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Commentary

American and Canadian Protests against Poison Gas after World War I

—[Elisabeth Iacono](#) (Editor: [Jennifer Lee](#))

During the summer of 2015 between my freshman and sophomore years at the University of New Hampshire (UNH), I took part in the Research Experience and Apprenticeship Program (REAP) under the direction of Professor Marion Girard Dorsey, associate professor of history. REAP is a summer award program of the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research at UNH for highly motivated freshman after their first year. They carry out a research project under the supervision of a UNH faculty member.

Professor Dorsey was working on a book-length project on perceptions of chemical warfare in Britain, the United States, and Canada during the interwar and World War II periods. I was to research Canadian and American sources from these periods in the popular press and literature, political speeches, and scientific literature having to do with the use of poison gas in wartime. The purpose of my and Professor Dorsey's research was to see if public, political, and scientific perceptions of poison gas could have influenced or replaced legal means taken to control its use after World War I; and if so, how. This project also gave me the opportunity to learn how to conduct scholarly research in primary and secondary sources.

The majority of my research was done online from my home in Rhode Island, using databases at the UNH library to read newspapers, scientific articles, and, to some extent, parliamentary and congressional records, as well as to find books. During the summer I met every few weeks with Professor Dorsey at UNH. To guide my work, she assigned different types of sources as well as background books for each week. This variety in materials kept my research interesting and allowed me to examine many different kinds of texts and points of view.

Some of the books I read were *Mad, Bad, and Dangerous? The Scientist and the Cinema* by Christopher Frayling; *Deadly Allies: Canada's Secret War (1937-1947)* by John Bryden; and *River of Darkness* by Rennie Airth. The first two books were scholarly studies, but the third was a mystery novel whose main character is a murderer scarred by experiencing gas warfare.

This novel showed how the topic of poison gas could be dealt with in popular literature.



The author and her mentor discuss the following week's research.

Poison Gas in World War I and the Geneva Protocol

Before starting my research, Professor Dorsey asked me to conduct a quick, general investigation into the use of poison gas to acquaint me with the topic. Gas was first used as a weapon by the Germans at the Second Battle of Ypres on April 22, 1915. It completely blindsided the Allied troops; it was like nothing they had ever experienced before. Later gases included ones that were odorless and colorless, yet could blind or seep right through soldiers' uniforms to burn or produce painful blisters (Vilensky & Sinish). Gas was a horrible weapon, and the Allies were not altogether sure how to combat it effectively. Gas masks were developed to protect troops and civilians, and Allied nations created their own gases for defensive, and sometimes even offensive, purposes ("Central Powers Intend to Continue Poison Gas" 2).

A huge international and domestic debate on whether or how to control gas warfare pervaded the interwar period. Members of the general public as well as governmental officials participated. In 1925, the Geneva Protocol was created, which banned the use of poison gas almost entirely (1925 Geneva Protocol).

The Geneva Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or Other Gases, and of Bacteriological Methods of Warfare was created at a conference for the supervision of international trade in arms and ammunition, held from May 4 until June 17, 1925. The Protocol did not go into effect until 1928, and dozens of countries, including Germany, signed and even ratified it before and after that date. The United States and Japan did sign, but did not ratify the treaty for various political reasons.

Although the Protocol stated that it outlawed the use of all "asphyxiating, poisonous, or other gases," it was remarkably weak. Signatories could insert reservations protecting their rights to retaliate by using gas. There was no way to stop such retaliation and no enforcement for preventing first use. The countries I focused on in my research (England, Canada, and the United States) created and stored poison gas for their own use, claiming it would be used only in retaliation to attacks. In fact, the United States government refused to stop using tear gas domestically, particularly in police use, because they believed it was more humane than other weapons and it was not, strictly speaking, a war gas (SIPRI 23). Their fear of gas still remained after World War I, however. American medical and military staff in World War II were trained to be prepared for situations involving poison gas, and often participated in simulated attacks. With the exception of tear gas, the U.S. has officially abandoned the production of poison gas. It is distressing to think, however, that this does not prevent hostile or terrorist groups in this country from producing it.

With agreeing states being allowed to use gas against others, it seems that the Protocol should not have worked; however, reputable (as compared to rogue) nations have rarely used poison gas. To this day, there have been only three major but limited uses of poison gas since World War I: the Italian attacks in Ethiopia from 1935 to 1936; Japanese attacks in China before and after World War II; and American assaults in Vietnam (SIPRI 24). The Protocol remained in force until a new treaty replaced it in 1993. It is my opinion, based on my research, that this success is because, as the Protocol states, gas was "justly condemned by the general opinion of the civilized world" (1925 Geneva Protocol 1).



Nurses learning to put on gas masks on the run during a simulated gas attack at Scott Field, Illinois, 1942 (?) (Courtesy of Library of Congress).

Poison Gas “Justly Condemned” During the Interwar Period

Professor Dorsey predicted that I would find more anti-gas sources than pro-gas ones, and my research supported her prediction. The articles and texts I read were predominantly anti-gas, and suggested a worldwide abhorrence of poison gas. After seeing the cruel consequences of the weapon, many people declared it inhumane and concluded that it would be wrong for it to be used again. A 1921 *Philadelphia Inquirer* article, “Dreamers of Peace Find New Panacea. Disarmament on Land, on Sea, in Air, and Prohibition of Poison Gas,” makes this clear. Gas was an indiscriminate killer, and although it was delivered often by artillery shell during World War I (limiting its area of effect), there was always the possibility of wind carrying it away from the battlefield. There are documented

cases in which nearby innocent civilians died from gas inhalation although the weapon had been released on the battlefield. A 1918 headline in the *Wilkes-Barre Times Leader* announces “German People Told to Buy Gas Masks Quickly.”

Gas also had the reputation of being exceedingly cruel. Not only could it be used to kill civilians, it also tended to cause prolonged suffering before finally eliminating its victims or maiming them. *The Times* of London 1915 article, “The Poison Gas: After Effects of the Fumes,” reveals that poison gas often caused burns and respiratory problems that remained with those victims who survived the initial exposure for their entire lives. Some soldiers would appear fine after being exposed to the poison on the battlefield, only to suddenly die later (Bryden 164).

I did find, as predicted, some pro-gas documents, and was surprised to find that they were written predominantly by scientists. Several scientists, such as the one cited in the 1938 article “A Scientist Deprecates Air-Raid Panic” in the *Illustrated London News*, argued that poison gas was just as humane as, and maybe even more humane, than any type of mechanical weaponry. The *Boston Daily Globe*’s 1926 article, “BACKWARD OR FORWARD?” even claimed that fears related to poison gas were overstated. However, these arguments were few compared to the anti-gas sentiments expressed.

Although the Geneva Protocol itself was weak, it remained in power due to a shared abhorrence of the effects of gas. Many people knew how painful and cruel gases were, and believed that it was not morally right to use these weapons. I believe that the Protocol placed into law the already existing negative attitudes that people had toward gas. It is likely that its successor in 1993, the Chemical Warfare Convention, was made more powerful because of these enduring attitudes.

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Author and Mentor Bios

Elisabeth Iacono is a sophomore history major from Bristol, Rhode Island, and a member of the University Honors Program. When she learned about the Research Experience Apprenticeship Program (REAP) offered by the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research, she looked for a mentor and found Dr. Girard Dorsey. Although her summer research was tedious at times, Elisabeth enjoyed meeting and talking with her mentor. She also learned much about the process of research and how to be efficient. Elisabeth is interested especially in American history, but also in archival work and museum studies.

Dr. **Marion Girard Dorsey** is an associate professor of history and has been at the University of New Hampshire since 2003. Her specialties are varied and include the history of medicine, legal and diplomatic history, and war and society. She is currently conducting research on chemical warfare and on the history of professionals in the military. Dr. Dorsey has mentored both undergraduate and graduate students for independent studies and undergraduates for research grants. She was delighted to see Elisabeth's excitement about history and her dedication to her research. "Elisabeth's commitment was admirable, and she studied numerous kinds of sources while developing her analytical skills. It was rewarding to watch her develop as an historian."

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