

Poison Gas

On the afternoon of April 22, 1915, French colonial troops in the trenches near Ypres in Belgium were startled to see a greenish-yellow cloud drifting toward them from the German lines. When the cloud reached them, the colonial troops began to cough and grab their throats. Many of them threw down their rifles and ran. Those who stayed died of suffocation.

The gas released by the Germans was chlorine gas, which caused death by suffocation. The Germans also used tear gas, which temporarily blinded all who came in contact with it. Germany's use of poison gas violated an agreement signed by forty-five nations in 1907 which prohibited the use of any weapon that caused unnecessary suffering. The Germans, however, violated that agreement in the false hope that poison gas would help break the deadlock on the western front.

One month after the gas attack at Ypres, the first gas masks came into use. These masks were rather inefficient at first, but they became more effective as the war went on. Even dogs that served as guards and helped locate wounded soldiers were outfitted with gas masks. More effective gas masks were especially needed when the Germans began using more potent gases such as phosgene and mustard gas.

Five months after the Germans initiated the use of gas, the Allied countries did the same. Gas attacks became routine, resulting in almost a million casualties (people killed, captured, injured, or missing) by the end of the war. Approximately 79,000 soldiers died as a result of being exposed to poison gas.

Fill in the blanks to complete the following statements about the use of poison gas.

1. _____ was the first country to use poison gas in World War I.
2. The first gas attack during the war occurred near the Belgian town of _____.
3. The kind of gas used against French colonial troops in 1915 was _____.
4. Three other gases used during World War I were _____, _____, and _____.
5. About _____ soldiers were killed by poison gas in World War I.
6. Do you think it is ever acceptable for nations at war to use weapons, such as gas, that cause great suffering? Why or why not?

7. Some nations today are developing biological weapons (disease spreading) and chemical weapons. Should any action be taken to stop them? If so, what type of action?

Trench Warfare

After the First Battle of the Marne, the war on the western front changed. Machine guns and other new weapons had made traditional methods of attack obsolete. If troops attacked the enemy by charging with bayonets, as they had in previous wars, they were mowed down by machine gun fire.

Fighting quickly turned into trench warfare. Both sides dug trenches in zigzag fashion on the western front from the Belgian coast to Switzerland. Most trenches were about ten feet deep and were fortified with sandbags and wood. Some were even fortified with corrugated iron to keep them from caving in. To make it as difficult as possible for the enemy to reach a trench, a barbed wire barrier was erected in front of it. Tin cans and razor blades were often attached to the wire to enhance its effectiveness.

There were generally four main lines of trenches. The trench line closest to the enemy was the firing trench. Soldiers served in the firing trench for up to a week. There they fired at enemy troops and took shelter from enemy fire. The line behind the firing line was the cover trench, where reserve troops supported the front line. The third trench line was the support trench. It frequently held field artillery. The fourth trench line was the reserve trench, which contained supplies. Communications trenches connected the four trench lines with one another and allowed soldiers and supplies to move between them. Soldiers typically rotated on duty between the four main trench lines.

Life in the trenches was extremely grim. Heavy rains caused the trenches to fill up with water and mud. Many soldiers who were asleep or wounded sank into the mud and drowned. Disease, flies, lice, and rats were rampant. In the first five months of the war, both sides lost nearly a million men.

The area between the trenches was called no man's land. On command, soldiers would go "over the top" (climb out of the trenches) and charge toward the enemy. When they did this, they were slaughtered in record numbers by machine gun fire and artillery.

1. Why were traditional methods of fighting no longer possible during World War I?

2. Describe the horrible conditions of trench warfare.

3. Why do you think the armies' positions moved so little during World War I?
