a weapon in future warfare, and it is only ignorance on the part of the Indian military authorities which interposes any obstacle.³

Churchill went on to cite what he saw as a greater good, which in his view made the use of “lachrymatory gas” acceptable: the welfare of soldiers. In all the accounts of his supposed enthusiasm for gas warfare, I have never seen this key minute cited in full:

Having regard to the fact that [the India Office] are retaining all our men, even those who are most entitled to demobilisation, we cannot in any circumstances acquiesce in the non-utilisation of any weapons which are available to procure a speedy termination of the disorder which prevails on the frontier. If it is fair war for an Afghan to shoot down a British soldier behind a rock and cut him in pieces as he lies wounded on the ground, why is it not fair for a British artilleryman to fire a shell which makes the said native sneeze? It is really too silly.⁴

Almost always absent from quotations alleging Churchill's penchant for the use of gas is the above paragraph, and certainly the first part of it. It testifies that Churchill was thinking more broadly, and more humanely, than most: He was thinking of sparing serving soldiers, most of them not volunteers, from ugly deaths by the most grisly and barbarous methods.

The issue of gas came up again after Britain had occupied Mesopotamia, part of the old Ottoman Empire, and was trying to restore order and establish a state, later Iraq—“nation building,” we would call it today. Britain was *not* securing her oil supply, which had already been achieved elsewhere. Churchill actually considered “Messpot,” as he called it, a huge waste of money. (See David Freeman, “Churchill and the Making of Iraq,” *FH* 132.)

Continued use of the Royal Air Force in Iraq, Churchill explained to Air Marshal Trenchard, might require “the provision of some kind of asphyxiating bombs calculated to cause disablement of some kind but not death...”⁵ A year later Churchill urged Trenchard to continue “experimental work on gas bombs, especially mustard gas, which would inflict punishment upon recalcitrant natives without inflicting grave injury upon them.”⁶

Now mustard gas is much sterner stuff than tear gas. It causes itching, skin irritation and large, putrid blisters. If a victim's eyes are exposed they become sore. A victim can contract conjunctivitis, where the eyelids swell, resulting in temporary blindness. But Churchill was right in his judgment that mustard gas was not usually lethal. Of 165,000 British mustard gas casualties on the Western Front in World War I, only 3000 or 2.5% were deaths. Chlorine, first used by the Germans, in its later “perfected” stage, killed nearly 20%.⁷ In the event, gas of any kind was not used in India or Iraq.

Gassing the Bolsheviks

The strongest case for Churchill as a chemical warfare enthusiast involves Russia, and was made by Giles Milton in *The Guardian* on 1 September 2013, which prompted this article. Milton wrote that in 1919,

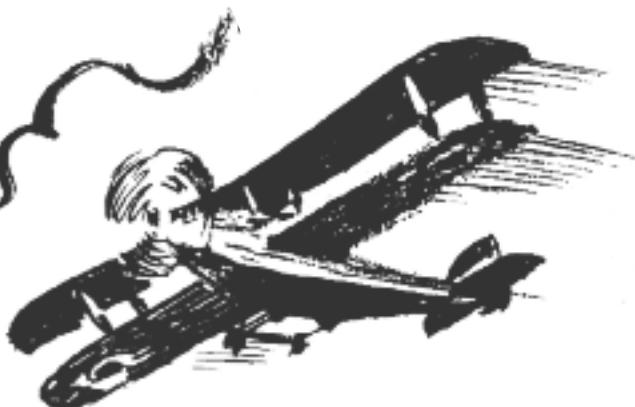
scientists at the governmental laboratories at Porton in Wiltshire developed a far more devastating weapon: the top secret “M Device,” an exploding shell containing a highly toxic gas called diphenylaminechloroarsine [DM]. The man in charge of developing it, Major General Charles Foulkes, called it “the most effective chemical weapon ever devised.” Trials at Porton suggested that it was indeed a terrible new weapon. Uncontrollable vomiting, coughing up blood and instant, crippling fatigue were the most common reactions. The overall head of chemical warfare production, Sir Keith Price, was convinced its use would lead to the rapid collapse of the Bolshevik regime. “If you got home only once with the gas you would find no more Bolshies this side of Vologda.”

A staggering 50,000 M Devices were shipped to Russia: British aerial attacks using them began on 27 August 1919....Bolshevik soldiers were seen fleeing in panic as the green chemical gas drifted towards them. Those caught in the cloud vomited blood, then collapsed unconscious. The attacks continued throughout September on many Bolshevik-held villages....But the weapons proved less effective than Churchill had hoped, partly because of the damp autumn weather. By September, the attacks were halted then stopped.⁸

If Churchill planned, or even countenanced, dropping lethal gas on Russian villages, even for three days, he is certainly culpable, assuming he actually understood the horrific nature of the device. It would be the only case where he advocated the use a killing agent on civil populations, rather than on the battlefield—where he favored throwing at the enemy whatever they threw first. >>



“The whole business of war is beyond all words horrible, and the nations are filled with the deepest loathing of it, but if wars are going to take place, it is by no means certain that the introduction of chemical warfare is bound to make them more horrible than they have been.” —WSC, 1932



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I respectfully asked Mr. Milton for the sources of his statements, and had no response. I am not sure why I should have to do this. One would expect that a writer making such serious charges would offer sources. No matter: my BBC correspondent put me onto his source: Simon Jones, in a 1999 article which Milton paraphrases, but in my judgment quite misconstrues.⁹

According to Jones, General Foulkes *did* consider the M Device and DM gas effective, and Sir Keith Price *was* convinced it would eliminate any “Bolshies” who came in contact with it. And Churchill *did* order General Ironside, in command at Archangel, to make “fullest use” of the new weapon—for the same reason he always cited with regard to gas: “Bolsheviks have been using gas shells against Allied troops....” (Jones explains that the Bolsheviks had used German shells recovered on the battlefield.)¹⁰

Nowhere, however, does Jones state that anyone thought the M Device “would lead to the rapid collapse of the Bolshevik state.” Neither Simon, nor Milton paraphrasing Simon, says anything about deaths or civilian casualties. This is not to say they didn’t occur, but they could not have been numerous. In a September attack on Chunova, for example, “ten Bolsheviks were affected.” Opposing British troops were advised that in the event of accidentally inhaling DM, “cigarette smoking would give relief.”¹¹

Reading Jones, DM comes off as an ugly, disgusting, but generally non-lethal advance on tear gas. Reading Milton, it sounds almost like Zyklon-B, the gas of choice at Auschwitz and the other killing factories of World War II. Milton’s *Guardian* article then transitions on to the subject of India as if the same gas were proposed there. But Sir Charles Foulkes was next posted to India, where he “investigated and rejected proposals to use gas against the fiercely independent North West Frontier tribes who guarded the main strategic routes into Afghanistan.”¹²

It is possible to believe Churchill would countenance use of more serious gasses in Russia, which he regarded as a life or death struggle against a barbarous tyranny. Yet a document in the Churchill Archives, at the time of the Allied intervention in Russia, suggests that his views here were no different than over India and Iraq:

Because an enemy who has perpetrated every conceivable barbarity is at present unable, through his ignorance, to manufacture poisoned gas, is that any reason why our troops should be prevented from taking full advantage of their weapons? The use of these gas shell[s] having become universal during the great war, I consider that we are fully entitled to use them against anyone pending the general review of the laws of war which no doubt will follow the Peace Conference.¹³

There is nothing here suggesting a Churchill penchant for using gas against civilian populations, as Assad (or some-

body, depending on whose intelligence you believe) did in Syria. Indeed Churchill qualified his recommendation: "pending the general review of the laws of war."

World War II and Beyond

Churchill's chemical weapons philosophy leading up to the Second World War remained along the lines he had expressed before. If the enemy should use it first, he would expect to use it back. Speaking in the House of Commons in 1932, he said:

Nothing could be more repugnant to our feelings than the use of poison gas, but there is no logic at all behind the argument that it is quite proper in war to lay a man low with high-explosive shell, fragments of which inflict poisonous and festering wounds, and altogether immoral to give him a burn with corrosive gas or make him cough and sneeze or otherwise suffer through his respiratory organs. There is no logical distinction....The attitude of the British Government has always been to abhor the employment of poison gas. As I understand it, our only procedure is to keep alive such means of studying this subject as shall not put us at a hopeless disadvantage if, by any chance, it were used against us by other people.¹⁴

Lethal gas was not used by the Allies or Germans on World War II battlefields, though the Nazis certainly reached new depths with its application in the death camps. Churchill was content with the battlefield stand-off, but was always prepared to use it there if it were used first by the enemy. One such possibility arose in February 1943, when London became aware that the Germans might use gas against the Russians in their counterattack on the Donets Basin. The Prime Minister immediately minuted the Chiefs of Staff Committee:

In the event of the Germans using gas on the Russians, my declaration of last year of course stands. We shall retaliate by drenching the German cities with gas on the largest possible scale. We must expect their counter-measures. Is everything in readiness for this contingency both ways? It is quite possible that another warning like I gave last year might check them off at the last minute, but we must be ready to strike and make good any threat we utter with the utmost promptitude and severity.¹⁵

The out-of-context quote one often sees here is "drenching the German cities with gas on the largest possible scale." It is clear, however, that Churchill's minute was a response, not an order. Nor did the military object. The Vice Chiefs of Staff reported back: "we are prepared offensively and defensively for gas warfare and are in a position to retaliate by air on a very large scale."¹⁶

Sir Martin Gilbert added that the Prime Minister was talking about mustard gas (described above), "from which nearly everyone recovers." Even then he would use it, he continued, only "it was life or death for us" or if it would

"shorten the war by a year...." To that end, in Churchill's opinion, Sir Martin continued,

it might even be used on the Normandy beach-head. "It is absurd to consider morality on this topic," he wrote, "when everybody used it in the last war without a word of complaint from the moralists or the Church. On the other hand, in the last war the bombing of open cities was regarded as forbidden. Now everybody does it as a matter of course."

It would be several weeks or even months, Churchill added, "before I shall ask you to drench Germany with poison gas." In the meantime he wanted the matter studied, he wrote, "in cold blood by sensible people, and not by that particular set of psalm-singing uniformed defeatists which one runs across, now here, now there."¹⁷

Again the military replied that they were ready, although they "doubted whether gas, of the essentially non-lethal kind envisaged by Churchill, could have a decisive effect, and no gas raids were made."¹⁸

In view of the celerity and gusto with which Right Thinkers in the media attack Churchill, it is appropriate to mention Sir Martin's next paragraph—a poignant reminder of stark reality, and the difference between "us" and "them":

"News had just reached London of the mass murder in specially-designed gas chambers of more than two and a half million Jews at Auschwitz, which had hitherto been identified only as a slave-labour camp."¹⁹

Myth and Reality

If anyone still believes that Churchill was an enthusiast of lethal gas, they will have to come up with better evidence than we have seen so far—and some acceptable explanation for the many instances when, faced with its possible use, Churchill and his commanders demurred. Truly, they thought on higher moral planes than the Syrians.

We need also to consider attitudes at the time—what really mattered. After the Bolshevik Revolution and the Russian exit from World War I, this same Winston Churchill advocated sending a "commissar" (as he put it) to Lenin, who would offer—in exchange for Russia reentering the war—that Britain would guarantee Lenin's revolution! Sir Martin said that he first revealed this in a lecture to a very large group of distinguished Soviet officers in Moscow: "You could have heard a pin drop."²⁰

While he never advocated the first use of lethal gas, Churchill's main aim in both world wars was victory: "Victory at all costs," as he said in 1940, "victory in spite of all terror." To that end he would consider almost anything. Describing the outbreak of the Great War in 1914 he had written similarly:

At the Admiralty we were in hot pursuit of most of the great key inventions and ideas of the war; and this long in advance of every other nation, friend or foe. Tanks, smoke, >>

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torpedo-seaplanes, directional wireless, cryptography, mine fenders, monitors, torpedo-proof ships, paravanes—all were being actively driven forward or developed. Poison gas alone we had put aside—but not, as has been shown, from want of comprehension.²

I recall the words of his daughter Lady Soames: “My father would have done almost anything to win the war, and I daresay he had to do some pretty rough things. But they didn’t unman him.”²² ☈

“*T*anks, smoke, torpedo-seaplanes, directional wireless, cryptography, mine fenders, monitors, torpedo-proof ships, paravanes—all were being actively driven forward or developed. Poison gas alone we had put aside—but not, as has been shown, from want of comprehension.” —WSC, 1923



Endnotes: **Websites accessed** **3 September 2013**

1. Chris Reddy, “The Growing Menace of Chemical War,” Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, 2 April 2007, cited at <http://bit.ly/15pDuRq>.

2. Churchill minute, War Office, 12 May 1919. Martin Gilbert, ed., *Winston S. Churchill, Companion Volume 4, Part 1* (London: Heinemann, 1977), 649.

3. Ibid., 661-62.

4. Ibid., 662.

5. Martin Gilbert, “Churchill and Bombing Policy,” Fifth Churchill Lecture, Washington, D.C., 18 October 2005, on the Churchill Centre website: <http://xrl.us/bgy3j2>.

6. WSC to Sir Hugh Trenchard, 29 August 1920, Martin Gilbert, ed., *Winston S. Churchill, Companion Volume 4, Part 2* (London: Heinemann, 1977), 1190.

7. “Chemical Weapons in World War I,” op. cit. See also “Sulphur Mustard,” <http://bit.ly/15pE8hL>.

8. Giles Milton, “Winston Churchill’s Shocking Use of Chemical Weapons,” *The Guardian*, 1 September 2013, <http://xrl.us/bprq4v>.

9. Simon Jones, “The right medicine for the Bolsheviks: British air-dropped chemical weapons in north Russia, 1919,” *Imperial War Museum Review* 12, 1999, 78-88. (A .pdf copy is available from the editor by email).

10. War Office to General Officer in Charge Archangel, telegram, 7 February 1919, Public Record Office, Jones, 80.

11. Jones, 83.

12. King’s College, London, “The Serving Soldier: Major General Charles Foulkes (1875-1969),” <http://xrl.us/bprrmo>.

13. WSC to Chief of Imperial General Staff, 25 January 1919, supplied by Allen Packwood, Churchill Archives Centre, 4 September 2013.

14. “Disarmament Problems,” House of Commons, 13 May 1932, in Winston S. Churchill, *Arms and the Covenant* (London: Harrap, 1938), 23-24. Richard M. Langworth, ed., *Churchill in His Own Words* (London: Ebury Press, 2012), 190.

15. Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, vol. 7, *Road to Victory 1941-1945* (London: Heinemann, 1986), 352-53. On 20 March 1942, Churchill had written Stalin: “His Majesty’s Government will treat any use of this weapon of poison gas against Russia exactly as if it was directed against ourselves.” See Winston S. Churchill, *The Hinge of Fate* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1950), 329.

16. Ibid., 353.

17. Martin Gilbert, *Churchill: A Life* (London: Minerva, 1992), 783.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Sir Martin Gilbert to the author; private correspondence, 1993.

21. Winston S. Churchill, *The World Crisis*, vol. 1, 1911-1915 (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1923), 382. I am grateful to Prof. Antoine Capet for bringing this to my attention.

22. Lady Soames to the author; private correspondence, 2005.