

GAS WARFARE

What Are the Benefits—and What the Dangers?

Paul W. Blackstock

Surfeited with the unprecedented horrors of World War II, the moral consciousness of the Western world has become jaded. There was a time—in the mid-1930's—when it protested Mussolini's practice of forcing castor oil down the throats of political prisoners and then parading them in public while stalwart Fascists watched the spectacle with sadistic glee. During his Ethiopian campaign, Mussolini's use of irritant gases to give brave but ill-shod and ill-equipped Ethiopian tribesmen "the hot foot" was also condemned by a moral conscience that had not yet learned to accept the organized cruelty of World War II—the terror bombings of both British and German cities, and the unexampled savagery of the German invasion of Russia, widely heralded by Nazi propaganda as a great anti-Communist "crusade."

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But even the Nazis, who kept the gas chambers of their extermination camps busily operating around the clock at home, did not use their enormous stock of deadly poison gases abroad during World War II. This restraint was all the more remarkable in view of the fact that they had made a significant breakthrough in research, and had produced in quantity new gases which are said to cause death in thirty seconds, and thus were many times more toxic than the obsolete types stockpiled by their enemies. What restrained their hand? A tender solicitude for intended target personnel? The fact that gas warfare had been outlawed by the Geneva Convention? Concern over public reaction—that "decent respect for the opinions of mankind" of which the framers of our own Declaration of Independence were so keenly aware? Not likely.

Long before the rise of Hitler, in fact as early as 1921, the German government began its long course

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of secret military collaboration with the USSR, and by 1923 a German-Soviet joint stock company, "Bersol," was founded for the purpose of manufacturing poison gases at Trotsk, in Samara province. The trade name of the new highly toxic nerve gases developed by the Nazis, *Samarin*, is a reminder of this early joint Soviet-German research effort.

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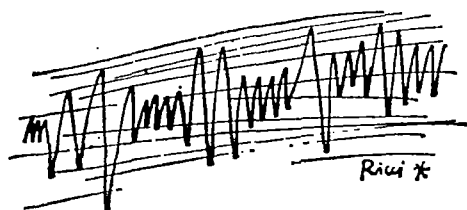
The threat of gas warfare was an integral part of strategic Nazi psychological warfare which so successfully terrorized Western Europe in the years before the outbreak of World War II. In the present age of a balance of terror in which the world is threatened with a thermonuclear holocaust, we forget that the Nazi threat of mass bombing and gas warfare was every bit as real to target populations in France and England in 1938-39. The threat was so close to home that many individuals had their own gas masks and government protective measures were taken. For example, in Paris in the summer of 1939, the long stretch of lawn and garden reaching from under the Eiffel Tower to the Palais Chaillot was honeycombed with a maze of gas shelters.

Nevertheless, once the battle was joined, there were a number of excellent practical considerations which deterred even Nazi Germany from using its stock of superior nerve gases during World War II. These considerations also serve to deter the use of chemical warfare agents today. In the first place, chemical, biological and radiological agents (known by their initials as CBR weapons) are used most effectively in a surprise or "pre-emptive" attack against an enemy which is relatively unprotected against them, and not adequately prepared to retaliate in kind. Fully adequate protective equipment (masks, clothing, special medicines, etc.) is bulky, expensive, and under battle conditions cannot be stockpiled and distributed to the troops in the field without such special preparations coming to the almost immediate attention of enemy intelligence agents. Such preparations are almost certain to remove the element of surprise, and to alert the enemy to extra defensive precautions. During the latter

stages of World War II, for example, most soldiers had either thrown away their gas masks or had used the containers for extra food and liquor for so long that the masks themselves were rendered completely unserviceable.

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These simple facts alone are enough to explain why the Nazi military machine was deterred from using its vastly superior nerve gases—Tabun, Sarin and others—even during the genocidal extremities of their campaign in Russia. Ironically, the only serious poison gas scare of the war came a few weeks before the German surrender and was caused by the U.S. Air Force which at the time was bombing and strafing targets of opportunity almost without opposition. The South German city of Bamberg had just been entered by token U.S. forces when three barges were observed sitting at anchor in the river in the center of the city. They were loaded with huge storage drums conspicuously marked with bright yellow and green bands—an ideal “target of opportunity.” They were filled with the new highly toxic nerve gases, and the occupying American troops spent a nervous 24 hours wondering whether word could be gotten back to eager-beaver pilots in time to avoid disaster to all concerned, as the American gas mask filters were useless against these new agents!



At the end of World War II both the U.S. and the USSR were embarrassed by the fact that the defeated German military establishment was obviously far ahead of the victors in the field of chemical warfare research and development. National prestige was at stake and the research and development race in the field of CBR weapons was on, at first secretly and then openly in April 1950, when General Anthony C. McAuliffe, then Chief of the Army Chemical Corps, announced in a speech to the American Chemical Society that the U.S. and the USSR were both developing “nerve gases” and similar weapons. The Army Chemical Corps began a hard-hitting public relations campaign to sell CBR weapons systems and to get a larger share of the budget for research and development.

This campaign has continued ever since on two

levels. First, within the military establishment, it conducts at least yearly briefings for “key personnel” which in an aura of deepest secrecy review material that has already been largely covered by such open sources as Hanson Baldwin, the military analyst of the *New York Times*, or various medical and chemical journals (which described the nerve gases at least as early as 1954). On the second level, in connection with the annual battle of the budget, the Chief of the Army Chemical Corps (or occasionally even the Secretary of the Army) makes a statement or speech calling for intensified research (and bigger appropriations), reporting on recent advances in CBR weapons systems, and warning sternly that we must keep abreast of Russian advances. The American Medical Association was given the full treatment—a series of briefings and the propaganda pitch on cooperation in research—by Army Chemical Corps spokesmen in November 1960.

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It should be emphasized that the Army Chemical Corps campaign has been a unilateral effort which violates the spirit, if not the letter, of U.S. government policy as laid down in a National Security Council recommendation. As Secretary of State Dean Rusk emphasized in a recent press conference, our policy has long been that the U.S. should not use CBR weapons except in retaliation for their use by enemy forces. Ever since World War I, gas warfare has been excluded by the Geneva Convention to which the U.S. is a signatory. Not only out of “a decent respect for the opinions of mankind,” but also because it is national policy, the Pentagon has strictly followed the NSC guidelines against the offensive use of CBR weapons in its cycle of war plans. This self-imposed limitation has not precluded continuing research in these areas and the development of significant capabilities which, like our thermonuclear striking power, serve mainly as a deterrent to the use of CBR weapons by an opponent in case war should break out.

The dangers inherent in such research and development have been widely recognized. As early as August 1937, U.N. Secretary Trygve Lie prophetically emphasized the dangers inherent in unrestrained research in chemical, biological and radiological warfare. On October 19, 1953, the late Pope Pius XII, speaking to an International Congress of Military Physicians, told doctors to refuse to take part in atomic, germ or chemical warfare “when it represents an injustice.” A year later the Board of Governors of the International Red Cross publicly backed the banning of CBR weapons, and the Pope again

spoke out against their use except in self-defense—essentially the U.S. National Security Council position. Nevertheless, the Army Chemical Corps persisted in its campaign for prestige and profits (in the form of a bigger budget). In November 1955, Army Secretary Brucker publicly endorsed a study urging that the use of CBR weapons systems be integrated into U.S. military planning. The report, which was drawn up by a Civilian Advisory Commission headed by G. W. Merck of Merck Chemical Company, did not go unnoticed. Hanson Baldwin, for example, wrote a special article emphasizing the psychological harm done to the United States image abroad by Communist propaganda based on the report.

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In order to put the worldwide reaction to the recent gas warfare incident in perspective, we need to take a close look at the picture of the U.S. built up by Soviet propaganda in the last decade.

Today, in the mid-1960's, it is difficult to appreciate how badly the U.S. image abroad has been damaged by the Soviet-inspired "Hate-America" and biological warfare campaigns during the classic cold war period which ended with the death of Stalin in 1953. This was also the heyday of Soviet "peace propaganda" which called for the banning of atomic weapons during a period of pronounced Soviet inferiority in this field. Working through a deliberately nebulous front organization, the World Peace Council, the Soviet propagandists issued a series of so-called "peace appeals" which were highly successful. The first and most widely publicized, the Stockholm Appeal of 1950, collected literally millions of signatures from the world over. Soviet propaganda claimed six hundred million signatures for the succeeding Warsaw Appeal of 1951, and 650 million for a similar Vienna Appeal of 1955.

The World Peace Council was also used to launch the so-called "germ warfare" campaign in March 1952. This worldwide campaign reached a peak of intensity during the Korean War. It was provided a phony but impressive "documentary base" by an international scientific commission which was hand-picked and sent to North Korea and Northeast China. The commission produced a 65-page pamphlet which was given worldwide circulation during September and October. This report, later supplemented by forced "confessions" of American aviators, such as Major Bley and Colonel Schwable, was the key to the whole bacterial warfare campaign. In spite of the fraudulent nature of the so-called "documentation," the hearsay evidence presented, the obviously

fake exhibits of bacterial "bombs" and other paraphernalia, the campaign as a whole was a major propaganda triumph.

As with other Soviet propaganda campaigns, the credibility of the charges was enhanced by the support of leading Communists and fellow-travelers in the West. Among these sympathizers were such outstanding figures as the French Communist Yves Farge, the Very Reverend Hewlett Johnson, "the Red Dean of Canterbury," who returned from Korea with his own eye-witness account of germ warfare as he had seen it.

In spite of its absurdities, the Soviet biological warfare campaign was one of the most successful strategic psychological operations in modern history. Even today, more than a decade later, to the teeming millions of Asia and Southeast Asia, the U.S. stands condemned for having *already* used biological as well as atomic weapons against "the yellow races." Like Pavlov's dog, the target audiences have been thoroughly conditioned to believe such charges, and Soviet or Chinese Communist propagandists need only to ring the bell again to produce the same kind of response.

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Unfortunately, by the recent use of chemical agents, such as tear and nausea gases in Vietnam, the American-led South Vietnamese forces have rung the bell for them. The fact that for years the civilian use of such agents for riot control purposes has been routine is irrelevant to the psychological damage done by their military use in Vietnam. It is difficult to explain to their victims that in theory such chemical agents are "merely incapacitating" and, since in the long run they may save casualties, are actually "benevolent." A bewildered Vietnamese villager who is crying his eyes out while vomiting uncontrollably is not likely to be impressed by the "benevolence" behind such sophisticated arguments. Moreover, like the parades of Mussolini's castor oil victims, the defenseless Vietnamese target population may well regard the indignities of chemically-induced diarrhea as degrading, and certainly something less than humane.

Even before the "gas-war incident" the distinguished political analyst, Marquis Childs, had observed that the psychological effect of American bombings and the use of napalm had been increasingly to alienate the Vietnamese people in the South. Without their support the war against the Vietcong guerrillas cannot possibly be won. Strategically, it is still too early to predict what the long-range effects of chemical agents may be. They may be forgotten

in the rush of daily events. On the other hand, future historians may mark their use as a psychological turning point of the war, as the last straw which finally alienated the local population after almost two decades of continuous warfare and foreign occupation.

Tactically, the local military gains resulting from the use of tear and nausea gases were virtually nil. Theoretically the Vietnamese villages were ideal gas warfare targets, since unlike the French on the eve of World War II, neither the politicians nor prostitutes, nor even the local military, were equipped with gas masks. But, as Secretary of State Dean Rusk admitted, the practical results of the experiment were disappointing. In the three incidents where gas was reported used, he said, "it wasn't very effective . . . the wind blew it away, it was dissipated, it didn't achieve its purpose. . . ." These results might have been anticipated by anyone taking the time to read a manual on gas warfare. The woeful inability of meteorologists to predict wind direction and change has long been recognized as a built-in limitation on the use of gas as a military weapon under the most favorable tactical conditions, that is, against even a defenseless opponent.

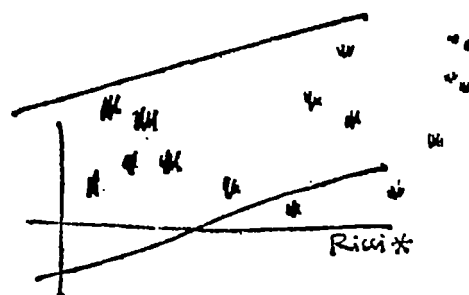
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From the point of view of psychological strategy, the gas warfare incident may be assessed in the famous dictum of Talleyrand: "It was worse than a crime, it was a mistake." As early as 1953 the President's Committee on International Information Activities, in the Jackson Report, warned that: "The important task is to build an awareness throughout the entire government of the impact of day to day governmental actions and to coordinate such actions so as to derive from them maximum advantages." Surely the psychological harm which might result from the use of even "benevolent" gases to flush out Viet Cong guerrillas should have been a matter of review at the national level before the decision was made.

No such review was made on the "day to day" basis recommended in the Jackson Report. Decisions fraught with such sweeping psychological consequences were apparently left in the hands of local field advisors, thus proving once again that war is too important in its political implications to be left entirely to soldiers. In his press conference, Dean Rusk frankly admitted that "we were not specifically asked in Washington on the day before any of these incidents whether we approved the use of this particular weapon." Coming after the bitter lessons of the U-2 "spy plane" affair, the incident brings to

mind Santayana's saying that "those who refuse to learn from history are condemned to repeat its mistakes."

For what in fact proved to be the most wretched tactical results, the local American military advisors simply handed the critics of American policy in Vietnam their greatest propaganda windfall of the conflict. This is a significant advantage which Soviet and Chinese Communist propaganda will probably continue to exploit for the foreseeable future. Al-



though the Soviets can certainly distinguish between lethal and non-lethal chemical agents, the USSR sent the American government an official note protesting our use of "poison gas." In their embarrassed press conference apologia, both Dean Rusk and Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara stressed that the relatively mild, non-toxic agents employed were a "minimum instrument" used in a difficult "riot-control type of problem," when Viet Cong guerrillas mixed with villagers. The object, said Rusk, was to avoid the use of artillery or aerial bombs that could inflict great damage against innocent people.

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This line of reasoning follows the propaganda pitch of a new, open campaign by the Army Chemical Corps to obtain a reversal of the NSC ban on CBR weapons. This campaign began in November 1959, and has continued into the present. It is based on the military use of the sensational new drugs, Lysergic acid (LSD), Psilocybin (the hallucinating ingredient of "golden" mushrooms) and Mescaline (the active "cloud-nine" ingredient of certain cactus drinks). Taken in even the most minute doses these drugs produce temporary schizophrenia. (The Chemical Corps pitch describes the effects as merely "mental aberrations.") Unlike marijuana and other narcotics they are reportedly non-habit-forming but produce even more marked hallucinations. They have replaced amphetamines and "goof balls" among hipsters who are determined to get their kicks one way or another, and propagandize their private use as "consciousness expanders."

In Congressional testimony released in March 1959 by the U.S. Armed Services Committee, Assistant Army Secretary Finn J. Larsen stated that both the U.S. and the USSR were developing a new gas "capable of neutralizing a population," one which makes its victims "incapable of realizing what they are doing for hours but which, once the effect wears off, leaves no permanent injury." In earlier press releases, Army officials were quoted as expressing the belief that it may be possible to direct such gases against entire cities, preparing the way for their seizure without damaging the buildings and with no harmful effect on the population. However, in reply to a direct question as to whether the U.S. might change its traditional position on the use of CBR weapons in view of recent scientific developments, former President Eisenhower answered, "no such official suggestion has been made to me, and as far as my own instinct is concerned [it] is not to start such a thing as that first."

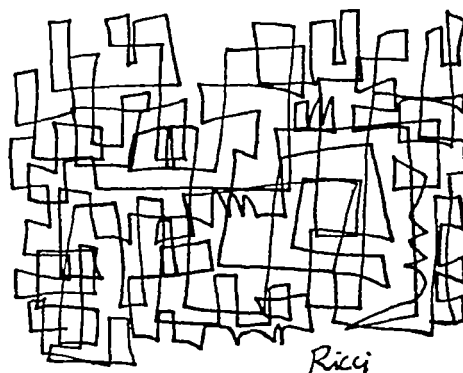
Here, as in the earlier case of his Presidential veto in plans to use atomic weapons in Indochina in 1954, Eisenhower's instinctive negative reaction to the offensive use of CBR weapons was psychologically sound. As demonstrated by the recent incidents in Vietnam, the game is simply not worth the candle. The damage done to the U.S. image and the propaganda losses incurred are entirely out of proportion to local and tactical advantages which may be dubious at best.

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But the recent incidents in Vietnam point up other lessons which need to be learned at once, and which have enormous implications, not only for the security of the U.S., but also for the future of mankind if the self-imposed limitations on the use of CBR weapons are reversed by any of the major powers. In the first place, the propaganda line that the new LSD-type drugs have no harmful after-effects is false. There is a growing body of scientific, medical, and popular literature indicating that these "consciousness expanding" drugs are very dangerous indeed. They produce temporary madness (schizophrenia) in almost all victims, and a significant number either never "come back" completely, or are subject to uncontrollable seizures for months or even years after exposure. Like the earlier and milder amphetamines, these new agents are already being tightly controlled by some states and will probably be as rigidly limited in the future as narcotics are today. To be sure, in Army experiments the effects have been relatively harmless on especially selected volunteer groups, each member of which has been

thoroughly screened by psychiatrists in order to weed out sociopathic and other potentially dangerous personality types. But these types are present in significant numbers in the population at large, which would be the target of mass attacks. Even the most carefully controlled medical experiments have resulted in many an unexpected tragedy, as indicated in the memoirs of those who had had "the experience."

In the second place, it cannot be emphasized too strongly that a delicate balance of thermonuclear terror hangs over the world today. This balance rests on the valid assumption that no sane member of the power elites in the U.S. or the USSR would deliberately trigger a thermonuclear exchange. The major powers have spent enormous sums on perfecting command and control procedures to safeguard against the hazards of accidental war to begin with, and on mechanisms which hopefully would limit response and retaliation, even after hostilities have started. The only hope of limiting hostilities and preventing their escalation rests on the assumption that the coolest heads and sanest councils would at all times prevail.



The offensive use of LSD-type drugs in the initial stages of a general war would fantastically increase the chances of a thermonuclear holocaust. The control of thermonuclear weapons is difficult under ideal conditions, when sobriety and sanity are the normal order of the day. The mind boggles at the thought of what might happen if whole populations were subjected to CBR weapons, however benevolent their advocates may consider them. The deliberate use of such allegedly "harmless" chemical warfare agents could open the way to ultimate consequences which could be disastrous. The door to the offensive use of CBR weapons has been ever so slightly opened by the so-called "gar warfare" incidents in Vietnam. It is up to an alert public opinion to close it again, and to keep it firmly shut.