

A Barbaric Weapon?

*Representations of
chemical weapons, and
the reproduction and
use of the Chemical
Weapons Taboo in
French and German
national newspapers
from 1899 to 1925.*

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The Figure on the front page shows a Greek soldier (possibly the war god Ares), inspecting a projectile containing an asphyxiating substance [*“obus axphyxiants”*]. From Albert Robida’s *La Guerre au Vingtième Siècle* (1887).

Abstract

Interest in the Chemical Weapons Taboo rekindled in 2013 when the international community argued in favour of military interventions against the Assad regime in response to its use of sarin gas in the Syrian Civil War. Recent academic publications on the topic proceed from the view that the Chemical Weapons Taboo is socially constructed and cannot be rationalised through essentialist or realist arguments. This view was originally established by Richard Price in 1997 who mapped out the construction of the Taboo with a strong focus on the political perspective.

This thesis seeks to expand Price's research by investigating the views of French and German national newspapers from the Hague Declaration of 1899 to the Geneva Protocol of 1925. In particular, this thesis focusses on how chemical weapons were represented in these newspapers and what these representations reveal about the reproduction and use of the Chemical Weapons Taboo. For that purpose, all articles containing the term "asphyxiating gases" and/or "deleterious gases" were considered in the French newspaper, *Le Matin*, and the German newspaper, *Berliner Tageblatt*.

These newspapers suggest that representations of chemical weapons changed significantly over time, ranging from disregard, to abhorrence, to acquiescence. Consequently, the reproduction and use of the Chemical Weapons Taboo were often situational and sometimes even highly inconsistent.

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List of Abbreviations:

OPCW.....	Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons
OHL.....	Oberste Heeresleitung (Supreme Army Command of Imperial Germany).
WTB.....	Wolffsches Telegraphenbureau

Introduction

“*Terrible*”, “*gruesome*”, “*sickening*”. These are but a few descriptions that then-President of the United States, Barack Obama, used in September 2013, when referring to the new heights of brutality in the Syrian Civil War.¹ The Assad regime had tried to flush out the opposition in the Damascus sub-urb of Ghouta by using sarin gas – a deadly chemical agent – that killed more than a thousand civilians, including children. In order to justify U.S. action against the Assad regime, Obama remarked in his speech: “*When dictators commit atrocities, they depend on the world to look the other way*”.² Targeted actions were therefore needed to make Bashar al-Assad understand that he had overstepped the line. All things considered, this message turned out to be quite effective: the Assad regime joined the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) less than a year later, pledging to destroy all of its chemical weapons reserves under the watchful eye of the United Nations.³ Beyond the use of chemical weapons, however, Obama’s remark left some people wondering whether the international community should have reacted as quickly to the other human rights violations committed by the Assad regime.

When the Arab spring arrived in Syria in early 2011, government forces quickly turned to violence: they did not shy away from arresting and subsequently torturing 15 children who had graffitied political messages on the walls of their school.⁴ One case that created particular outrage, was the murder of Hamza Ali al-Khatib. The 13-year-old boy was separated from his family during the chaos of the Daraa uprising and was returned dead to his parents a month later with three gun-wounds in his chest, his body displaying burn marks and his genitals cut off.⁵ In this context, it is not surprising that some newspapers at the time regarded Obama’s response with dissatisfaction. An article in the Atlantic pointed out that ‘conventional’ weapons had been a much larger threat to civilians than poisonous gases.⁶ The author arrived at the conclusion that enforcing the ban on chemical weapons would make little

¹ Obama. “President Obama’s full speech on Syria”. *CNN*. Published on YouTube.

² *Ibid*, 00:03:40

³ OPCW, “Destruction of Syrian Chemical Weapons”, p. 1

⁴ Tarabay. “For many Syrians, the story of the war began with graffiti in Dara’a’.” *CNN*.

⁵ Macleod, Flamaud. “Tortured and killed: Hamza al-Khateeb, age 13”. *Al Jazeera*.

It is strongly suggested that these tortures were done by the government forces of the Assad regime which itself denies any involvement in this.

⁶ Tierney. “Syria’s 99 Percent: The Problem With Focusing on Chemical Weapons”. *The Atlantic*.

to no difference in stopping the violence against civilians as the truth of the matter was: “*Conventional weapons have killed 100,000 Syrians. Chemical weapons have killed 1,000.*”⁷

The selective focus on chemical weapons by the international community also sparked discussions in the academic world. In *Syria and the Chemical Weapons Taboo* (2016), Michelle Bentley suggests that the outrage around the Assad regime’s use of sarin gas reveals a powerful Taboo on chemical weapons. This Taboo can be understood as a social and political revulsion against chemical weapons that considers any use to be unacceptable, even justifying military force against the users. While Bentley does not deny that the Taboo helps to uphold a prohibition on a very dangerous and indiscriminate weapons technology, she also acknowledges its deeply ambivalent character in the context of the Syrian Civil War. For one, Bentley suggests that it has blinded the international community to similarly or more destructive forms of violence, creating “*erroneous hierarchies into arms control discourse*” that may “*push non-chemical threats out of consideration*”.⁸ Furthermore, Bentley claims that Assad joining the OPCW may have even served to legitimise his regime, simply by complying with the expectations of the international community.

Inspired by Bentley’s conclusion that the Chemical Weapons Taboo does not present a static norm but can be used by political actors “*in very strategic and manipulative ways*”, this thesis will investigate the reproduction and use of the Taboo in French and German national newspapers at the start of the 20th century, when chemical weapons emerged for the first time.⁹ Before defining and justifying this research question more clearly, however, we need to appreciate earlier attempts at understanding the Chemical Weapons Taboo. A task that leads us to the history of international relations.

Historical approaches to the Chemical Weapons Taboo

In the second half of the 20th century, many historians have proceeded from the view that the Chemical Weapons Taboo can be explained with rational arguments. Such arguments either tried to identify properties that showed why chemical weapons appeared to be inherently more cruel than ‘conventional’ weapons technologies, or considered why actors did not think the

⁷ “Why has the Syrian War lasted 10 years?” *BBC*.

These were only the estimates for the period from 2011 to 2013. Since then the death toll has further increased to 600.000 (as of March 2021).

⁸ Bentley. *Syria and the Chemical Weapons Taboo*, p. 2

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 152

use of chemical weapons advantageous in specific (geo)political and military contexts.¹⁰ In his book, *The Chemical Weapons Taboo* (1997), Richard Price rejects these approaches, pointing out why the most dominant essentialist and realist arguments cannot fully explain the moral stigma on chemical weapons:

Essentialist arguments for the Taboo have often highlighted the secretive and indiscriminate nature of chemical weapons, alongside their potential to create unnecessary suffering.¹¹ Price points out, however, that it is always possible to find another weapons technology that equals or even exceeds chemical weapons in these qualities without inciting the same moral stigma. Although realist arguments are often more specific and cannot be dismissed in such a general manner, Richard Price shows why the three most frequently evoked realist arguments do not fully explain the Chemical Weapons Taboo either.

Firstly, it has been suggested that many countries felt underprepared to wage a chemical war, be it because their production capacities were too small or because of the lack of protection measures against chemical weapons. According to Price, this argument does not fully explain how the Chemical Weapons Taboo became politically relevant, further observing that there are few examples in history in which a weapon was not used “*simply because an army did not have the supply they would have liked.*”¹² The argument of chemical underpreparedness has often been accompanied by the notion that, in reality, chemical weapons do not provide a significant advantage to their users, making it easier to keep the Taboo in place. Turning to the book, *La Grande Guerre Chimique* (1998) by Olivier Lepick, this could also be the case for chemical weapons: as Lepick illustrates, chemical weapons have not caused very many deaths at the western front during World War I (see Figures 1A and 1B). Of the millions of soldiers that were killed on either side of the trenches in France and Belgium, 17,195 died as a result of chemical weapons. The number of wounded is significantly higher with around 480,000, but that still amounts to only 3% of all casualties.¹³ It must be acknowledged that these relatively small numbers can be partly explained by the fact that protection measures against chemical weapons were quickly implemented at the

¹⁰ Price. *The Chemical Weapons Taboo*, p. 6

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 6

¹² *Ibid*, p. 5

¹³ Lepick. *La grande guerre chimique*, under section: “Le bilan humain des hostilités chimiques” [epub].

The number 17.195 was derived from Figure 1A by adding all of the estimated deaths together for every country and period of time. The number 480.000 was derived from Figure 1B by adding all of the estimated human casualties together for every country and period of time and subtracting the 17.195.

western front. Furthermore, it is important to note that the year 1918 shows a much higher number of casualties of chemical weapons than the previous years from 1915-1917 (see Figure 1B). Lepick points out that from 1917 onwards, the belligerents started to use artillery shells that allowed for more accurate bombardments of enemy lines while developing more potent chemicals to use in these shells.¹⁴ It is exactly for this reason that Richard Price dismisses the notion of the inutility of chemical weapons as deadlier chemical agents can be developed and chemical weapons can still provide tactical advantages in certain situations, for example, to flush out barricaded soldiers.

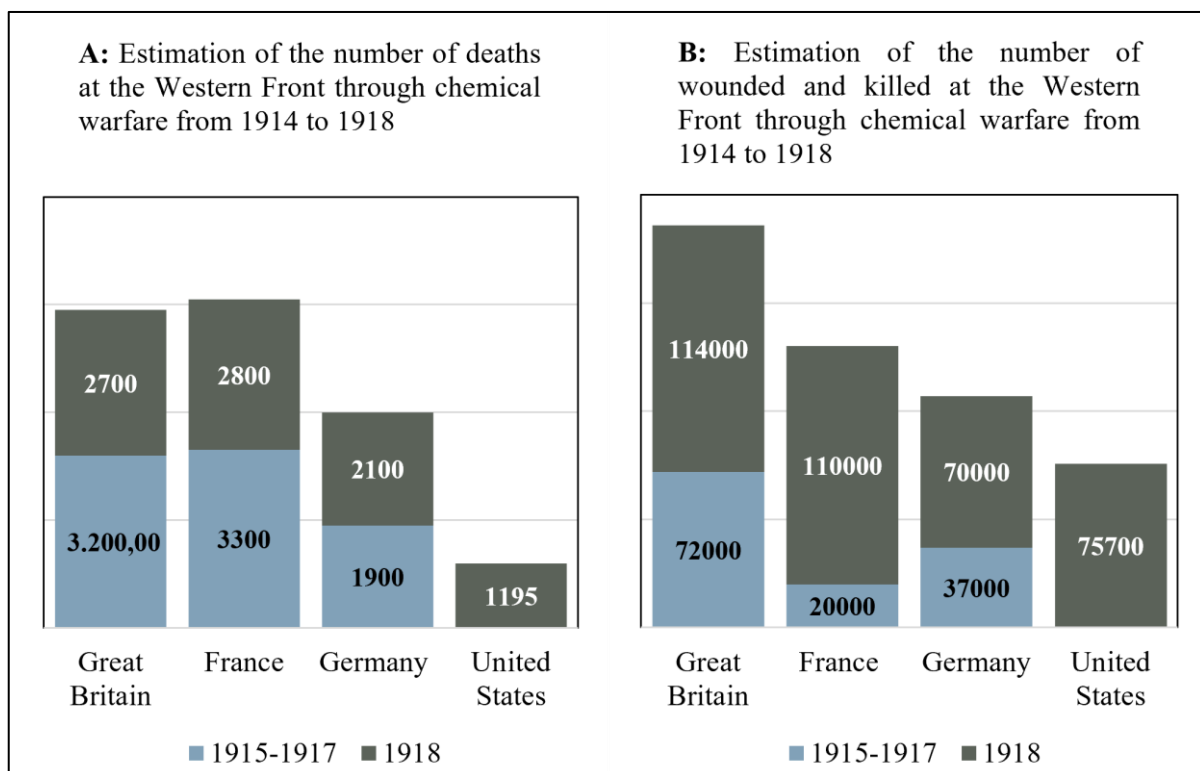


Figure 1: killed and wounded through chemical warfare in World War I

Both of these bar charts can be found in Olivier Lepick's *La Grande Guerre Chimique* but they were retouched for visibility purposes. No changes were made to the data themselves.

A: estimation of the number of deaths caused by chemical weapons on the Western front for Great Britain, France, Germany and the United States. The blue column shows the number of deaths from 1915-1917; the grey column shows the number of deaths in 1918.

B: estimation of the number of wounded and killed through chemical weapons at the Western front. The blue column shows the human casualties from 1915 to 1917; the grey column shows the human casualties in 1918. The total amount of approximately 500.000 wounded and killed through chemical weapons amount to 3% of the total human cost at the Western front.¹⁵

¹⁴ Ibid, under section: "Le bilan humain des hostilités chimiques" [epub].

¹⁵ Ibid, under section: "Le bilan humain des hostilités chimiques" [epub].

A second realist explanation for the Taboo is based on the notion that an attack with chemical weapons may provoke the opponent to use them also, creating a fear of mutually assured destruction. The deterrence argument could explain the non-use of chemical weapons in military conflicts where all belligerents had the infrastructure to wage a chemical war. Nevertheless, Richard Price criticises this idea on the grounds that chemical weapons have not been used in a number of conflicts where one faction lacked the means to produce and employ them, and retaliation in kind was an unlikely scenario (i.e. during the Spanish Civil War, the Korean War, the Wars of Indochinese and Algerian Independence, or the Vietnam War).

This leaves the third realist argument that is based on the idea that governments felt generally appalled by chemical weapons, a notion that was further “*reinforced by the pressure of public opinion and the constraining influence of the Geneva Protocol [of 1925].*”¹⁶ Richard Price does not doubt this idea in as much as moral and legal categories can indeed effectively constrain the use of certain weapons technologies, however, he also asserts that the argument needs further elaboration and clarification. According to Price, the problem with most of the 20th century literature on the Chemical Weapons Taboo lies in the assumption that the question, ‘Why is there a peculiar Taboo on chemical weapons?’, has a definitive answer. Rather than reducing the Taboo to this ‘Why’-perspective, Price proposes to look at the more descriptive questions ‘How did the Chemical Weapons Taboo come into existence?’ and ‘how did it gain political relevance?’

In Price’s view, terms such as ‘conventional’, ‘chemical’ or ‘weapons of mass destruction’ do not present natural categories, but should instead be understood as contingent moral structures that have been fabricated through political and social processes as he summarises himself:

*“Rational reductions for deeply rooted cultural constraints on chemical weapons are mistaken as they ignore the vagaries of history and politics. As I demonstrate here [in my book], it is political constructions in history which have shaped subsequent attitudes towards chemical weapons, contrary to rational expectations.”*¹⁷

Price investigates the construction of the Chemical Weapons Taboo by adopting a ‘genealogical approach’ that was first established by Friedrich Nietzsche and later

¹⁶ Price, R., *The Chemical Weapons Taboo*, p. 4

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 7

complemented by Michel Foucault.¹⁸ Instead of focussing on where and when a norm originates, the genealogical approach is interested in revealing how power and discourse “*shape [people’s] normative stances on different topics*” and “*produce and legitimise certain behaviours*”¹⁹. It is important to note that the construction of norms does not necessarily follow a rational process but may sometimes also be influenced by “*chance occurrences, fortuitous connections and the continuous reinterpretations of moral structures*”.²⁰

Proceeding from this view, Price shows that the norm against chemical weapons was defined for the first time in the Hague Declaration of 1899, banning the “*use of projectiles, the sole object of which is the diffusion of asphyxiating or deleterious gases*”.²¹ To Price, this first prohibition on chemical weapons was decisive in the construction of the Taboo and only possible at a unique historical intersection in which there was a considerable political will to define ‘civilised’ standards of conducting future wars. Although the Hague Declaration was breached in World War I, Price maintains that the Taboo remained intact as chemical weapons were not employed against civilians and their military use had to be specifically justified by the belligerents. In the interwar period, the specific prohibition of the Hague Declaration was extended to include all types and applications of chemical gases. According to Price this more comprehensive prohibition further consolidated the Taboo, eventually contributing to the military non-use of chemical weapons in World War II.²²

Since its publication more than twenty years ago, Richard Price’s, *The Chemical Weapons Taboo*, is still relevant and frequently cited in publications concerned with the constructions of norms in international politics.²³

The public reproduction of the Chemical Weapons Taboo

Main research question:

Although Richard Price’s book provides a thorough analysis of the construction and consolidation of the Chemical Weapons Taboo in the 19th and 20th centuries, his primary and secondary sources are almost exclusively based on academic and government publications.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 9

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 7

²⁰ Ibid, p. 7

²¹ The Hague Declaration (IV,2), *Concerning Asphyxiating Gases*. All of article IV,2 of The Hague Declaration can also be found in Document C in the Appendix of this thesis.

²² Price. *The Chemical Weapons Taboo*, p. 50

²³ From 2018 to now, other studies have, for example, been inspired by Price to apply the ‘genealogical approach’ to other norms, such as saturation bombing or civilian immunity.

While these sources show how the norm against chemical weapons was established and enforced by institutions, political leaders and other decision makers, it leaves open the question if– and how the Taboo was adopted in the public sphere. Given that the genealogical perspective puts emphasis on the concepts of power and discourse, it is remarkable that the public perspective on the Taboo has not yet been substantially discussed. The historian Christopher Warren has investigated public opinions on– and representations of chemical weapons in the United States and the United Kingdom during the interwar period, however, without explicitly considering the question in what manner and to which degree these representations were reproducing a norm on chemical weapons.²⁴ Intending to expand this research, the following research question arises for this thesis:

How were chemical weapons represented in French and German national newspapers from 1899 to 1925, and what do these representations reveal about the reproduction and use of the Chemical Weapons Taboo?

It must be pointed out that this thesis will not make causal inferences about the role of national newspapers in the construction of the Chemical Weapons Taboo, but will only investigate the reproduction and use of the Taboo.

Timeline:

Chemical weapons were prohibited for the first time during the Hague Conference of 1899 as “*projectiles the sole object of which is the diffusion of asphyxiating and deleterious gases*”.²⁵ In World War I, chemical weapons were not immediately introduced on the battlefield. While France experimented with tear gas in late 1914, it was not until April 1915 that the German army launched its first largescale attack with chlorine gas, provoking the continued use and refinement of chemical gases by all belligerents in World War I. The interwar period saw three attempts at reintroducing the prohibition on chemical weapons, starting with the Treaty of Versailles that banned “*asphyxiating, poisonous or other gases and all analogous liquids*” for Germany in 1919.²⁶ The Five-Power Treaty of 1922 contained a resolution, intending to extend the prohibition to the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, France and Italy.

²⁴ Warren. “GAS, GAS, GAS!”

²⁵ The Hague Declaration (IV,2), *Concerning Asphyxiating Gases*. The whole article IV,2 of The Hague Declaration can also be found in Document C in the Appendix of this thesis.

²⁶ Treaty of Versailles (V, 171), *Concerning the use of asphyxiating, poisonous or other gases*. The whole article V, 171 can be found in Document E in the Appendix of this thesis.

Even so, the document was not ratified by all parties. In 1925, discussions on the prohibition of asphyxiating and poisonous gases were reopened, eventually resulting in the Geneva Protocol that was signed and ratified by 41 countries. It should also be noted that during the proceedings of the Geneva Protocol, the Spanish colonial army employed gas bombs against Berber tribes in the Rif region of Morocco. The Hague Conference of 1899 and the Geneva Protocol of 1925 therefore constitute the natural boundaries of this research (consult Figure 2 for a rough timeline of the covered period).

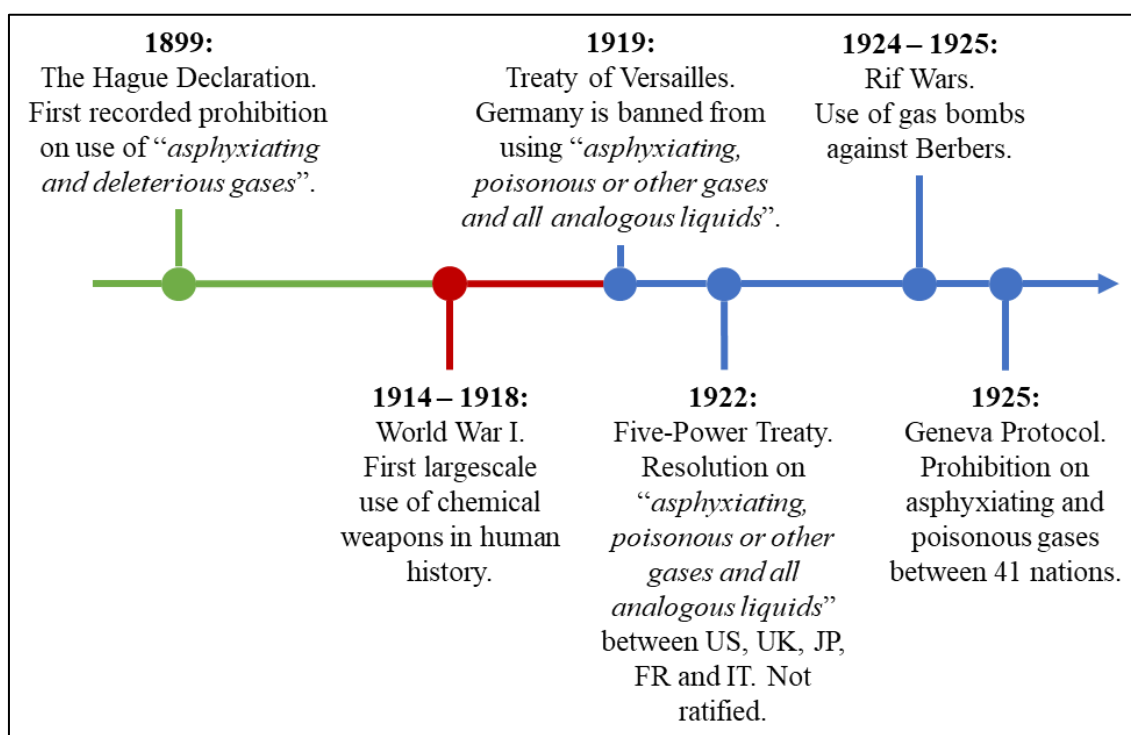


Figure 2: timeline from 1899 to 1925

Rough timeline of the relevant events related to the prohibitions and uses of chemical weapons in the period from 1899 to 1925.

Primary sources and methodology:

The 19th century could be considered as the golden age of the press and newspaper industries. While certain newspapers were growing their circulation numbers into the hundreds of thousands per year, there was a growing awareness that the press had acquired the status of a “*Großmacht*” – a major power – that could “*topple thrones, destroy altars, conquer kingdoms, and subdue and command peoples*” when fallen in the wrong hands. As a result, national newspapers played an increasingly dominant role in interpreting political and social events from the 19th century onwards, including the power to actively advance certain opinions and points of view. Using national newspapers as the main primary source in this thesis can

therefore provide important insights into the reproduction and use of the Chemical Weapons Taboo.

The first official definition of chemical weapons – or rather ‘asphyxiating and deleterious gases’ as they were called at the start of the 20th century – constitutes the vantage point of this thesis. Entering the French and German equivalents of ‘asphyxiating gases’ and ‘deleterious gases’ into the digital libraries of Gallica and Europeana, produces more than seven thousand results.²⁷ For the purpose of this thesis, the search query was further refined to include only the results in the daily, national newspapers *Le Matin* for the French context and *Berliner Tageblatt* for the German context. Reviewing all articles, containing the search words ‘asphyxiating gases’ and ‘deleterious gases’ in *Le Matin* and the *Berliner Tageblatt* from 1899 to 1925, allows for a systematic engagement with the public representations of chemical weapons in France and Germany and may nuance some of the more general statements of existing research. Figure 3 shows two bar charts with the number of search results for “gaz asphyxiant*” or “gaz délétère*” per year in *Le Matin* (see Figure 3A), respectively the number of search results for “erstickende* gas*” OR “stickgas*” and “giftige* gas*” OR “giftgas*” per year in the *Berliner Tageblatt* (see Figure 3B).

On the one hand, both of the newspapers were chosen for practical reasons as they are completely digitalised for the given time period from 1899 to 1925 and full-text searchable. On the other hand, both of these newspapers were very influential in their respective countries. At the height of its popularity in 1914, *Le Matin* sold around 1,000,000 copies per day, while the *Berliner Tageblatt* sold 250,000. These relatively high circulation numbers can be explained by the fact that both newspapers reached out successfully to an audience of working– and lower middle class people.

Gallica situates *Le Matin* on the far right of the political spectrum, describing it as having conservative and nationalist attitudes towards most political issues.²⁸ In retrospect, this present-day understanding of *Le Matin* may have been influenced by the fact that the newspaper later collaborated with the Vichy regime during World War II. When *Le Matin* was founded, however, it considered itself to be of a more moderate republican inclination,

²⁷ Note that ‘asphyxiating and deleterious gases’ were officially translated as ‘gaz asphyxiants et délétères’ in French and ‘erstickende und giftige Gase’ in German. In the German context, the terms ‘Stickgase’ and ‘Giftgase’ were searched as well due to the tendency of creating compound nouns in the German language. A first rudimentary search on gallica.bnf.fr for the terms ‘gaz asphyxiants’ and ‘gaz délétères’ yields 3528 results; on Europeana, the terms ‘erstickende Gase’ and ‘giftige Gase’ yield 3608 results.

²⁸ Gallica, “Les principaux quotidiens.”

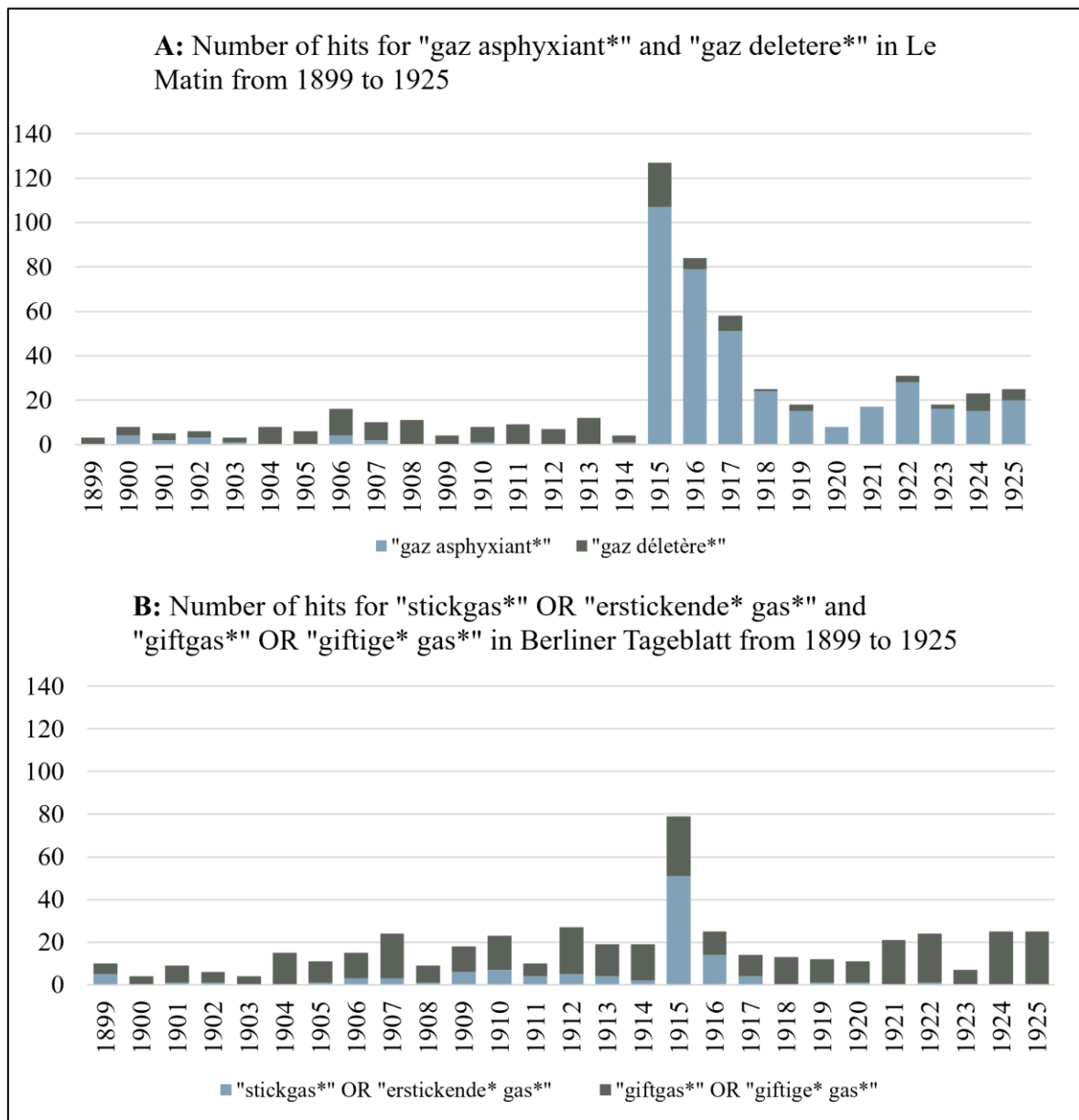


Figure 3: frequency of use of ‘asphyxiating gases’ and deleterious gases in *Le Matin* and the *Berliner Tageblatt* from 1899 to 1925

A: bar chart showing the number of hits for the term “gaz asphyxiants” (see blue columns) and “gaz délétères” (see grey columns) per year from 1899 to 1925 in *Le Matin*. The data were retrieved from gallica.bnf.fr.

B: bar chart showing the sum of the number of hits for the terms “erstickende* gas*” OR “stickgas*” (see blue columns) and “giftige* gas*” OR “giftgas*” (see grey columns) per year from 1899 to 1925 in the *Berliner Tageblatt*. All the data were retrieved from europeana.eu

The raw data of these charts can be found in Table A in the Appendix.

leaning towards the centre-right of the political spectrum. Before and during World War I, the *Berliner Tageblatt* tried to be as neutral as possible in its news reporting, citing politicians and organisations without further commentary. In the Weimar Republic, however, the published articles became decidedly more opinionated, often inspired by the liberal ideals of the German Democratic Party (*Deutsche Demokratische Partei* in German).

Limitations:

Nevertheless, the chosen methodology presents some important limitations to this research: On a more general note, the representations of– and opinions on chemical weapons in national newspapers cannot be equated to the overall public perception of chemical weapons. To that end, it would also be necessary to substantially discuss representations of chemical weapons in literature, public addresses, expositions and the like.

Furthermore, although *Le Matin* and the *Berliner Tageblatt* were highly influential newspapers in their respective national contexts, they cover but two of the many political views of their time. While this thesis also regularly references other newspapers and magazines of different ideological dispositions, they were not reviewed in the same systematic manner as *Le Matin* and the *Berliner Tageblatt*. It is possible that this matters less in the context of World War I, given that censorship laws enforced a somewhat universal patriotic narrative in both France and Germany. To name but one example, however, there may have been a significant difference in the way that socialist newspapers reported on and evaluated chemical weapons before and after World War I in comparison to *Le Matin* and the *Berliner Tageblatt*.

Risking to point out the obvious, it must still be emphasised that France and Germany, as two of the main belligerents of World War I, had very high stakes in justifying their uses of chemical weapons. As a result, their reproduction and use of the Chemical Weapons Taboo may be much more biased than in other countries. Given that the Chemical Weapons Taboo is mostly understood as a transnational concept, however, neutral and non-Western countries would need to be considered as well to paint a picture of how the Taboo was reproduced and used in a broader sense.

Given that this thesis covers only the inception period of chemical weapons until 1925, presents yet another limitation to this study. Continuing the research after 1925 may elucidate, for example, when national newspapers started to separate the overarching terms ‘asphyxiating and deleterious gases’ into different categories, such as tear gases or war gases. In this context it must also be noted that while the term ‘chemical weapon’ is used as a

synonym for ‘asphyxiating and deleterious gases’ in this thesis, it was not really in use in the covered time period. From 1899 to 1925, *Le Matin* used the term ‘arme* chimique*’ only six times, while the *Berliner Tageblatt* used the term ‘chemische* waffe*’ only once. Given that the term ‘chemical weapon’ puts emphasis on military use, its origin story may reveal more about how and when the use of chemical gases diverged into different (legal) trajectories.

Structure: From The Hague to Geneva

This thesis will be divided into three chapters that will discuss the representations of chemical weapons in French and German national newspapers as well as the reproduction and use of the Chemical Weapons Taboo in a chronological manner.

Referring back to Figure 3, it becomes apparent that the search terms ‘asphyxiating gases’ and ‘deleterious gases’ were not extensively used in *Le Matin* before 1915, while being much more prevalently mentioned in the *Berliner Tageblatt*. It should be pointed out that such mentions very rarely referred to gases in a weaponised context, often even lacking a direct connection to chemistry. Therefore, Chapter 1 will investigate the broader question in which scientific-industrial and geopolitical context chemical weapons were banned for the first time during the Hague Convention of 1899. To that end, Chapter 1 discusses how newspapers and magazines viewed the development of industrial chemistry as well as the political attempts at regulating the wars to come in 19th century Europe. As will become apparent, these two topics are not entirely separated as the increasing number of military applications in industrial chemistry gave credence to the idea that scientific progress was much more Janus-faced than expected.

With World War I and the use of chemical weapons by all belligerents, the frequency of the terms ‘asphyxiating gases’ and ‘deleterious gases’ shoots up significantly (see Figure 3). The use of chlorine gas by the German army on April 22nd, 1915 shocked many countries and provoked the continued use and development of gases by all belligerents. Chapter 2 will be concerned with the reaction of French and German newspapers to the introduction of chemical weapons on the battlefield of World War I. In this regard, it will be of particular interest to this thesis to evaluate at which point the Chemical Weapons Taboo emerged and what kind of narratives were created around specific uses of chemical weapons.

Lastly, Chapter 3 will look at how German and French national newspapers reevaluated chemical weapons during the interwar period, in the context of the international community

trying to reinstate prohibitions on their use. In contrast to the period from 1899 to 1914, the vast majority of articles discussed the terms ‘asphyxiating gases’ and ‘deleterious gases’ in a weaponised context from 1918 to 1925. While uniformly decried as a barbarian weapon by the Allied Powers during World War I, representations of chemical weapons became more diversified, implying a significant change in the reproduction and use of the Chemical Weapons Taboo.

Chapter 1

Between utopia and dystopia: the rise of industrial chemistry in the 19th century and the hopes for international peace.

At the end of the 19th century, chemistry seemed on everyone's lips. This is hardly surprising, as the study of matter and transformation lay at the heart of the industrial changes at the time, constituting what some historians now call the Second Industrial Revolution.²⁹ While the relatively well-established steel and coal industries expanded into other parts of the world, industrial chemistry thrived in Western Europe, especially in those countries that facilitated the integration of scientific theory and industrial capitalism.

Promising a plethora of useful applications and conveniences, industrial chemistry was helping to build a world of material abundance never before experienced in human history. Throughout the 19th century, newspaper articles were often very optimistic about how chemistry was shaping modern life, observing that “*modern civilisation owe[d] its principal features to chemistry*” or asserting that chemistry was “*putting the universe in the possession of mankind.*”³⁰ Although we now seem to be much more aware of the ambivalent character of industrial chemistry (and technology in general), such positive attitudes still resonate in present-day historical literature on 19th-century chemistry, aptly captured in Norman Pohl's enumeration of “*bread, prosperity, beauty*” or Engelmann's and Lynteris' book title “*Sulphuric Utopias.*”³¹

Much less optimistic, were the 19th century efforts to create a lasting peace on the European continent and abroad. On the one hand, these movements were inspired by idealist notions of abolishing all future wars, a hope that the peace activist Bertha von Suttner voiced in her rallying cry, “*Lay down your arms, down with them forever!*”³² On the other hand, many politicians took to the realist position that a certain level of disarmament was desirable for general economic development but that wars would also remain an inevitable part of human existence.³³

²⁹ Homburg, Schröter, Travis. *The Chemical Industry in Europe*, p. 1

³⁰ Dumas. as quoted in *L'Univers Illustré* of December 30th, 1876,

³¹ Pohl. “Chemie gibt, Wohlstand, Schönheit.”

³² Von Suttner. *Die Waffen nieder!*, p. 119

³³ Rémond. “Le Pacificisme en France au Vingtième Siècle,” p. 8

This chapter will discuss both, the scientific-industrial as well as the geopolitical, context of the Hague Conference of 1899. The first part of this chapter will consider the positive aspects of industrial chemistry, starting with a discussion on its development in France and Germany during the 19th century, followed by an examination of three examples of so called ‘concrete utopias’ that chemistry was expected to turn into reality. It should be noted that while the term utopia often entails the somewhat poignant realisation that something may be desirable but unattainable at the same time, the term ‘concrete utopias’ was introduced by German philosopher Ernst Bloch to describe the pursuit of a knowable and actually realisable future.³⁴

As we will see in the second part of this chapter, a more nuanced picture about chemistry arose at the end of the 19th century, when chemical factories started to more visibly pollute the environment and chemistry was increasingly weaponised. These negative aspects of chemistry were highly criticised in the magazine, *La Caricature*, accompanied by the unique illustrations of Albert Robida, who – as we will see shortly – almost prophetically imagined what the destructive potential of chemistry would develop into in future wars.

The third part of this chapter will address the public attitudes towards the Hague Conferences. The goals and implications of these Conferences were not immediately understood by the public. Many commentators were sceptical about the true intentions of the Russian Empire when they called on the nation states to find ways to manage the wars-to-come. Discussions arose about who would profit most from a disarmament agreement, accompanied by in-depth commentary on the geopolitical situation on the European continent and the oversea territories. As was noted in the introduction, the first ban on chemical weapons was particularly noteworthy because they did not exist at the time that the Hague Conference of 1899 took place. This fact may explain why the topic does not seem to have stirred up much discussion during the Conference itself, neither in the German and French newspapers, nor amongst the state delegates.

From the Laboratory to the Factory: Professionalisation and Commercialisation of Chemistry in France and Germany

The rise of chemical industry is usually attributed to the second half of the 19th century and the Second Industrial Revolution. In the case of France, however, the beginnings of a

³⁴ Engelmann, Lynteris. *Sulphuric Utopias*, p. 6

chemical sector already became apparent during the Bourbon monarchy, where chemistry was applied in an industrial context.³⁵ On the one hand, the French government assumed an active role in managing big manufacturing sites. Textile-, metal-, glass- and paper industries received the privilege to sell their products nationwide, while being regulated by the *administration de commerce* that also recruited chemists to work as public servants for the monarchy.³⁶ Although these chemists were mainly tasked with administrative functions, they also gave technical advice and conducted research into new markets. On the other hand, the end of the 18th century also featured theoretical and experimental advancements that turned chemistry into a real scientific endeavour with its own methods, theories and values. Antoine Lavoisier's work on pneumatics and elemental theory are particularly well-known in this regard, establishing a theoretical framework that would influence chemical research for decades to come.³⁷

During the French Revolution, the educational system for natural sciences was completely reorganised. Driven by the ideal to make the sciences accessible to all classes of society, new educational institutions were created. The *Enseignement Supérieur* provided the engineers, the *Écoles Techniques* the technical staff for the manufacturing industries. With the foundation of these schools, chemistry became its own subject that was subsidised by the state to pay for the expensive laboratories and equipment.³⁸ The creation of this new educational system facilitated the rise of France's chemical industry in the 19th century by training a new generation of chemists that did not see a barrier between the pure and applied sciences.³⁹

Generally speaking, however, such ties with industry were not viewed positively. It was felt by contemporaries that chemists who worked in a commercial environment were wasting their potential.⁴⁰ In France, this belittlement of applied chemistry continued to appear throughout the 19th century: an article of *Le Temps*, published in December 1875, praised the work of Pierre-Eugène-Marcelin Berthollet in synthetic chemistry as a much needed contribution to pure science in a time “*where one could seemingly find nothing else than applications*”.⁴¹ Before even thinking of such possible applications, analytical chemists would have to provide the “alphabet” of chemical synthesis by identifying the elementary

³⁵ Sadoun-Goupil. “Chimistes et Industrie Chimique en France”, p. 33

³⁶ Ibid, p. 34

³⁷ Ibid, p. 34

³⁸ Ibid, p. 36

³⁹ Ibid, pp. 37. To this generation belonged men like Nicolas Clément (1779 – 1841) and Joseph Louis Gay-Lussac (1778 – 1850), both of whom studied at the *École Polytechnique* in Paris.

⁴⁰ Crosland. “Gay-Lussac – Scientist and Bourgeois”, pp. 179

⁴¹ Vernier. “La synthèse chimique par M. Berthollet.” *Le Temps*.

composition of molecules that could be found in nature. As the century progressed it seemed that the continuing division of pure and applied chemistry in France overturned its head start in industrial chemistry. In 1891, *Le Matin* remarked apprehensively: “To name only dyestuffs, it was in Lyon where picric acid was produced for the first time in 1849. It was in Lyon, where fuchsine was brought into existence ten years later. It was in Paris, where methyl violet, or Parisian violet, was discovered. And it is in Germany, where the dye industries have developed the most since 1870, because they could immediately find the necessary chemical staff. It is in Germany where the wonderful work of synthetic chemistry comes to fruition, [allowing] mankind to come closer to the Creator in a way as we force inert elements to combine into new shapes.”⁴² The complaint that France allowed Germany to steal its glory had a grain of truth in it. Although French chemists had some loose ties to the industry at the beginning of the 19th century, there was little interaction between academic and industrial laboratories later on.⁴³ As the historians, Leprieur and Papon, point out, “chemical research in the French university lived in splendid isolation” from industrial activities, explaining why French chemical companies were not able to compete successfully with other European countries. As we will see, the situation to the east of the Rhine developed in quite a different fashion.

In Germany the integration of science and industry started at the University of Gießen. Under the guidance of Justus von Liebig, Gießen’s laboratories became the paragon of chemical research for other countries.⁴⁴ Liebig’s work was mostly focused on the elemental analysis of organic molecules according to Lavoisier’s elemental theory, but also included applications of chemistry in agricultural and nutritional sciences.⁴⁵ He also stood out as a gifted teacher. Many of the leading chemists of the 19th century had spent a year or two working under his direction, translating his research into other languages and therefore adding to Liebig’s international acclaim. One of his most famous students was August Wilhelm von Hofmann,

⁴² Cornély. “Sens Commun.” *Le Matin*. Translated from the original in French: “C’est à Lyon qu’on a fabriqué pour la première fois, en 1849, pour ne citer que les matières colorantes, l’acide picrique. C’est à Lyon que naissait, dix ans plus tard, la fuchsine. C’est à Paris qu’a été trouvé le violet de méthyle, dit violet de Paris. Et c’est en Allemagne, depuis 1870, que s’est surtout développée l’industrie des matières colorantes, parce qu’elle a trouvé tout de suite le personnel de chimistes qui lui était nécessaire. C’est en Allemagne qu’ont éclaté ces merveilleux travaux de synthèse chimique par lesquels l’homme se rapproche en quelque sorte du Créateur, puisqu’il force les éléments inertes à se combiner sous une forme nouvelle.”

⁴³ Leprieur, Papon. “Synthetic Dyestuffs”, p. 223

⁴⁴ Meinel. “August Wilhelm Hofmann – ‘Regierender Oberchemiker’,” p. 1294

⁴⁵ Jones. “Justus von Liebig, Eben Horsford and the Development of the Baking Powder Industry”, p.

who played a significant role in the professionalisation and commercialisation of chemistry in Great Britain and later in Imperial Germany.

After studying under Liebig, Hofmann worked in the United Kingdom where scientific research was not merely conducted for the sake for knowledge itself. In fact, the English were decidedly more utilitarian: scientific research had to be useful in some way, favouring practical applications over theoretical considerations. Not wanting to abandon his intellectual heritage from Gießen completely, Hofmann often made a case for pure chemistry as a long-term investment that would eventually improve industrial processes.⁴⁶ “*Seal[ing] the pledge of alliance between industry and science*” would become Hofmann’s guiding motive.⁴⁷ During the 1850s, Hofmann was heavily involved in the production of new aniline-based dyes that could be sold lucratively to the textile industry. The market for synthetic dyes actually exploded: from 1860 to 1880 its market value multiplied by a factor of 12, much to the surprise of contemporaries.⁴⁸ A large part of the dye industry was taken up by German companies, holding a share of about 65% in the global dyestuffs market in 1880.⁴⁹ This market proved to be the breeding ground for innovation as successful marketing of chemical products provided the financial means for further research. As a result, German chemical companies also turned to the production of drugs, which turned Bayer, Hoechst and BASF to the high-profile players we know today.⁵⁰

The successes of the German chemical industry, especially during the Wilhelmine period, were interwoven into a narrative of German greatness.⁵¹ Germany wanted to hold its own against the other developed nations and having the largest chemical industry in the world at the end of the 19th century seemed a good omen. According to the historian of science, Christoph Meinel, the chemical dye industry achieved cultural significance, not only because it symbolised German excellence but also because it became an important component of what critics later called the Wilhelmine “age of festivities”. The emperor had a proclivity for self-glorification, expressed in pompous parades and shows of wealth and power. In turn, German chemical industry contributed to this image by its capacity to produce ‘gleam and glitter’ from seemingly worthless substances, such as oil or bituminous coal.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 1297

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 1300

⁴⁸ Meyer-Thurow. “The Industrialization of Invention”, p. 364

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 365

⁵⁰ Pieters. “De benzeenrevolutie in de farmacie”, p. 7

⁵¹ Meinel. “August Wilhelm Hofmann – ‘Regierender Oberchemiker’,” p. 1304

The 19th century was not only an age of science-based industry, but also an age of Empire. While indigenous people were exploited to mine and gather resources, the world became more interconnected. An army of steamboats transported goods from the colonies to Western Europe and North America, providing the fuel for their centres of industry. However, these steamboats often transported more than their intended cargo. Ships could carry sicknesses from one port to another, becoming a serious concern for public health and therefore inhibiting the free trade of goods around the world.⁵² Even with the improved standards of hygiene at the end of the 19th century, quarantine was often thought to be the only solution to limit the spread of disease, delaying trade by several costly days or even weeks. An invention of Thomas Adam Clayton promised deliverance.⁵³ In 1899, he patented a fumigation machine capable of disinfecting ships through the even dispersion of sulphur dioxide. Born by the desire to improve public health as well as trade, the Clayton machine was one of the first of its kind that based its claims on years of experimental testing.⁵⁴

In the 1860s, the American Public Health Association favoured the use of a chemical solution containing 18 to 24 percent of carbolic acid in order to prevent the importation of contagious diseases into the port cities by the Mississippi river.⁵⁵ During the Civil War that took place in the same decade, New Orleans was struck particularly hard by yellow fever. Multiple outbreaks of the disease forced the city into quarantine with varying degrees of success, but devastating effects for the local economy.⁵⁶ Disinfection with carbolic acid was a time-consuming task as the solution had to be administered on the hulls and decks of the ships, as well as on the inside surfaces and cargo, sometimes damaging sensitive goods in the process. Fumigation with sulphur dioxide was applied as well to reach all the crevices in the vessels, although it was considered ineffective on its own. The idea that gases could be used as the quickest and most efficient means for disinfection came up a decade later. After a few years of testing, local health authorities reported in 1875 to the delight of merchants and traders in New Orleans that large quantities of sulphur dioxide might indeed be a reliable way to kill off the primary agents of yellow fever.⁵⁷

⁵² Engelmann, Lynteris. *Sulphuric Utopias*, p. 7

⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 4

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 17

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 58

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 60; Engelmann and Lynteris even suggest that quarantine became an instrument of commercial warfare between the different states.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p. 63

It is at this point that the term utopia becomes ‘concrete’ and starts to involve wilful instead of wishful thinking following the definition by Ernst Bloch. With the fruitful interaction of industry and science, fumigation machines became the “material and [...] mechanical bases of a knowable and realisable future.”⁵⁸ However, they did not turn out to be an ultimate success. The fumigation machines of the 19th century, such as the Clayton machine, could not completely deliver what they promised. Instead their development and use was marked by failures that were big enough to necessitate further research, but also small enough to not give up on the ideal of quarantine-free trade.⁵⁹ In the end, the objective of fumigation moved away from the fight against infectious diseases at the start of the 20th century and turned towards the removal of infestations.⁶⁰ Sulphur dioxide as fumigation substance was largely given up in favour of hydrogen cyanide that was less suited for the killing of pathogens, but decidedly more effective against living organisms.

Thomas Adam Clayton and his colleagues were not the only ones to recognise that chemistry provided powerful tools for the improvement of economic and material conditions. Fritz Haber’s and Carl Bosch’s contribution to the fixation of atmospheric nitrogen into ammonia is perhaps the best known example of a chemical utopia becoming reality. From 1800 to 1900 the global population almost doubled in size and the projections for the next century foretold that this growth would continue to be exponential. This development posed an enormous challenge with regard to the future food supply of the world, especially in Europe. Great-Britain, Germany and France, were extremely dependent on the import of guano and saltpetre from South-America as primary ingredients for fertilisation. Nevertheless, these resources were fast depleting and therefore saw significant price increases at the start of the 20th century.⁶¹ At the time, it was already understood that most of the earth’s atmosphere was made up of nitrogen gas which, however, was known to be virtually inert. Chemists needed to discover a process that would make nitrogen gas reactive, as the alternative surely meant global famines and the collapse of the colonial empires. As much was at least predicted by the English chemist Sir William Crookes: “Unless we can class [the fixation of nitrogen] among certainties to come, the great Caucasian race will cease to be foremost in the world, and will be squeezed out of existence by races to whom wheaten bread is not the staff of life.”⁶²

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 10

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 15

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 202

⁶¹ Stern. *Einstein’s German World*, p. 81

⁶² Crookes, W. as in Stern, F. *Einstein’s German World*, p. 81

Many scientists were chasing after this Holy Grail from their university- or company laboratories, but in the end it was Fritz Haber who discovered a relatively efficient method for the production of ammonia from atmospheric nitrogen. Previous research by Walther Nernst had already shown that the conversion was possible under high temperatures and high pressure, but Haber managed to increase the efficiency of the reaction by adding an osmium catalyst.⁶³ Together with the help of Carl Bosch and several other talented chemists of the Badische Anilin-und-Soda Fabrik, the process was scaled up to an industrial level, leading to the construction of the first ammonia factory in 1913.

Both, the sulphuric- and nitrous utopias, were born from noble intentions, but they had some unintended consequences. As Fritz Stern points out in *Einstein's German World*, the Haber-Bosch process played a significant role in prolonging the Great War, as ammonia was also a key ingredient for gun powder which allowed Germany to keep up its production of munition.⁶⁴ Likewise Engelmann and Lynteris admit that the research on fumigation techniques in the 19th century served as a basis for the development and eventual use of cyclone B during the Shoah.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, they dismiss the notion that utopias “always contain within them the seeds of authoritarian dystopias” as too reductionist. While this may indeed be the correct position from a historian’s point of view, Ernst Homburg and Anthony Travis point out that historical investigations into the Second Industrial Revolution seem to have taken the role of science as a positive and productive force for granted. In the next part of this chapter we will therefore examine the perceived disadvantages of industrial chemistry during the 19th century.

“Burning and Destroying” – the Drawbacks of Industrial Chemistry

In the beginning, the activities of the chemical industries were largely concentrated around the production of lyes and dyes for textile factories. One of the most important compounds in this regard was sodium bicarbonate, which was used to prepare cloth for dyeing.⁶⁶ Sodium bicarbonate could be produced through the so called Leblanc process that relied on relatively inexpensive reactants such as sea salt, sulphuric acid, coal and limestone. However, during this process, large quantities of hydrogen chloride were released into the air as one spectator

⁶³ Ibid, p. 83

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 88

⁶⁵ Engelmann, Lynteris. *Sulphuric Utopias*, p. 202

⁶⁶ Bensaude-Vincent, Strengers. *Histoire de la Chimie*, p. 211

observed around 1820: “*the vapours coming from the laboratories blacken and burn the entire environment; one might think to be at the edge of a volcano. I interrogated the merchant about the results of this remarkable discovery: nice request, he exclaimed; burning and destroying, there you are with your efforts and methods of all of your inventions*”.⁶⁷ Even if the damage of lye factories to the environment was evident, from 1850 to 1870 the production of sodium bicarbonate in France increased five-fold.⁶⁸

The problems with pollution were similar in Germany, although more focussed on the liquid waste of dye factories that were emptied haphazardly into the rivers.⁶⁹ Initially, the public outcry was confined to visible changes, in particular with regard to an aniline-based dye that coloured the waters red. Many Germans relied on these rivers as a source of food and water, and therefore saw their livelihoods threatened by the careless waste management of chemical companies. The German government was not quick to act on these problems. Shortly after the Franco-Prussian war, Germany entered a period of economic stagnation and therefore avoided burdening companies with additional costs. Furthermore, these companies made a significant effort to present rivers as natural sewage canals. Since they were already transporting all sorts of natural waste, a little amount of industrial sewage could not possibly have any impact.⁷⁰ While some affected locals had unsuccessfully protested against this pollution, the improper waste disposal of Germany’s chemical industry started to impact its neighbouring countries. The Netherlands in particular, complained about the dwindling hauls of their fishing industry, but even when the problem became international, the German government decided to protect its own economic interests. Only from the 1950s onwards, was the issue of chemical pollution in rivers taken seriously.⁷¹

While these direct, environmental issues curbed the public’s confidence in the chemical industries, some journalists and illustrators were much more concerned about the possible applications of modern chemistry in the military. These concerns rose to particular prominence after the Franco-Prussian war which inspired a whole literary genre about the

⁶⁷ De Jouy, E. as in Bensaude-Vincent, Strengers. *Histoire de la Chimie*, p. 207; note the original in French: “*Les vapeurs qui s'exhalent de ces laboratoires noircissent et brûlent tous les environs ; on croirait être au bord d'un volcan. J'interrogeais le négociant sur les résultats de cette découverte remarquable. “Belle demande, s'écria le porte-croix ; brûler et détruire, voilà le but et le moyen de toutes vos innovations”.*”

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 216

⁶⁹ Anderson, A. “Pollution and the Chemical Industry”, p. 183

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p. 190

⁷¹ *Ibid*, p. 200

question what wars would look like in the future.⁷² The swift and unexpected defeat of the French in 1870/1871 created a great deal of upheaval in the British press, as the armies of the newly formed German Empire had performed an almost unimaginable feat. It left the island facing uncomfortable questions. Could Britain withstand the German forces, should they decide to cross the channel? Or would they suffer the same fate as their French neighbours?

However far-fetched this scenario appeared to be, it inspired one of the most important works of futuristic fiction in the 1870s. In *The Battle of Dorking* (1871), George Tomkyns Chesney conceived a future in which Great Britain would be overrun by Germany on account of their technological superiority and military discipline. The book, originally published as a serial story in the *Blackwood Magazine*, had a tremendous effect on the British public, as it made them participate in the imagined defeat and subsequent humiliation of their country.⁷³ In a short period of time, *The Battle of Dorking* sold hundreds of thousands of copies and was translated into several languages, exposing a high demand in the public for stories about the wars-to-come. Others would soon follow suit, although they often described less dystopian outcomes.

The *belle époque* gave rise to many famous science fiction authors. Be it Herbert George Wells, Arthur Conan Doyle, or Jules Verne, many of these names are still known and referenced today. In the particular context of chemical weapons, however, one stands out among all the others: Albert Robida was first and foremost an illustrator, wanting to capture the simultaneous evolution of technology and society in the future.⁷⁴ Being the chief editor of *La Caricature*, he created a platform where he could publish his drawings and establish a loyal readership. In the 1880s, he compiled his most important drawings and short stories into a book series called *Le Vingtième Siècle*, featuring the emancipation of women in society, the frequent use of aerial vessels for transportation and new forms of destruction in future wars.

This becomes most notable in *La Guerre au Vingtième Siècle* (1887): recounting the adventures of the fictional character Fabius Molinas, a French soldier in the year 1945, Robida envisions the immense destructive capabilities that could be unleashed in the wars of the 20th century.⁷⁵ Molinas jumps from one battle to the next, participating in airship- and submarine fights, using chemical- and bacteriological weapons and travelling over the whole world in a matter of hours. With the benefit of hindsight Robida's work seems rather accurate, almost prophetic, however, lacking any psychological depth. The illustrations and story of *La*

⁷² Clarke. *The Tale of the Next Great War*, p. 1

⁷³ Ibid, p. 14

⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 18

⁷⁵ Robida, A., *La Guerre au Vingtième Siècle*, p. 14

Guerre au Vingtème Siècle seem to expose a certain inconsistency. On the one hand, Robida shows how chemical weapons can destroy entire towns in the blink of an eye. On the other, it is still possible for the artillery batteries to fight a relatively slow-paced battle, in which the more courageous and perseverant faction wins (see Figure 4). Interestingly, the development of deadlier weapons is presented as something that deserves public recognition. When a French chemist invents sulphuric acid projectiles that can destroy the enemy artillery, he receives a medal of honour by the famed *Academie des Sciences*. According to Clarke, Robida's book closely resembles the work of his contemporaries. Apart from the chauvinistic accounts of battle, the ends often seem to justify the means in these fictional war stories of the late 19th century.



Figure 4: the battery of chemists “without fear”

Illustration in Albert Robida's *La Guerre au Vingtème Siècle*.⁷⁶

Robida's magazine, *La Caricature*, displays a general distrust towards chemistry. Instead of rejoicing about the opening of a new municipal laboratory in Paris, one should be afraid of the pollution it will bring to the area.⁷⁷ A column written by Jules Demolliens mocks the common view that chemistry is a useful science that improves the condition of human kind. From *fulmicoton*, to nitro-glycerine to dynamite, one may get the impression that chemists only seek

⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 25

⁷⁷ BOUM. “Laboratoire Moral.” *La Caricature*.

to improve the ways in which humans can “reduce each other to bits”.⁷⁸ The image that chemists are hermits that work tirelessly in their laboratories and could never even hurt a fly can only be false. They are killers of a different kind that even the cruellest military leaders in history would have been wary of (see Figure 5). It is not clear whether these extreme positions were actually meant by Robida. His work should perhaps be understood as a warning to his contemporaries who accepted the conveniences of modern science too easily.



Figure 5: Chemistry defeats conquerors

Great military leaders of history looking sceptically at the chemist who just invented a new weapon with supposedly enormous destructive capabilities.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Demolliens. “La Chimie Humanitaire.” *La Caricature*.

⁷⁹ Robida. “Les merveilles de la Science.” *La Caricature*.

It is difficult to say to which degree Robida's illustrations in *La Guerre au Vingtième Siècle* were actually relevant to the Hague Conferences 12 years later. Although the genre of science fiction discussing the wars-to-come was very popular, there were unfortunately no available records of how many copies Robida's magazine or books sold in France or abroad. Nevertheless, during the proceedings of the Hague Conference of 1899, *Le Matin* published an article evaluating Tsar Nicholas' hopes for the Conference, remarking that his wish to prohibit air bombardments seemed to have sprung out of "Robida's fantasies in the 'War of Tomorrow' or 'The Battle of Dorking'."

A Peace Initiative from the Neva

For a long time, promoting peace had been the goal of writers, activists and a handful of politicians who believed war to be cruel and inhumane, no matter the circumstances. Nevertheless, there were also more pragmatic attitudes towards the issue, especially in the East. In 1898, Ivan Bloch published the book *Is War now Impossible?*, pointing towards the ever increasing costs of the military that threatened to cripple the economic development of the Russian Empire.⁸⁰ These problems did not merely originate from Russia's colonial ambitions, but were aggravated by geopolitical changes on the European continent. When the Franco-Prussian war of 1870/1871 ended, the newly formed German Empire entered a period of accelerated industrialisation. The smaller German states, in particular, had previously lacked the resources and the financial power to develop their industries at the same pace as the larger nation states in Europe. Under the leadership of the Hohenzollern monarchy, however, Germany quickly prospered into an economic and military powerhouse, especially with regard to the steel, engineering and chemical industries.⁸¹ This caused a notable degree of discomfort for its neighbouring countries, not only in the case of France that had previously suffered defeat at the hands of the German army, but also for Imperial Russia that worried about its capacity to keep up with German modernisation.⁸²

Coincidentally, the Proposal for the Hague Conference of 1899 was not the first peace initiative from the Neva. Tsar Nicholas' grandfather, Alexander II, had also proposed a conference in 1874 in which the world powers were supposed to regulate warfare between

⁸⁰ Vagts. "The Hague Conventions and Arms Control", p. 33

⁸¹ Fairbairn. "Economic and Social Developments", p. 73

⁸² Not to mention the fact that Russia had lost the possibility to exploit the divided structure of the Holy Roman Empire for its own security interests; see also, Schroeder. "The 19th Century International System", p. 9

‘civilised’ nations. The Proposal for the Brussels declaration was well received in the German press, especially in the government’s mouthpiece-newspaper, the *Provinzial-Correspondenz*. However, even the “noble” (“*hochherzig*”) and “humane” effort of the tsar ultimately developed into little more than an expression of intention by the participating countries.⁸³ Although Tsar Nicholas II. would achieve greater success in convincing the world’s nations to craft and actually ratify an international treaty 25 years later, it was felt that his motives were based on geopolitical and financial interests, instead of pacifist ideals.

On the 24th of August 1898, Russian nobleman, count Muraviev, send a circular to all diplomats at the court in Saint Petersburg. It declared Tsar Nicholas’ intention to organise a Peace Conference between all nations in order to put a stop to the arms race that was exhausting the nations’ treasuries.⁸⁴ At the time, it was commonly thought that peace could only be maintained by forming powerful alliances and building large military apparatuses, preventing anyone from attacking without fear of retaliation. According to the tsar’s proposal, however, this idea of *Friedensrüstung* or *paix armée* was a fallacy. It risked to ignite the very conflicts it sought to prevent, while crippling the nations’ economies and driving money away from the people. Only the quantitative and qualitative reduction of armaments could genuinely help to achieve the ideal of a global and universal pacification.⁸⁵

However noble this initiative appeared to be, it did not inspire enthusiastic responses: as the French newspaper, *Le Temps*, pointed out on the 30th of August, it was somewhat odd that words of peace were suddenly heard from the “last autocratic regime of Christian Europe”.⁸⁶ The Russian government seemed to adhere to different guiding principles for domestic politics on the one hand and foreign affairs on the other. While the populace enjoyed only few civil liberties and were otherwise oppressed, the Russian monarchs had a history of pretending to promote enlightened and humanistic ideals on the outside.⁸⁷ These cutting words are not surprising. Although Russia had recently formed an alliance with France, the

⁸³ “Reformatorsche Bestrebungen auf dem Gebiete des Kriegsvölkerrechts.” *Provinzial Correspondenz*.

⁸⁴ For a full transcript of the Tsar’s declaration in French, see Document B in the Appendix. Retrieved from “Le Désarmement général.” *L’Aurore*.

⁸⁵ The first proposal of the tsar was quite explicit about the need to reduce armaments quantitatively (number of weapons) and qualitatively (kinds of weapons). Nevertheless, Vagts suggests that Russia was mostly interested in quantitative reductions. See Vagts. “*The Hague Conventions and Arms Control*.”

⁸⁶ “La Circulaire du Comte Mouraviev.” *Le Temps*.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, p. 1

absolutist monarchy and the republic did not see eye to eye when it came to the ideals of governance.

The timing of the Proposal seemed a little off as well: the United States of America and Spain had just fought a war over the Philippine islands, while tensions were rising in the Far East between Russia, Britain and Germany who were squabbling over potential colonial possessions. In *L'Aurore*, George Clemenceau remarked not without irony that “having his hands [already] full” the tsar had actually chosen the perfect moment to ask the other great powers to renounce further conquest.⁸⁸ Clemenceau doubted the moral authority of both, the Russian and French governments, to lead the way during the negotiations. Peace remained the dream of “just and free men”, but Russia’s autocratic track record and France’s failure to deliver justice in the Dreyfus affair made them unfit to achieve it. Another commentator of *L'Aurore*, a certain Monsieur G. Lorand, mocked the tsar even more openly: if his intentions were genuine and the Peace Conference successful, than the concentration of absolute power might have finally done some good in the world.⁸⁹ In fact, the tsar could have actually dug his own grave as, surely, successful negotiations had to end with the abolishment of tsarism itself.

On the right side of the political commentary, the reaction was even more negative. The republican *Le Temps* and the socialist *L'Aurore* had their misgivings about the messenger of the Peace Proposal, but not the message itself. The nationalist newspaper *Le Matin* on the other hand, thought that the whole idea of a Peace Conference was nonsensical.⁹⁰ Drawing on conspiratory sentiments, the author exclaimed that the peoples of Europe had long wished to find a way to clear France of the map and forcing disarmament upon them would be the first step to achieve that goal. The relatively positive tone in which other newspapers discussed the topic of disarmament and peace was unsettling, as no great power could afford to leave its internal security or grip on colonial possessions in the hands of “collective judgement”. France’s total humiliation in 1870/1871 at the hands of the German army should not be forgotten either. Even if the French government had no other reservations about attending the Conference, the question of Alsace-Lorraine would surely be the stumbling block for the negotiations.

However far-fetched the views of *Le Matin* seemed to be, they had taken root long before. After the Franco-Prussian war, Otto von Bismarck made sure to isolate France from

⁸⁸ Clemenceau. “Désarmement.” *L'Aurore*; note the full quote in French: “*Le moment est toujours bien choisi quand on a les mains pleines, pour dire : “Messieurs, ami de tout le monde, je propose que chacun de nous renonce à des nouvelles conquêtes”.*”

⁸⁹ Lorand. “Le Tsar et la Paix.” *L'Aurore*.

⁹⁰ “L’Encyclique du Tsar.” *Le Matin*.

the other great powers on the European continent.⁹¹ Assuming that the expropriation of Alsace-Lorraine could never be reconciled, Bismarck created an intricate system of alliances between Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia and Great Britain that lasted until the coronation of Wilhelm II. in 1888. While this so-called Bismarckian system guaranteed the preservation and consolidation of the Empire under the rule of the Hohenzollern monarchy, it left France with a sense of contempt that defined its relationship with Germany up to the second half of the 20th century.

In Hamburg, the narrative was decidedly more positive than in Paris. As the *Hamburger Korrespondent* remarked, the tsar had made himself immortal by pursuing the “sublime, humanitarian ideal” of world peace.⁹² Even if a lot of practical questions remained unanswered and the success of the whole initiative could not be guaranteed at this point, the Peace Proposal was a true *Kulturthat* and the German Empire should be delighted to help the tsar achieve this goal. The tone of the *Hamburger Korrespondent* was by no means representative for the German press as a whole. Just like the French newspapers, the *Volks-Zeitung* japed at the tsar for proposing the Peace Conference.⁹³ Hearing about the Proposal for the first time, the reader would certainly have to think that the whole thing was meant as a joke. But it wasn't. Russia's absolutist monarch, the man who had one of the largest standing armies in the world and could force any of his subjects to fall on their sword, wanted to “declare war on militarism”. Nevertheless, the author seemed convinced that a peace proposal from the Russian tsar had to at least achieve some level of success. How could militarism still be defended, if one of its biggest proponents had suddenly become “a crown witness” for the peace movement?

This sentiment was also expressed in other German newspapers. The *Vossische Zeitung* observed that a proposal from such a position of power, would have to have a far greater impact than the initiatives of “unknown and undistinguished journalists” or the few politicians that had dared to vie for disarmament.⁹⁴ Due to the technological advancements of the 19th century, war had lost a lot of its former “poetic appeal”, turning into a kind of

⁹¹ Lerman. “Bismarckian Germany”, pp. 26

⁹² *Hamburger Korrespondent* as cited in “Der Abrüstungsvorschlag des Zaren.” *Berliner Tageblatt*.

⁹³ “Auch eine Kriegserklärung.” *Volks-Zeitung*.

⁹⁴ “Die Friedensglocke.” *Vossische Zeitung*; one of these politicians in the German context was Rudolf Virchow, who was a delegate of the *Deutsche Fortschrittspartei* and had proposed disarmament in the parliament of the North German Confederation in 1869. The *Vossische Zeitung* remarked that he was still widely regarded as “a moron and a traitor” for this initiative.

arithmetic problem where the consequences of losing often overshadowed the dubious advantages of winning. In this context, even the sternest *Realpolitiker* would have to admit that disarmament was a responsible and feasible choice, if all the nations found common ground on the reduction of military spending. Although German journalists seemed to have a greater veneration for the position of the tsar than their French colleagues, conservative voices counselled prudence.

An often cited article by the *Kreuzzeitung* exclaimed that it was of utmost importance for the German Empire to continue the development of military strength.⁹⁵ Earlier peace initiatives had all been inconsequential and “the obligation of self-preservation” made it necessary to expand the army and navy. With this talk of self-preservation, the *Kreuzzeitung* expressed one of the biggest worries of the German Empire. Being situated in the centre of Europe, Germany found itself completely surrounded by the other great powers on the continent. This unfavourable, geopolitical position made it more likely that the Empire might one day have to fight a war on two fronts. Whereas the Bismarckian system answered this problem by befriending three of the four great powers, Wilhelm II. took a different approach. From the 1890s onwards, German foreign policy became increasingly aggressive and nationalistic.⁹⁶ While strengthening its bonds with the Germanic brothers in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, it became estranged from the other nations on the continent, giving credit to the idea that Germany had to be a strong, independent nation that needed a large military apparatus.

In the weeks and months following the first circular by count Muraviev, the rush of opinions in the German and French press did not entirely subside, although the proposal rarely made the front page anymore. *Le Matin* in particular, offered a platform for outside views, although the names of the consulted ‘experts’ were never provided. According to an ‘English industrialist’, for example, a disarmament conference would be a great opportunity to expand the grain export from the highly industrialised countries in Western Europe to the Russian Empire, the latter of which could only produce 22% of the grain supplies that were needed for the colonisation of Siberia and Manchuria.⁹⁷ Another article approached the topic of disarmament from a scientific perspective.⁹⁸ The global demand for foodstuffs increased relentlessly and could scarcely be matched by the tilling of new fertile soils. Nitrate fertilisers

⁹⁵ *Kreuzzeitung* as cited in “Das Russische Abrüstungsmanifest.” *Vossische Zeitung*.

⁹⁶ Chickering. “Militarism and Radical Nationalism”, p. 211

⁹⁷ “Une clientèle à prendre – opinion d’un anglais pratique.” *Le Matin*.

⁹⁸ “Arguments d’un chimiste – la paix universelle scientifiquement nécessaire.” *Le Matin*.

would be required to ensure sufficient crop yields in the future, however, sodium nitrate also was the main component of gun powder and the natural reservoirs of this resource were fast depleting. Until someone developed a method to fixate nitrogen from the air into sodium nitrate, every gunshot seemed a considerable waste of valuable resources. The chemist featured in *Le Matin*, assured the readers that the person “who will find an industrial way to produce sodium nitrate in large quantities, will be one of the biggest benefactors of humanity”.⁹⁹ In hindsight this statement exposes a cruel irony, as the scientist who would discover the process to fixate nitrogen from the air in the early 1900s, German chemist Fritz Haber, later invented chemical weapons for the German Empire.

All things considered, many newspapers remained sceptical of the tsar’s motives and the actual effectiveness of the disarmament proposal. The critics saw their views confirmed by the fact that it was business as usual: the great powers continued to expand their armies and navies, and even the smallest of sparks seemed capable of igniting a fire. In September of 1898, diplomatic relations between Great Britain and France were put to the test during the African scramble.¹⁰⁰ The British Empire wanted to extend their colonial possessions from the south to the north of the African continent in order to build a railway from Cape Town to Cairo. The French on the other hand, tried to create a belt from Eastern- to Western Africa. At the intersection of their colonial ambitions, in the small Sudanese town of Fashoda that had just recently been brought under French control, the two great powers met. The British troops, vastly outnumbering the French garrison, laid claim on the town and matters could be resolved peacefully in the end. The French retreated in order to avoid larger conflicts in the European homeland. However, this seemed to have left behind a bitter aftertaste that was even reflected in the commentary of the leftist *L’Aurore*.¹⁰¹ According to Georges Clemenceau, the Fashoda incident showed how utterly useless Russia was as an ally. Count Muraviev had recently visited France to discuss foreign policies, assuring the French that they would not have to renounce Alsace-Lorraine in order to participate in the disarmament conference while at the same time offering his apologies for the way that things turned out in Africa. Given this context, Muraviev’s subsequent request for a loan from the French government just seemed to add insult to injury.

⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 1; note the original in French: “*Le chimiste qui trouvera le moyen industriel de produire du nitrate de soude par grandes quantités sera un des plus grands bienfaiteurs de l’humanité.*”

¹⁰⁰ Asseraf. “La société coloniale face à l’actualité internationale”, pp. 124

¹⁰¹ Clemenceau. “Leçon des choses.” *L’Aurore*.

Even though the odds did not favour a peaceful congregation of the world's nations, count Muraviev reaffirmed the tsar's intentions at the start of the New Year, becoming more concrete about the issues that Russia sought to address during the Conference.¹⁰² On the one hand, the tsar wanted the nations to give up on the invention and development of new types of explosives, firearms and other weapons technologies, as the ones already in existence seemed sufficiently destructive. Two particular issues of concern were the use of submarine torpedo boats and balloons from which explosives and projectiles could be thrown on the ground below. Apart from these qualitative restrictions, the tsar also hoped to find general agreement on the budgets that each country would be allowed to spend on military and navy.

By January 1899, the terms disarmament and peace were clearly separated in the press. Disarmament would be the foremost goal of the Conference and seemed relatively feasible. On the other hand, it did not necessarily imply the creation of a lasting and universal peace, although it counted as an important step towards it. "A work that can only be completed in the far future, has to have its starting point in the present", observed the *Vossische Zeitung*, adding to the optimistic voices that became slightly more common as the outlines of the Conference were more clearly defined.¹⁰³ It was decided that the Conference would take place in The Hague and in a matter of months, on the 18th of May 1899 to be precise, the nations of the world finally sat around the same table, discussing the ways in which the wars-to-come could be regulated.

However, the start of the Conference was already somewhat disappointing. Russia's suggestion that each country should abstain from enlarging troops and navy for a set amount of years, was quickly dismissed by other nations as this measure would put a stop to their colonial ambitions.¹⁰⁴ Although, Nicholas II. had originally hoped to achieve both a quantitative- and qualitative reduction of weapons, the Convention's focus ultimately moved to the latter. These prohibitions on new weapons technologies were not chosen haphazardly. Important guiding principles were the level of control that humans could exert on the weapon, its usefulness and its potential to create unnecessary suffering. As a result of these considerations, dum dum ammunition and submarine contact mines were successfully prohibited during the Conference.¹⁰⁵ For asphyxiating gases the case had to be made more

¹⁰² Price. *The Chemical Weapons Taboo*, p. 15; see also, "Une Circulaire." *L'Aurore*.

¹⁰³ "Das Abrüstungsprogramm." *Vossische Zeitung*.

¹⁰⁴ Vagts. "The Hague Conventions and Arms Control", pp. 34

¹⁰⁵ Dum dum bullets were designed in such a manner that they expanded on impact, creating bigger wounds. Submarine contact mines could get lost and destroy ships that were not meant for war.

plainly. On the initiative of Russian delegate Captain Scheine, the attendees discussed a possible ban on projectiles, containing explosives that could spread asphyxiating and deleterious gases.¹⁰⁶ This proposition was further specified as to include only those projectiles that had the sole purpose of spreading asphyxiating and deleterious gases. Otherwise the prohibition might have encompassed every type of explosive that could produce such gases incidentally. The American delegate Captain Mahan, however, remained unconvinced. In his view, such weapons should not be equated with the cowardly use of poison and might even be considered a more humane form of killing than “tearing the body with pieces of metal”.¹⁰⁷ Wishing not to deprive his country of a potentially advantageous weapon in the future, Mahan voted against the prohibition, as did Great Britain. Although the French and German newspapers did not neglect to emphasise the Anglo-Saxon dissent, the topic of asphyxiating gases was given no further attention. Only *Le Temps* seemed to worry about the meaningfulness of the prohibition, if the United States and Great Britain, covering such vast territories in the world, remained opposed to it.¹⁰⁸

As Richard Price points out, the delegates at the Conference did not necessarily categorise asphyxiating gases as a poison or even as a chemical weapon.¹⁰⁹ Instead, they seem to have been understood as a type of explosive that risked to get out of control too easily, bearing the potential to harm citizens. Even though the use of chemicals in warfare had already been conceived well before the Hague Conference of 1899, no country had made a serious effort of turning these plans into reality. On paper they would remain until Europe tumbled into one of its biggest conflict yet, later known as the Great War.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to contextualise the scientific-industrial and geopolitical context of the first ban on chemical weapons during the Hague Conference of 1899. While industrial chemistry was seen as a powerful tool to solve the problems of modern societies, it also became apparent that chemical factories were polluting the environment and chemical research could be used to develop new weapons. *La Caricature*, in particular, portrayed

¹⁰⁶ Price. *The Chemical Weapons Taboo*, p. 31

¹⁰⁷ Scott, *Proceedings of the Hague Conferences*, pp. 365 – 367 as in Price. *The Chemical Weapons Taboo*, p. 32

¹⁰⁸ “La Conference de la Haye.” *Le Temps*.

¹⁰⁹ Price. *The Chemical Weapons Taboo*, p. 33

chemistry in a very negative light, making it responsible for recent discoveries of explosives. In this context, the chief editor of *La Caricature*, Albert Robida, also speculated how the destructive capacities of chemistry would develop further, imagining chemical weapons that came very close to those that were actually used in World War I. It must be noted, however, that Albert Robida's stories on chemical weapons lack real moral reflection. Furthermore, it is not explicitly clear whether his work inspired the delegates to the Hague Conference of 1899 to prohibit chemical weapons.

The Hague Conference of 1899 was initiated by Tsar Nicholas II, who hoped that regulating the arms race between the European powers would free up resources for Russia's general economic development. The French and German press were largely sceptical and sometimes even decidedly negative about the Conference's success. While quantitative disarmament was also intended, the Conference only prohibited certain types of weapons, including – following Captain Scheine's suggestion – “*asphyxiating and deleterious gases*”. Of all the participants, only the United States and United Kingdom decided to withdraw from the prohibition. Apart from the remark in *Le Temps* that this would make the prohibition much less effective, this withdrawal did not spark any moral concerns whatsoever. Given these results, one may draw the conclusion that the prohibition on asphyxiating and deleterious gases did not yet imply the existence of a Chemical Weapons Taboo.

Chapter 2

An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth: justifying the use of chemical gases during the Great War.

“*Oh! It is a wicked war, this war of the Boches*”, it read on the front page article of the socialist newspaper *Le Radical* in February 1916.¹¹⁰ The article consisted of a (probably made-up) letter by Jacques Le Poilu, addressing the French engineers who were organising the response to Germany’s chemical weapons programme.¹¹¹ Reliving the memory of the first use of chlorine gas at Langemarck in April 1915, Le Poilu complained that the French army still lacked the resources to give the Germans a taste of their own medicine. It was true that protective masks were already widely available, however, this was not enough to quench Le Poilu’s thirst for retaliation as “*a few puffs here and there*” would not be enough to inflict real damage to the enemy. In his view, the scientific programmes concerned with the making of chemical weapons in France, needed to double down on their efforts to match the German attacks.

Whether a strawman for propagandistic purposes, or perhaps a commonly expressed sentiment of the public, we will see in this chapter that the account of Jacques Le Poilu quite closely resembled political reality. Although France needed some time to get their production of chemical weapons up to speed, the question of employing them was never really put up for debate.¹¹² As a result, France became one of the main drivers in the production of chemical weapons, contributing 26 kilotons of chemical agents out of the total 52 kilotons produced by the Allied Powers (in contrast with approximately 60 kilotons for the Central Powers; compare blue and grey columns in Figure 6).¹¹³

This chapter will discuss how the French and German press reacted to the first largescale use of chemical weapons on April 22nd, 1915, starting with the initial reaction of the French press. Although rumours of the German army experimenting with a new kind of weapons technology were going around mere days before the actual attack, the French press

¹¹⁰ Le Poilu. “Lettre de Jacques Le Poilu sur les gaz asphyxiants.” *Le Radical*.

¹¹¹ It should be noted that Jacques Le Poilu is probably a made-up name that refers to the ‘typical French soldier’, Jacques being a common French first name and Le Poilu referring to a frequently used designation for French soldiers in WW I. (the word ‘poilu’ literally means hairy in French, expressing on the one hand a certain type of manliness, while at the same time referring to the lack of possibilities to exercise personal hygiene in the trenches).

¹¹² Lepick. “The Road to Retaliation in Kind,” p. 70

¹¹³ Lepick, O. *La Grande Guerre Chimique* under section: “Quelques données statistiques” [epub].

was shocked about Germany's infringement on the Hague Declaration and fervently demonised them for it. Numerous articles described the effects of chlorine gas on individual soldiers in horrific detail, only to be followed by an explanation why it would be France's obligation to develop chemical weapons themselves and use them against the enemy on the other side of the Rhine. The response of German newspapers, came much later, justifying their use of chemical weapons by accusing the Allied Powers of having used them first. As will become clear in the course of this chapter, both, France and Germany, seemed to have used the taboo on chemical weapons to benefit their own propagandistic ends.

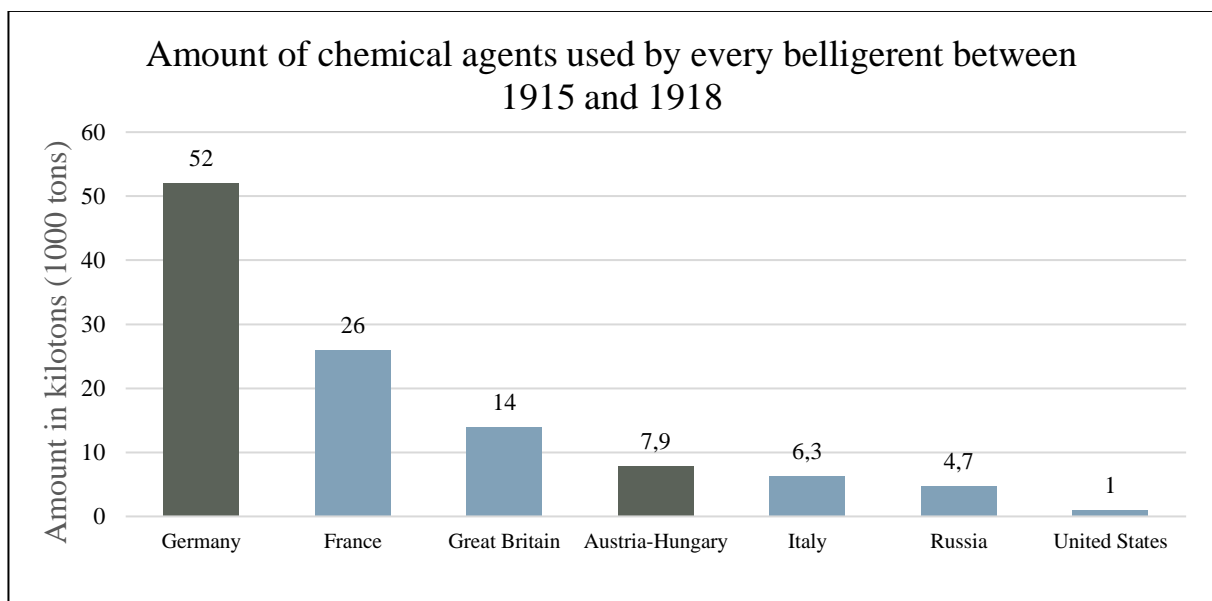


Figure 6: Amount of chemical agents used by every belligerent nation between 1915 and 1918.

The Central Powers (grey columns) used about 60 kilotons of chemical agents, while the Allied Powers (blue columns) used about 52 kilotons in total.¹¹⁴

When chemical weapons became more and more widely employed on the battlefield, they started to not only endanger the lives of soldiers, but also became a threat to civilians. While this originally concerned civilians living near the front line, there are also a few reports in French newspapers that mention the use of asphyxiating- or poisonous gases by the French gendarmerie and military in out-of-combat situations.

Lastly, this chapter will discuss the reaction of the French and German press to the plea of the International Committee of the Red Cross in 1918. In this plea, the belligerents

¹¹⁴ Ibid, under section: "Quelques données statistiques" [epub].

were asked to stop using chemical weapons at the front, as the Red Cross became increasingly worried by the growing use of chemical weapons and the introduction of new, deadlier chemical agents. Being offered a way out of chemical warfare by a neutral party, was not necessarily met with enthusiasm from all sides.

A humane weapon or the work of barbarians? Initial reactions to the first Gas Attack.

On April 11th, 1915, *Le Matin* quoted a small Dutch newspaper, asserting that the German army had confiscated all dogs near the Belgian city of Hasselt.¹¹⁵ Apparently the test animals had been put into trenches, only to be bombarded with small grenades that contained asphyxiating gases. The results were alarming: whereas in some trenches, the dogs had merely lost consciousness, in others they had been completely struck down. Crammed together with around forty different articles on page three of the Sunday edition, however, this first report may have been easily overlooked. Little did the editors of *Le Matin* know that Germany was about to use these gases against real soldiers, a mere eleven days later.

One of the first newspaper articles reacting to the use of asphyxiating gases by the German army sought to calm the public by putting the new technology into perspective. Written by France's minister of defence at the time, André Léfèvre, the article made clear that asphyxiating gases were not very effective as they needed to be highly concentrated, yet would easily disperse in the open air.¹¹⁶ As unpleasant as they were, the vast majority of soldiers had been able to escape them and Léfèvre was convinced that their lethality would pale in comparison to "*the explosives, the cannons, the fire arms and the machine guns*" that were already in use. In fact, the use of asphyxiating gases would not even have made the war more gruesome than before given that the German army had already violated the Hague Conferences so many times: "*She [Germany] is burning cities to the ground, is killing civilians, is massacring children and is attacking merchant ships without any prior warning*".

Factual discussions followed on how the German army had executed the attack and what kind of chemical agents had been employed. Six days after the attack, for example, *Le Matin* reconstructed the event, explaining that German soldiers had first dug a make-shift

¹¹⁵ Author unknown, "Les Allemands essayent un procédé d'empoisonement." *Le Matin*.

¹¹⁶ Léfèvre, A. "Bombes asphyxiantes." *Le Matin*.

trench in which they subsequently installed metal tubes.¹¹⁷ After setting off these tubes, the Germans retreated slightly while a large cloud of yellowish-green to green colour moved towards the French lines, merely irritating the eyes of the soldiers if the report is to be believed. Apparently unaffected by the gas, the German soldiers then proceeded to attack. Given the descriptions of eyewitnesses on the colour and odour of the gas, *Le Matin* surmised correctly that the metal tubes had probably contained chlorine or diethyl ether.

From these first reactions in the French press, it appears that chemical weapons did not receive any moral consideration at all. Going by Léfèvre's article, in particular, it may even be concluded that he explicitly tried to play down the impact of asphyxiating gases. This attitude, however, quickly and definitively changed in the following days: contrary to Léfèvre, several articles soon stressed that chemical weapons had a completely different effect than the conventional explosives previously used in the war, calling them barbaric, diabolic and a violation against humanity.¹¹⁸ Another article translated from *The Times*, and subsequently published in *Le Matin*, did not shy away from going into macabre detail about the medical effects of asphyxiating gases: "*When I entered the hospital, I had no difficulty finding the rooms where these men [afflicted soldiers] were kept, because their loud efforts to breathe were enough to guide me towards them. I was awaited by a doctor who led me into a room with around twenty patients, of whom the most severely afflicted were made to sit upright on mattresses with their backs leaning against the wall. Their faces, arms and hands had turned dark grey, and their eyes had the colour of led. With their mouths open, balancing back and forth, they tried to draw breath.*"¹¹⁹ Breathing in a lethal dose of the German gases, the article continued, would lead to severe bronchitis. As a consequence, the lungs of the victims filled with a liquid substance up to the mouth, leading to a slow death by asphyxiation that could take up to two days.

On the other side of the Rhine, the increasingly accusatory tone of the French press was met with silence at first. The German press had previously mentioned the use of asphyxiating gases only when accusing the Allied Powers of using them, which happened a few times before their attack on April 22nd, 1915. A press release of the *Oberste Heeresleitung* (also known as OHL) in January 1915, for example, asserted that the French army had used

¹¹⁷ "Les Gaz Asphyxiants - Comment les Allemands les ont employés." *Le Matin*.

¹¹⁸ See: "Une note officielle sur les gaz asphyxiants." *Le Matin*. Or "Visite aux soldats anglais victimes des gaz asphyxiants." *Le Matin*.

¹¹⁹ "Visite aux soldats anglais victimes des gaz asphyxiants." *Le Matin*.

artillery shells near Lille, distributing foul-smelling, asphyxiating gases.¹²⁰ Although these gases had apparently not had any effect, the OHL reminded its readers that this was not the first time the French had employed such weapons at the front. In April 1915, just a few days before the German army launched their attack with chlorine gas, an article in the *Berliner Tageblatt* explained that the Russians were also employing shells that did not explode on impact but distributed asphyxiating gases instead.¹²¹ The author of this article, Richard Förster, emphasised again that these weapons had been used before by the French and Russian armies, wondering scornfully why the “bearers of culture”, France and Russia, lowered themselves to the use of such an “dishonourable way of fighting”. One may dismiss Richard Förster’s article as propaganda, seen as though its date of publication was suspiciously close to the first gas attack of the German army. The question who had started the use of chemical weapons, however, became an important point of contention throughout the First World War, most frequently evoked by the German side.

Although it is commonly accepted that Germany was the first country to use lethal chemicals in the First World War, France had already experimented with different kinds of tear gas before as an announcement of the French ministry of war from February 1915 demonstrates.¹²² It instructed French soldiers on the use of newly developed hand-grenades and cartridges containing so-called “*engins suffocants*”, but emphasised that these chemicals would not cause any lasting harm when used in small quantities. Whereas this showed the humanitarian concern of the French army according to *Le Matin*, an article by the *Wolffsche Telegraphenbureau*, published in many major German newspapers in June 1915, rectified this presumption in a long justification for Germany’s use of chemical weapons.^{123,124} The article observed that the French had been using considerable amounts of such gases, leading to the death of several German soldiers. Unsurprisingly, Germany repeatedly referred to this announcement later on in an attempt to assert their innocence towards neutral countries regarding the question who had initiated chemical warfare.

Furthermore, the *Wolffsche Telegraphenbureau* (WTB) used the announcement of the French ministry of war to defend Germany’s use of chemical weapons as surely no one could

¹²⁰ Oberste Heeresleitung, “Westlicher Kriegschauplatz.” *Berliner Tageblatt*.

¹²¹ Förster, R. “In und um Rawa.” *Berliner Tageblatt*.

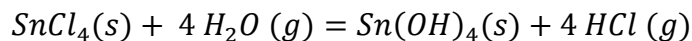
¹²² See: Lejaille. “Introduction à la Guerre des Gaz.” The document is searchable under the description: “*Ci-dessus, deux notices sur l’emploi contre versé, des engins suffocants, datée antérieurement au 22 avril 1915.*”

¹²³ “Une Calomnie de Plus.” *Le Matin*.

¹²⁴ *Wolffsches Telegraphenbureau*. “Die Vewendung von betäubenden Gasen.” *Berliner Tageblatt*.

expect them to refrain from developing and using chemical weapons too when Germany was merely reacting to a chemical warfare initiated by the Allied Powers. Consequently, the outrage of the British and the French was rather hypocritical but also somewhat understandable as they would fear the vastly superior chemical industry in Germany, capable of creating more lethal chemical agents at faster production speeds.

To raise the ante even further, the article asserted that the destruction of the Lusitania – a British ocean liner carrying several American civilians – at the hands of the German navy was justified considering new findings published in the New York Times and Cincinnati Enquirer. According to these sources, the Lusitania had allegedly shipped different kinds of ammunition and contraband raw materials, including 250.000 pounds of tin tetrachloride, destined for the French chemical industry to be put into shells. Although the claim that the Lusitania was trying to smuggle chemicals and weapons into the United Kingdom did not withstand closer inspection later on, tin tetrachloride was indeed used during the war.¹²⁵ The book *Chemical Warfare*, published shortly after the Great War in 1921 by Amos Fries and Clarence West, contains an entry about tin tetrachloride, explaining that it would hydrolyse easily in the air, creating hydrochloric acid in the process:¹²⁶



Tin tetrachloride, Fries and West continued, had been used extensively in hand grenades, producing “a very disagreeable cloud of smoke upon detonation”. Neither Fries and West, nor the French press reflected on the fact that the tin tetrachloride used by the French in February 1915 must have had a similar effect as the chlorine gas employed by the Germans two months later as both substances lead to the formation of hydrochloric acid in contact with water (which could directly form on the moist surfaces in the nose, the throat, the lungs and on the surface of the retinal).

The article of the *Wolffsche Telegraphenbureau* further accused the United Kingdom of moral hypocrisy as they had completely disregarded the intention of the Hague Declaration

¹²⁵ Ibid, *Berliner Tageblatt*. What the article of the Wolffsche Telegraphenbureau fails to make clear is that the New York Times was merely citing a German official, Carl L. Schurz, who claimed that Germany received a tip by Pittsburgh chemist, John Braun. According to Braun, the Lusitania apparently contained various types of contraband, including tin tetrachloride. Although the New York Times does not evaluate this statement further, it should be clear that it hardly qualifies as proof.

See: “SAYS GERMANY GOT TIP ON CONTRABAND.” *New York Times*.

¹²⁶ Fries, West. *Chemical Warfare*, pp. 289 and p. 302

too by using *Lydittgranaten* during the Second Boer War in South Africa.¹²⁷ These grenades technically had not violated the Hague Declaration as they would distribute toxic gases and explode at the same time, but their use was still morally questionable. The article also recalled that it was the British and the Americans who had voted against the prohibition of asphyxiating gases during the Hague Conferences of 1899 because they considered them to be more humane than their conventional counterparts. It was only after the Second Boer War that the United Kingdom decided at last to affix its signature to the prohibition on asphyxiating and deleterious gases. Lastly the article questioned the prohibition of asphyxiating gases in light of the fact that the British had deluged German trenches in an attempt to force soldiers out of them. If liquids were allowed in battle, why not air?

In the end, it seems that this attempt at whataboutism by the *Wolffsche Telegraphenbureau* had little success in convincing other countries of Germany's innocence. To the French press, in particular, Germany seemed to have turned into a 'force of evil' beyond compare that would destroy every civilised nation if let to have its own way. In this context, referring to the violations of the Hague Declaration by the German army – especially with regard to chemical weapons – had a strategical purpose: it allowed the French press to justify their hate towards everything German. The accusations were not only limited to German militarists or monarchists in this case, but every aspect of German culture and tradition was marked down as corrupt. *Le Matin* belittled "Teutonic intellectuals" and social democrats, dismissing their internationalist and pacifist ideas before the war as a stealthy attempt to force German values on the rest of the world.^{128,129,130} On the other hand, Germany similarly used the moral stigma on chemical weapons to justify the destruction of the *Lusitania*. Even the unproven claim that the cruiser contained raw materials destined for chemical warfare, was justification enough to sink it to the bottom of the sea without controlling the cargo beforehand.

This strategical use of the chemical weapons taboo may have prevented a deeper reflection on the technological advancements of 'conventional' weapons, apart from the occasional article discussing them in the broader context of modern warfare. In July 1917, to name one of the few examples, an article in *Le Matin* described how modern technology had changed the role of soldiers on the battlefield. Just like Léfèvre two years earlier, the article

¹²⁷ Wolffsches Telegraphenbureau. "Die Verwendung von betäubenden Gasen." *Berliner Tageblatt*.

¹²⁸ Normann. "Herr Professor." *Le Matin*.

¹²⁹ Laskine. "Duplicité Allemande." *Le Matin*.

¹³⁰ Laskine. "L'offensive morale de l'Allemagne." *Le Matin*.

did not pay any special attention to chemical weapons. The author remarked that all kinds of weapons were now being used that would completely break with the traditions of previous wars. For one, no one received praise for their marksmanship anymore given that machine guns, grenade launchers, artillery shells and asphyxiating gases were much more destructive, allowing only a handful of soldiers to turn the entire battlefield upside down. Wielding these weapons, however, would not be an easy thing to learn and required careful instruction and training during the short breaks from fighting in the trenches. Whereas some soldiers claimed that these instructions would only serve to annoy them, the author of the article in *Le Matin* was convinced that dominating the hated *Boches* would be the surest way of protection. This way of thinking did not suddenly emerge in *Le Matin*, but corresponded to the strategy France had decided to pursue after the first gas attack by the Germans: exploiting every technological means at its disposal, *nulla quaestio*.

***“Frightening results”*: France’s decision to retaliate in kind**

Although France’s chemical industry was not on par with its German counterpart, its reaction to the first gas attack was quite quick. Under the direction of French chemist, André Kling, the gas was rapidly confirmed to be chlorine and two days after the German attack, the first rudimentary protective devices were sent to the front; a mere three weeks later, France had mass-produced an additional 500.000 gas masks, ready for employment.¹³¹ Even though the French were able to muster such a substantial defence in such a short amount of time, chemical companies at the home front were engaged to develop chemical weapons themselves. Without debating the question whether there was an actual need to do so in the National Assembly or the Senate, the French military was granted *carte blanche* and promptly started organising and executing first experiments with ‘non-toxic fumes’, only eight days after the first gas attack by the Germans.¹³² Politicians in the United Kingdom on the other hand, did not feel comfortable to enter into chemical warfare without political deliberation, as a letter by the minister of war, Lord Herbert Kitchener, to General John French shows: “*the use of asphyxiating gases is, as you are aware, contrary to the rules and usages of war. Before we fall to the level of the degraded Germans, I must submit the matter to the government.*”¹³³ Some British government officials were not convinced whether Germany’s

¹³¹ Lepick. “The Road to Retaliation in Kind,” p. 71

¹³² Ibid, pp. 72

¹³³ Kitchener as in Schmidt. *Secret Science*, p. 26

use of metal cylinders constituted a literal infraction of the Hague Declaration as it specifically referred to “*projectiles, the sole object of which is the diffusion of asphyxiating and deleterious gases*”.¹³⁴ According to historian Ulf Schmidt, however, the British press and military did not seem interested in such technical arguments, contributing to the government’s decision to eventually retaliate in kind as well.¹³⁵

The French press also actively vied for retaliation in kind, although adopting a more combative tone. A letter by an Alsace correspondent to the *Gazette de Lausanne*, for example, asserted that French soldiers were especially resolute about the need to retaliate with chemical weapons. Although they had suffered the horrors of such weapons themselves, they were determined to pay the Germans back in kind, if not for their own sake than at least in the name of humanity that Germany had so heavily insulted with its use of chemical weapons.¹³⁶ No one could claim under these circumstances that the French would be responsible for any damage inflicted on German soldiers. The article noted further – and seemingly not without satisfaction – that it was the German officers who had doomed their troops to the fate of chemical warfare: “*The efforts of French chemists have given rise to frightening results and we do not believe to be wrong in saying that the German officers, who encouraged the use of asphyxiating gases, have prepared hours of unimaginable pain and anguish for their troops.*”¹³⁷

An interview with French chemist, Daniel Berthelot, in August 1915, ensured the readers of *Le Matin* that the organisation of retaliatory acts was in the best hands.¹³⁸ Having discovered the highly poisonous gas hydrogen cyanide himself, Berthelot explained that German chemists had not invented any of the asphyxiating and poisonous gases they were using, but had instead relied on the intellectual achievements of British and French chemists in the 19th and 20th century. The article indeed paid a lot of attention to the technological finesse required to wield such gases, including the need to use nebulising agents that would prevent the gases from being dispersed too quickly. Given the fact that French chemists had already such an expertise at their fingertips, Berthelot repeated that the German enemy could “*only regret having used such processes against us [France] first.*”

¹³⁴ The Hague Declaration (IV,2), *Concerning Asphyxiating Gases*. The whole article IV,2 of The Hague Declaration can also be found in Document C in the Appendix of this thesis.

¹³⁵ Schmidt, *Secret Science*, p. 27

¹³⁶ “Ce qui se prepare.” *Gazette de Lausanne*.

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, *Gazette de Lausanne*.

¹³⁸ “La Riposte aux gaz asphyxiant.” *Le Matin*.

Citing the abovementioned article of the Alsace correspondent in the *Gazette de Lausanne* however, the *Norddeutsche Zeitung* wondered about the moral hypocrisy of the French press who appeared to be delighted at the prospect of using chemical weapons on German soldiers.¹³⁹ The article also expressed its astonishment about a discussion in the House of Commons in the United Kingdom: the deputy Sir William Pollard Byles had asked the British government if the chemicals they intended to use were not “cruel and inhumane”. The response of the British government that they were mostly concerned with the effectiveness of the substances rather than their ‘cruelty’ and ‘inhumanity’, seemed to be yet another sign of bad faith to the *Norddeutsche Zeitung*. Especially with regard to the fact – so the article claimed – that the Allied Powers had used ambiguous weapons long before the German attack in April 1915.

For some politicians, retaliating in kind did not seem to go far enough. While people were already expressing the hope that Germany stood at the brink of defeat, French Minister of Munitions, Albert Thomas, was convinced that the Allied Powers needed to improve their weapons even further.¹⁴⁰ Given that a cornered enemy would have nothing to lose, Germany might be capable of developing and using even more horrifying weapons than asphyxiating gases and flame throwers. For this reason, the war effort needed to continue, because every shell produced by the French and British war industries would save lives in the end. In fact Albert Thomas even asserted that “*Until we achieve victory, and in order to achieve this victory, we will need to compete [with German science] for initiative and invention.*”¹⁴¹ Or in other words: France and the United Kingdom should not merely wait until the Germans introduced yet another type of weapon on the battlefield, but take the initiative in inventing and using deadlier weapons themselves.

From these newspaper articles it becomes apparent that France eventually adopted an ‘anything-goes’ attitude with regard to the use chemical weapons. While retaliation in kind was presented as a necessity of war that would ensure the defeat of the Germans, there was no further reflection on the moral implications of such a course of action. Although the French press often referred to The Hague Conferences, during which the taboo on chemical weapons was established, they seemed to have taken the view that France had no moral responsibility

¹³⁹ “Englische Bestechungsversuche und Fälschungen.” *Norddeutsche Zeitung*.

¹⁴⁰ Thomas, A. “Journaux de France et de l'étranger.” *Le Matin*.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*, *Le Matin*. The original quote states: “*Jusqu'à la victoire, et pour la victoire, il faudra rivaliser avec elle [science Allemande mobilisée] d'initiative et d'invention.*”

at all to uphold the taboo itself. In fact the press seemed to await the day the Germans would receive a taste of their own medicine with impatience. Perhaps such a craving for revenge does not come as a surprise during times of war, but is deserving of less sympathy given that France's allies in the United Kingdom expressed their reluctance to wield chemical weapons against German soldiers. As we will see shortly, this point becomes even more important when considering that France experimented with the use of gases during police arrests.

A weapon against criminals. The use of asphyxiating gases during police arrests.

On the 18th of August, 1916, *Le Matin* reported on a curious disturbance in the fort Mont-Valérien, located at the Western periphery of Paris.¹⁴² A platoon of 25 police officers and military personnel stood sentry by a bunker in the fort, where – so *Le Matin* wrote – an Algerian soldier had barricaded himself. The soldier had recently been dismissed from a Canadian-run military hospital in France and – apparently in a state of delusion – had entered the fort without authorisation. Having ignored all attempts of the military guards to stop him at the gates, eventually ran into a small bunker-cell (“*casemate*”) in which he barricaded himself. When the local police arrived to arrest the soldier and escort him out of the fort, however, he grabbed a pickaxe that he had found in the bunker, declaring that he was going to kill anyone who tried to enter. After multiple failed attempts to negotiate with the man, the police eventually decided to incapacitate him through the use of asphyxiating gases.

Le Temps presented the episode somewhat differently, explaining that the soldier was in fact from Senegal and went by the name Bambala Lambassé.¹⁴³ He had apparently laughed at the gases the police diffused in the bunker as he had “*seen much worse in the trenches opposite the Boches*”. The situation could only be solved when a fellow Senegalese was asked to parlay with the man who – the police realised – was not able to speak French very well. When Lambassé finally came out, he calmly explained that he had tried to take a train to Bordeaux, but had gotten lost along the way and was pointed towards the fort by a passer-by. Confused by the aggressive reactions of the personnel, he had tried to outrun them first but resorted to threaten them with the pickaxe when cornered in the bunker.

This almost comical episode did not raise anyone's eyebrows. Neither *Le Matin*, nor *Le Temps*, nor any other French newspaper reflected on the fact that the police had apparently

¹⁴² “La police assiège le fort du Mont-Valérien.” *Le Matin*.

¹⁴³ “Un assaut au Mont-Valérien.” *Le Temps*.

received the authorisation to use asphyxiating gases against civilians. Only an article in the *Gazette des Ardennes*, a heavily censored Belgian newspaper installed by the German occupation, discussed the occurrence pointing out that “*asphyxiating gases, formerly decried as savagery of the Boches, seem to be frequently employed in Paris, - at least against Senegalese compatriots!*”¹⁴⁴

There are at least two further instances where French police forces used – or were prepared to use – asphyxiating gases against civilians during the war: In July 1917, the police was informed about the location of a certain Nicolas Chaumon, a man in his thirties who appeared to have deserted the army and was described as a dangerous individual.¹⁴⁵ Anticipating a difficult arrest, the local superintendent had informed his superior, Monsieur Tanguy, of the situation, who arrived at the scene with a scientist of the municipal laboratory of Paris in tow. According to *Le Matin*, the scientist – who was referred to as Monsieur Kling – had apparently brought devices for asphyxiating gases with him (“*appareils à gaz asphyxiants*”), probably in an attempt to flush out Chaumon, should he refuse to come out. It is highly likely that this scientist is actually André Kling who was mentioned earlier in this chapter. He headed one of the three organisations that were set up to coordinate France’s retaliation to Germany’s chemical weapons programme.¹⁴⁶ Although Kling occupied such a high post, his presence at the scene and the report that he carried asphyxiating gases with him, were not explained any further by *Le Matin*. It is possible that Kling was sent to analyse the use of asphyxiating gases during police arrests, but the whole situation is rather odd given the insistence of the French press that asphyxiating gases were the work of barbarians.

The last report on the intended use of asphyxiating gases on French civilians was published in September 1917.¹⁴⁷ A 45 year old man, named Edmond Heulard (who had already been convicted twice by the police), got into a fight with 16 year old Paul Rimbaut. The situation escalated and Heulard shot Rimbaut with his revolver. While the victim was transported to the hospital with haste, Heulard barricaded himself in his bedroom, threatening to shoot everyone who tried to enter. The police therefore gave the order to use asphyxiating gases, but Heulard gave himself up before they could execute the procedure.

It should be noted that all the articles explicitly used the term “*gaz asphyxiants*” without explaining which chemical substances the French police were actually using. As

¹⁴⁴ “Le Mont-Valérien occupé par un Sénégalais.” *Gazette des Ardennes*.

¹⁴⁵ “La foule hue un déserteur.” *Le Matin*.

¹⁴⁶ Lepick. “The Road to Retaliation in Kind,” p. 72

¹⁴⁷ “Une tragique querelle.” *Le Matin*.

Bambala Lambassé was allegedly amused about the gases in fort Mont-Valérien, however, it is likely that the police used some kind of tear gas rather than a toxic equivalent. According to an interview with historian Anna Feigenbaum, the French police had already developed plans to use tear gas against barricaded criminals before 1914, ultimately inspiring the French army to use them in the trenches during the Great War rather than the other way round.¹⁴⁸ Although the term “*gaz lacrymogène*”, as a literal translation of tear gas, already existed at the time, it was only sparsely used; the term “*gaz asphyxiants*” seemed to be preferred. Feigenbaum explains that the distinction between tear gas and other types of chemical gases arose only after the war, when groups of politicians and scientists lobbied for the use of tear gases by the police. Based on the work of World War I historian, Jean Paul Zanders, Feigenbaum explains further that “*this semantic split would continue in arms conventions around gas warfare, offering up a legitimization for outlawing some weapons, while not others. This line of reasoning allowed tear gas to follow a different (though highly contested) legal trajectory than other poisonous agents.*”¹⁴⁹

Nevertheless, the reports of the French press on the use of chemical gases by the police seem to betray a dubious double standard in using and reproducing the taboo on chemical weapons. While being extremely outraged at Germany’s employment of chemical weapons, there is no deeper reflection on France’s active contribution to make the use of chemical gases a commonplace phenomenon. When the International Committee of the Red Cross (also known as ICRC) issued a plea to all belligerents in the last year of the war to stop using chemical weapons, neither the French-, nor the German press did not seem particularly interested in de-escalating the situation, .

The plea of the International Committee of the Red Cross to end the use of asphyxiating gases

As previously discussed, the Allied Powers’ decision to fight fire with fire and organise a substantial response to the German chemical weapons programme ended with the escalation of chemical warfare. From 1915 onwards, the production of chemical gases rose substantially every year, although Olivier Lepick estimates that there were only two instances in which these weapons could have had a decisive impact on the outcome of the war: on April 22nd,

¹⁴⁸ Ropert. “Le gaz lacrymogène.”

¹⁴⁹ Feigenbaum. *Tear Gas* under section: Chemical Warfare in World War I [epub].

1915 when Germany used chlorine gas at the Western front and in 1917 when the German army introduced yperite (also known as mustard gas) on the battlefield.¹⁵⁰ Confronted with the use of deadlier and more sophisticated chemical gases at the Western front, the International Committee of the Red Cross issued a plea with the following intention on February 8th, 1918:

*“Today we wish to raise our voices against a barbarous innovation which science is in the course of perfecting, that is, making it more murderous and more refined in its cruelty. We are speaking of asphyxiant and poisonous gases, the use of which, it seems, is growing to a scale hitherto unsuspected. [...] The fact that such procedures have become common practice in war is in itself intolerable. But we insist that anyone who attempts to render this method of combat still more cruel will carry a steadily increasing weight of responsibility for having driven warfare in a direction contrary to the humane ideas which seemed to be gaining ground, the living proof of which appeared to be the Red Cross. For this is not an act that an army can spurn as being repugnant, since its own existence is at stake. A combatant confronted by an enemy using these gases is forced, despite himself, to do the same; and, if he does not want to be in an inferior position which might be fatal to him, he will try to outdo his enemy, to concentrate all his efforts on ensuring that the poisons are ever more harmful and more widespread in their effects. Each side will compete with the other in the race to invent the deadliest and the cruellest methods”*¹⁵¹

Apart from a short notice on the day of the plea’s publication, German newspapers reacted only several weeks later.¹⁵² According to Philipp Scheidemann, deputy for the social democratic party in the Reichstag, this silence of the German press was caused by the increasing military censorship that was supposed to prevent German citizens at the home front from growing even more discontent.¹⁵³ With the United States entering the war on the side of the Allied Powers in 1917, Germany’s chances at winning had already taken a definite turn for the worse. Suffering through significant resource and food shortages, many German armament facilities could only operate half of the time while factory workers took to the

¹⁵⁰ Lepick. *La Grande Guerre Chimique* under section: “À armes nouvelles, tactiques Nouvelles” [epub].

¹⁵¹ ICRC, *The ICRC’s appeal against the use of poisonous gases*. The whole plea can be found in Document D in the Appendix of this thesis.

¹⁵² The notice can be found in “Letzte Nachrichten.” *Berliner Tageblatt*.

¹⁵³ Scheidemann as cited in “Die Reden der Parteiführer im Reichstage.” *Berliner Tageblatt*.

streets in protest.¹⁵⁴ When the *Wolffsche Telegraphenbureau* finally reacted to the plea on February 25th, 1918, it asserted nevertheless that the German chemical industry was still vastly superior and only those factions who were not capable of producing effective gases would want their use to stop. Not wishing to reopen the tedious discussion on the question who had started to use chemical gases first, the agency still repeated the German stance on the matter by pointing the blame at the Allied Powers, in particular the French use of hand grenades containing asphyxiating gases in late 1914/early 1915.¹⁵⁵ Contrary to the position of the Committee, the article was convinced that the introduction of chemical gases on the battlefield had not made the war more gruesome as they would merely serve to incapacitate enemy soldiers (“*außer Gefecht setzen*”) just like conventional weapons. Germany simply drew on its advantageous position in this matter, but would follow the developments concerning the plea with interest and in good conscience.

In May 1918, *Le Matin* reported that the Allied Powers had responded to the plea of ICRC, thanking the committee for the laudable thought of wanting to end the use of asphyxiating and poisonous gases. Should Germany bring forward concrete measures to regulate the use of these weapons, the Allied Powers would make sure to consider them, but given Germany’s role in starting chemical warfare and its other violations of the Hague Convention, they did not expect a sudden change of heart to occur.¹⁵⁶ Germany’s response, on the other hand, was a long time in the coming. In September 1918, seven months after the plea was issued, Germany affirmed that it would be willing to discuss the topic of asphyxiating gases with the Allied forces.¹⁵⁷ As the rest of the response consisted of a renewed discussion on who had started the use of chemical weapons first, the German response was only met with anger as can be seen in the analysis of French essayist, Louis Forest, who surmised that never before had a country tried to make itself appear so naïve although it was known for lying so much.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, *Berliner Tageblatt*.

¹⁵⁵ Wolffsches Telegraphenbureau. “Der Aufruf des Genfer Internationalen Komitees.” *Berliner Tageblatt*.

¹⁵⁶ “L’Entente et les gaz asphyxiants.” *Le Matin*.

¹⁵⁷ “L’Allemagne répond à la Croix-Rouge Suisse.” *Le Matin*.

¹⁵⁸ Forest. “ÉCHOS.” *Le Matin*.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to investigate how French and German newspapers reacted to the uses of chemical weapons on the battlefield of World War I with particular interest for the question at which point the Chemical Weapons Taboo actually emerged and what kind of narratives were created around specific uses of chemical weapons.

Moral evaluations on chemical weapons did not take place until after the chlorine gas attack by the German army on April 22nd, 1915. While the new weapons technology was initially put into perspective by the French press, the tone quickly switched to outrage. Asphyxiating and deleterious gases were singled out as a particularly barbaric form of warfare. Without needing the approval of the French government, the French military launched its own chemical weapons programme. The French press did not question this programme, albeit the fact that the French army had already drawn up significant protective measures against the new weapon of the Germans. In fact, a number of articles in *Le Matin* seemed to obtain a certain degree of satisfaction from imagining how German soldiers would suffer under the chemical weapons of the French army. Furthermore, the French Minister of War, Albert Thomas, explained that it would be necessary to compete with German science for initiative and invention, implying that the French army would not shy away from introducing deadlier chemicals themselves. At the same time, articles condemning the use of chemical weapons by the German army were often accompanied by insulting remarks about Germany in every possible sense. From these articles, it appears that the Chemical Weapons Taboo was reproduced in the French press through moral outrage after the chlorine attack, however, it was also used to justify using chemical weapons against the Germans themselves.

The German newspapers did not immediately react to the French outrage, except for pointing out that the French had used hand grenades containing gases before the German army. Eventually, the Wolffsche Telegraphenbureau gave a more extensive response in June 1915 by publishing a press release in the *Berliner Tageblatt*: While not as morally outraged as the French newspapers, the article very subtly reproduced the Chemical Weapons Taboo by emphasising again that Germany was not the first to have used war gases on the battlefield. Furthermore, the WTB justified the German army torpedoing the Atlantic cruiser ‘Lusitania’ by claiming that it shipped precursors for chemical weapons to the United Kingdom. In that sense, the Chemical Weapons Taboo was also used in the German press in a self-interested manner.

In 1917, three articles in *Le Matin* report on the use of asphyxiating gases during police arrests. These gases were used against a Senegalese soldier, a deserter and a criminal. The complete absence of moral evaluation on these uses by the French press reveals a very noticeable double standard in reproducing the Chemical Weapons Taboo. In a more pessimistic reading of this difference in reporting, one may draw the conclusion that the targeted groups apparently did not deserve the moral outrage of the French press.

In the last year of World War I, the Red Cross issued a plea asking all belligerents to seize the development and use of chemical weapons. While the Allied Powers expected Germany to take the first step, the German press did not react until September 1918, when the war was all but lost.

Chapter 3

Trials and treaties: re-defining the prohibition and taboo on chemical weapons after the Great War.

A changed world

In the summer of 1918, it became abundantly clear that Germany would lose the war, as the Allied Powers had managed to break through the German lines multiple times during The Hundred Days Offensive.¹⁵⁹ On top of the military pressure of the Allied Powers, the situation at the German home front had also grown increasingly dire. Resources had been scarce due to the continued naval blockade of the Allied Powers and what little Germany managed to procure from the outside or produce itself was in large part invested in the war effort.¹⁶⁰ As we have seen in the previous chapter, this resulted in significant food shortages and led to strikes at the home front.

For these reasons, Germany's Supreme Army Command (or OHL) insisted at the end of September 1918 that Emperor Wilhelm II should call on the Allied Powers to negotiate the terms of an armistice.¹⁶¹ Since American president Woodrow Wilson had already outlined Fourteen Points to ensure a lasting peace on the European continent in January 1918, the OHL had a general idea what an armistice and eventual peace treaty would require from the German Empire, namely extensive disarmament as well as cession of land and colonies. Hoping to improve these terms and acquire the good faith of the Allied Powers, the German military leadership suggested a democratic government be formed under the chancellorship of the conservative politician Prince Maximilian von Baden that would negotiate the upcoming armistice and peace treaty for the German side.¹⁶² These hopes were completely dashed when events unfolded somewhat more chaotically:

¹⁵⁹ Lloyd. "The Hundred Days Offensive."

¹⁶⁰ Verhey. *War and Revolution*, p. 249;

It must be acknowledged that the secondary literature on the immediate afterwar period emphasises that Germany lost the Great War because of military reasons, not – as was later suggested by far right nationalists – because the military was “stabbed in the back” by communists, (social) democrats and/or Jews at the home front.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, p. 258

¹⁶² Ibid, p. 259

Foreseeing that Wilson's Fourteen Points would lead to an extensive, or even complete disbandment of the navy, German navy officers planned to engage the vastly superior British and American fleets in one last battle at the end of October 1918, however, without informing Von Baden or his government.¹⁶³ As this effort was entirely pointless and would mean certain death, sailors on the German war ships revolted against their superiors in the harbour of Kiel, eventually taking charge of the whole fleet. This revolutionary energy also found fertile ground among German citizens, who were thoroughly disillusioned by a political and military system that had pretended until the very end that an ultimate victory would be within Germany's grasp and the deprivations of the German people would eventually pay off. Many major German cities such as Munich, Frankfurt, Hannover and eventually Berlin, therefore became witness to mass protests that are known today as the 'November Revolution'.¹⁶⁴ An important result of these protests was the complete abolishment of the German monarchy and the introduction of a real democratic government under the leadership of the social democrat, Friedrich Ebert.

However, this also meant that Ebert's new government ended up with the unenviable task to negotiate a peace treaty with the Allied Powers and redefine Germany's relationship with its neighbours on the European continent. The Great War had cost at least 13.5 million lives, had left more than 22.5 million people wounded, had devastated the lands at the Franco-Belgian border and had largely ruined the Allied- and Central Powers' economies.¹⁶⁵ Creating peace therefore became an essential goal of international politics. As a result, the 1920s featured many conferences and treaties on disarmament in order to anticipate and avoid future conflicts, three of which also specifically tried to re-establish a prohibition on chemical weapons. These are the Treaty of Versailles (1919), the Washington Naval Treaty (1922) and the Geneva Protocol (1925).

Taking these three treaties as guiding posts, this chapter will investigate how French and German newspapers viewed chemical weapons after the war and how these representations changed in comparison to the war period. Furthermore, the chapter will discuss how the French and German press evaluated the new prohibitions on chemical weapons, and what this evaluation tells us about the reproduction and use of the moral stigma on chemical weapons in the national newspapers.

¹⁶³ Ibid, p. 259

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 260

¹⁶⁵ Janda. "Combatant and Non-Combatant," p. 273

The Treaty of Versailles and the Investigation Committee on Questions of Guilt in the World War

On November 11th, 1918, the guns and canons in Northern-France and Belgium finally went silent. While Germany was trying to give shape to a new democratic system and grappled with internal conflicts, the Allied Powers convened in Paris to draft a treaty that would ensure peace on the European continent.¹⁶⁶ Germany was only invited to sit at the table from April 1919 onwards and therefore had to accept the treaty as a *fait accompli*, as the Allied Powers had already negotiated its contents. While the treaty is best known for its demands on repartition payments, cession of territories and general disarmament, it also established a specific prohibition on chemical weapons in Article 171, stating that:

“The use of asphyxiating, poisonous or other gases and all analogous liquids, materials or devices being prohibited, their manufacture and importation are strictly forbidden in Germany. The same applies to materials specially intended for the manufacture, storage and use of the said products or devices” (see Document B).¹⁶⁷

This new phrasing corrected some flaws of the Hague Declaration as it now issued a ban on every type of gas or analogous liquid, irrespective of its nature or mode of diffusion. Although the definition of what constituted a chemical weapon was broadened, this was not reflected in the way the French and German press discussed them. As we will see in the next part of this chapter, the ban on the import of materials which could be used to produce chemical gases, only came up during the Washington Naval Conference as the French press felt a prohibition on the use of chemical gases for the Allied Powers would undermine their capacity to react to a future chemical war. Furthermore, Article 172 of the Treaty of Versailles established that Germany needed to disclose their production processes for “*explosives, toxic substances or other like chemicals*” to the Allied Powers. Although France, in particular, still regarded Germany’s use of asphyxiating gases as a crime, other parts of the Treaty of Versailles seemed to garner far more attention than Articles 171 and 172.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ Weitz. *Weimar Germany* under section: “A troubled beginning” [epub].

¹⁶⁷ Treaty of Versailles (V, 171), *Concerning the use of asphyxiating, poisonous or other gases*. The whole article V, 171 can be found in Document E in the Appendix of this thesis.

¹⁶⁸ “Le Rapport Général du M. Barthou,” *Le Matin*.

The signing of the Versailles Treaty itself gave way to mixed feelings in the United Kingdom and France, some considering the treaty to be too harsh or unenforceable and others voicing their regret that it had not undone the work of Otto von Bismarck, that is to reverse the unification of Germany and to disband its territory into numerous, smaller states.¹⁶⁹ As the defeated faction, it is unsurprising that Germany struggled enormously with the Treaty. Under Article 231, which later became known as the ‘War Guilt Clause’, Germany and its Allies were marked down as the aggressors of the war and therefore had to compensate all the damages the Allied and Associated Powers had accrued throughout the war. On top of its war debts, Germany was therefore commanded to pay an intentionally unspecified sum of money as reparation, while also losing the Memel region and Posen to Poland, and Alsace-Lorraine to France.¹⁷⁰ To the vast majority of German – from the far left to the far right – these conditions seemed absolutely unacceptable, however, an article by the diplomat Friedrich Wilhelm Foerster in the *Berliner Tageblatt* urged for reconciliation nonetheless: “*During times of international conflict (“Völkerkonflikte”), the task of a German diplomat is without a doubt not only limited to making foreigners understand the German people – therefore ensuring its correct treatment – but also to explain to the German people the psychology behind the attitudes abroad as a reaction to certain acts or omissions, speech or silence from the German side.*”¹⁷¹ Instead of being reflexively outraged at the Allied Powers, Germany needed to look inward and reflect on its own behaviour during the war. This was much easier said than done.

In an effort to revive the discussion on the ‘War Guilt Clause’, the Weimar National Assembly decided in 1919 to set up committees that were to assess Germany’s responsibility in starting and conducting the war. One of these so-called ‘Investigation Committees on Questions of Guilt in the World War’ (“Untersuchungsausschuss für die Schuldfragen des Weltkrieges”) was tasked with investigating Germany’s acts of war that were prohibited under international law, or in the absence of such prohibitions, could be said to have been disproportionately cruel or harsh.¹⁷² German Minister of the Interior, Erich Koch, explained that the use of asphyxiating gases would be a specific subject of these reports, especially with regard to the question which faction had used them first. The National Assembly committed to the provision of all the necessary documents to the Committees, even if classified, but as

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, *Le Matin*.

¹⁷⁰ Weitz. *Weimar Germany* under section: “A troubled beginning” [epub].

¹⁷¹ Foerster. “Nach Friedensschluß.” *Berliner Tageblatt*.

¹⁷² Koch. “Die Programmrede des Reichsministers Koch.” *Berliner Tageblatt*.

historian Ulrich Heinemann points out, the Investigation Committees were not exactly neutral.¹⁷³ They sometimes worked towards forgone conclusions and during their almost 13 years of existence became less and less independent from the government. Rather than looking at Germany's use of asphyxiating gases through a moral lens, the Investigation Committee discussed the issue in a technical manner applying a high degree of "legal sophistry" ("juristische Rabulistik").¹⁷⁴ Going by the literal definition of the Hague Declaration, the commissioned expert Johannes Kriege estimated that France had broken the agreement first through their use of hand grenades whose sole object was the diffusion of asphyxiating gases. Germany on the other hand had not infringed upon the Hague Declaration because its projectiles also exploded on impact and therefore did not have the sole object to diffuse asphyxiating gases. Furthermore, the chlorine attack of April 22nd, 1915, was not covered by the Hague Declaration because the gases were diffused like clouds that moved with the direction of the wind. Whatever Germany did to retaliate against the Allied Powers in terms of chemical warfare was justified as they had used asphyxiating and deleterious gases first.

Although the negotiations and hearings of the Investigation Committee were concluded in 1921, the results were not published until 1927, because the public authorities feared a negative reaction from abroad to the sensitive documents that underlined the report.¹⁷⁵ When the results were finally published, however, they did not provoke any further discussion in the German or French press about chemical gases. *Le Matin*, for example, only mentioned the conclusions of the Investigation Committee on the use of chemical gases but seemed more interested in discussing Germany's stance on the mistreatment of Belgian citizens during the war.¹⁷⁶ It seems that the approach of the Investigation Committee was rather typical for the way that chemical gases were discussed in the Weimar Republic. Contrary to Foerster's hopes, a real ethical reflection on Germany's role in starting or escalating the war in general and chemical warfare in particular did not occur, even though the question how this weapons technology should be treated remained in the focus of attention during the Washington Naval Conference and the Geneva Protocol.

¹⁷³ Heinemann. *Die verdrängte Niederlage*, p. 192

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 199

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p. 193

¹⁷⁶ "Le Reichstag discute un rapport sur les violation du droit des gens." *Le Matin*.

The Washington Naval Conference

When the war was concluded on the European continent, the focus of the international community shifted to the Pacific. The rapid industrialisation and imperialist ambitions of Japan, on top of the longstanding presence of the British Empire in East Asia, particularly worried the United States and so it tried to anticipate a possible naval arms race with a new disarmament conference.¹⁷⁷ The focus of this Conference, which took place in Washington from November 1921 to February 1922, was to limit the participating nations' navies, but as an article of *Le Matin* pointed out on the Conference's announcement, then-US president Harding also envisioned specific regulations on aerial warfare and chemical weapons.¹⁷⁸ The Conference itself was quite small, with only nine nations participating: the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, China, and Portugal. Germany had been excluded from the Naval Conference as its maritime disarmament had already been outlined in the Treaty of Versailles, as was Soviet Russia for its recent border disputes with Poland on top of its communist ideology.¹⁷⁹

In the French press, this Conference was not met with enthusiasm. Columnist Louis Forest feared that the question of general disarmament would be discussed too superficially with a strong focus on limiting the number of war ships, artillery, and soldiers.¹⁸⁰ In his view, the issue was much more complex: for one, a potential disarmament conference would also need to take industrial capacities and technological development of the participating nations into account as they might simply scale up their production when a conflict ensues. Furthermore, economic and military alliances between countries might also play a role in the sense that “*the nation which has a powerful chemical industry can produce – in times of conflict – the unknown asphyxiating gases of an[other] agricultural nation.*”¹⁸¹ This way of thinking was not entirely unfounded: given that the Weimar Republic and Soviet Russia felt treated as outcasts by the Allied Powers, both countries decided to forge a close military collaboration which was formalised only two months after the Washington Conference with

¹⁷⁷ Goldstein, Maurer (Eds.) *The Washington Conference 1921-1922*, pp. 1

¹⁷⁸ “La Conference Harding.” *Le Matin*.

¹⁷⁹ Goldstein, Maurer (Eds.) *The Washington Conference 1921-1922*, p. III (foreword)

¹⁸⁰ Forest. “Le désarmement armé.” *Le Matin*.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid*, *Le Matin*. Translated from the original French: “*La nation qui dispose d’une puissante industrie chimique peut produire, en cas de conflit, des gaz asphyxiants inconnus d’une nation agricole.*”

the Treaty of Rapallo.¹⁸² In accord with a top secret part of this treaty, German scientists and engineers were sent to Russia to continue their military research without breaking the Treaty of Versailles in plain sight. Although this was not official knowledge, the French press accused Germany numerous times of sending its scientists abroad to create chemical gases.¹⁸³

Perhaps then the problem of general disarmament was not just a materialistic one. French prime minister, Aristide Briand, captured this idea during his speech at the Naval Conference with the phrase “*It takes two, to make peace*”.¹⁸⁴ In an attempt to justify the large size of the French army at the time, Briand asserted that a country such as the United States would have to understand the security concerns that came with sharing a continent with many formidable competitors. Without calling a specific country out, Briand explained further that there were still “*severe elements of instability*” in Europe, which is why materialistic disarmament could only be effective if it had taken place in a “moral” sense first. This sentiment was mirrored in a speech of British Prime Minister, Lloyd George, who wanted to avoid bringing up a young generation of Germans that were fuelled by revenge. The *Berliner Tageblatt* completely agreed with George’s speech, but explained that it was France that blocked any attempt at reconciliation by continuously framing and dehumanising the German people.¹⁸⁵ In any case, the question of general disarmament – materialistic or moral – quickly came off the table, as Aristide Briand insisted that without a general guarantee from the United States and the United Kingdom (which both countries were not willing to give), France must keep its armies intact.

In the case of chemical disarmament, the French press was particularly worried about Germany’s chemical industry, as became clear in a translated speech by Walter Van Rensselaer Berry, president of the Franco-American Chamber of Commerce.¹⁸⁶ In his view, the German chemical industry was an ever-existing threat, given its enormous production capacity in comparison to other countries. This had recently become apparent due to German chemical companies dumping the prizes of colouring agents on the American market. Ironically this was a result of the Treaty of Versailles’ intention to create free trade between the United States, Germany, and the other countries on the European continent. Something

¹⁸² Bowring, B. “Yevgeniy Pashukanis, His Law and Marxism,” p. 275

¹⁸³ See for example: “LA POLOGNE REDOUTE UNE AGGRESSION DES SOVIETS.” *Le Matin*. Or: “Depuis qu’il n’y a plus de contrôle de l’aviation militaire allemande il n’y a plus de sécurité pour la France.” *Le Matin*. Or: “Les événements de Chine.” *Le Matin*.

¹⁸⁴ Briand. “Un grand discours de M. Briand sur le désarmement terrestre.” *Le Matin*.

¹⁸⁵ “Für Lloyd George.” *Berliner Tageblatt*.

¹⁸⁶ Berry. “UN DANGER.” *Le Matin*.

had to be done about Germany's superiority in this regard, however, as it threatened to compete the chemical industries in other countries out of existence, making them more vulnerable to a chemical war in the future. Furthermore, the production processes in German chemical factories could easily be modified to produce chemical gases or explosives within hours, making Germany's industrial capacity one of the most dangerous threats to chemical disarmament. It appears that Walter Berry did not believe in chemical disarmament at all: observing that 55% of the projectiles used in the last year of the Great War diffused some type of chemical, he assumed that this number would rise even further in future wars.

Despite all these misgivings, five of the nine participating nations of the Washington Naval Conference adopted a resolution that re-established and re-defined a new prohibition on the use of chemical weapons, providing the following definition in Article V:¹⁸⁷

*“The use in war of asphyxiating, poisonous or other gases, and all analogous liquids, materials or devices, having been justly condemned by the general opinion of the civilized world and a prohibition of such use having been declared in treaties to which a majority of the civilized powers are parties”*¹⁸⁸

Just like the Treaty of Versailles, this so-called Five-Power Treaty corrected a number of flaws of the Hague Declaration, but left others open: it also broadened the definition of chemical weapons, so that all types of chemical gases and their analogous liquids were banned, irrespective of their nature and mode of diffusion. This was an improvement in the sense that both Germany and France had used the literal formulation of the Hague Declaration to justify their respective uses of chemical gases in World War I. Although the new phrasing of the prohibition also took a definitive normative stance on the use of chemical gases, stating that they had been *“justly condemned by the civilised world”*, it left open the question whether this should apply in non-military situations as well. Incidents in which the police used gases against criminals, such as discussed in the previous Chapter, continued to occur in France, however, without inciting any debate in the press on whether this was a morally acceptable thing to do.¹⁸⁹ It should be noted that the phrasing of the Five-Power Treaty also referred to

¹⁸⁷ These five nations were: the United States, the British Empire, France, Japan and Italy

¹⁸⁸ See Document F in the Appendix of this thesis for a full version of Article V of the Washington Naval Treaty

¹⁸⁹ See for example: “Le pivot, le commissaire et les gaz asphyxiants.” *Le Matin*. Or: “Un noir furieux soutient rue de Calais un siege.” *Le Matin*.

and reaffirmed the Hague Declaration by stating that “a prohibition of such use having been declared in treaties to which a majority of the civilized powers are parties”.

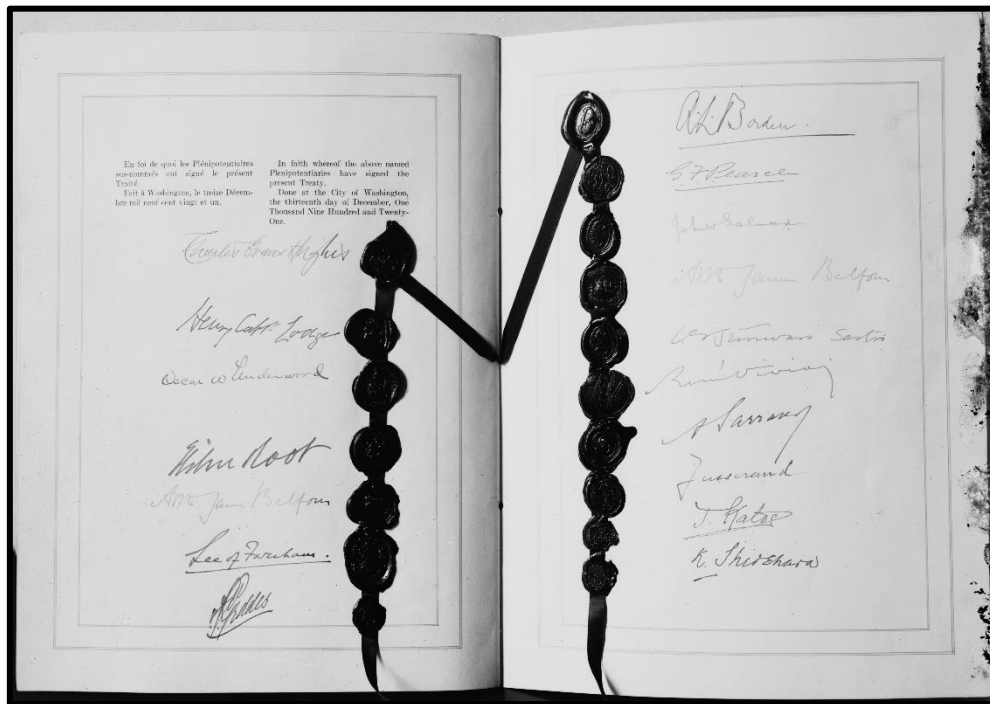


Figure 7: The Washington Naval Treaty

Photograph of the first page of the Four-Power Treaty signed during the Washington Naval Conference. It states: “In faith whereof the above named Plenipotentiaries have signed the present Treaty. Done at the city of Washington the thirteenth day of December, One Thousand Nine Hundred and Twenty One.”¹⁹⁰

Instead *Le Matin* insisted that the very idea of a prohibition on chemical gases in times of war was as “ridiculous” as flailing at the wind (“*coup d’épée dans l’eau*”), given that there were still no practical means to control other countries’ chemical industries.¹⁹¹ To impress this point further onto its readers, *Le Matin* interviewed three French chemists on chemical disarmament: Firstly, Daniel Berthelot asserted that chemical gases were not more barbaric or lethal than ‘conventional weapons’.¹⁹² In his view, certain people were apparently so sentimental that they would cry foul whenever a new technology was introduced as a weapon on the battlefield. Furthermore, Berthelot stressed that he had serious doubts about the practical implementation of such a prohibition. In his view, the Hague Conferences had

¹⁹⁰ Wikimedia Commons.

¹⁹¹ “Doit-on et peut-on prohiber les gaz asphyxiants dans l’avenir ?”. *Le Matin*.

¹⁹² *Ibid*, *Le Matin*.

shown that the prohibition on chemical weapons had merely handed a weapon to the most unscrupulous enemy.

The chemist Auguste Béhal, on the other hand, estimated that chemical weapons had to be prohibited because they risked to harm unprotected civilians.¹⁹³ When *Le Matin* objected that conventional weapons had also presented a danger to civilians in the recent war, Béhal conceded that it would indeed make little sense to focus a prohibition on this or that type of weapon, but that one should want to prohibit war altogether, adding that entirely preventing another nation to produce war gases in secret would be impossible to achieve. Being an expert advisor to France in the Naval Conference, Charles Moureu, was not at all allowed to comment on this matter. Nevertheless, *Le Matin* surmised from previous correspondences with Moureu that he too must be convinced that any form of chemical disarmament is futile in the end.

All in all, this particular article of *Le Matin* is rather insightful as it relativises its previous reporting on the use of chemical weapons in the Great War. From becoming a barbarous weapon that necessitates retaliation in kind, chemical gases were suddenly presented as an equally valid (or invalid) form of killing as ‘conventional’ weapons. It is unclear whether this shift in perspective occurred out of a sense of realism or pragmatism, however, it should be noted that instead of reproducing or using a taboo on chemical weapons, *Le Matin* seemed to do away with it completely, purporting a world view in which chemical weapons could not be disinvented and would play an integral part in the wars to come. In fact, *Le Matin* seemed sceptical of disarmament altogether as its writers felt the Hague Conferences had only served to leave France vulnerable to other countries. It is unsurprising that the newspaper therefore concluded its reporting on the Washington Conference with the estimation that the Anglo-American, Anglo-Japanese and Anglo-French “antagonisms” had persisted and that the prohibitions drawn up during the Conference were merely platonic.¹⁹⁴

In Germany, the tone was notably more positive: presenting the United States as Europe’s school teacher that could safeguard Germany’s recovery after the war and create lasting peace on the continent, the *Berliner Tageblatt* estimated that the Washington Conference had achieved much more than originally intended: Firstly, it had set up quantitative limitations on the amount and tonnages of war ships that each signatory was

¹⁹³ Ibid, *Le Matin*.

¹⁹⁴ “LA MORALE DE LA CONFÉRENCE DE WASHINGTON.” *Le Matin*.

allowed to hold.¹⁹⁵ Secondly, it had introduced an “open door” policy in China, preventing the European powers from dividing the country up amongst themselves as they had done with the African continent. And thirdly, it had outlawed the use of chemical weapons and submarines. To the *Berliner Tageblatt*, it seemed that the Washington Conference had managed to create a lasting peace in the Pacific and therefore created a good precedent for future disarmament conferences.

Such an additional conference turned out to be necessary as France failed to ratify the Five-Power Treaty on the prohibition of chemical gases. Mirroring the sentiments of *Le Matin*, the French government feared the implementation of a prohibition on chemical gases was rather dangerous given that Germany’s industrial and chemical prowess were not addressed properly.¹⁹⁶ Meanwhile *Le Matin* invested a considerable amount of energy to discredit the idea of chemical disarmament even further after the Naval Conference. Several newspaper articles in 1922 promoted investments into the research of protective devices against chemical gases at the time.¹⁹⁷ The newspaper was convinced that France’s chemical protection was abysmal and far too little was being done to develop new protection devices or improve the existing ones. Consulting the recent publication of two American generals, Clarence West and Amos Fries, *Le Matin* explained that the standard French A.R.S. masks (“*Appareil Respiratoire Special*”) were entirely insufficient, providing only a very short time of protection against the most commonly used war gases: chlorine, mustard gas and phosgene.¹⁹⁸ This stance matched *Le Matin*’s conviction that chemical gases would continue to exist and instead of spending a lot of energy on the question how the world’s nations could be made to engage in chemical disarmament, they simply went by the assumption that war gases would continue to pose a threat. *Le Matin* did not have the last word in this matter, however, as a new conference was already being planned in Geneva.

The Geneva Protocol and the Rif Wars

The Geneva Protocol was supposed to finish what the Washington Naval Treaty had started. The Five-Power treaty on asphyxiating, poisonous and other gases had been signed by the plenipotentiaries of the United States, the British Empire, Japan, Italy and France, but in fact

¹⁹⁵ “Was will Amerika?” *Berliner Tageblatt*.

¹⁹⁶ Buckley. “The Icarus Factor,” p. 146

¹⁹⁷ See for example: “Sommes-nous défendus contre les gaz asphyxiants ?” *Le Matin*. Or: “S’il y avait une guerre nous serions sans défense.” *Le Matin*.

¹⁹⁸ “Sommes-nous défendus contre les gaz asphyxiants ?” *Le Matin*.

never been ratified by the French government as it feared that limiting France's chemical preparedness would make it more vulnerable to chemical attacks in the future. It was only three years after the Washington Naval Conference that another initiative within the League of Nations tried to address chemical weapons again. However, the Geneva Arms Traffic Conference of 1925 – which eventually resulted in the Geneva Protocol – did not solely focus on chemical weapons.¹⁹⁹ Following the initiative of then-US president Calvin Coolidge, the Arms Traffic Conference was supposed to regulate the trade and trafficking of weapons between nations in general. Within these debates, chemical gases started to play a more prominent role when US-delegate Theodore Burton suggested a prohibition of exports on chemical weapons and their precursor chemicals.²⁰⁰ Burton immediately pointed out, however, that defining such a prohibition would present some difficulties: for one, many chemicals that could potentially be used for the production of war gases were also essential ingredients to many industrial applications. Furthermore, those countries which lacked the means of producing chemical gases could find themselves disproportionately affected by an export ban as they had no means of deterring a potential enemy who did have access to chemical weapons. Despite these concerns, Burton proposed a specific formulation for the exportation ban on chemical gases, namely: “*the signatories of the Treaty agree to an export ban of such gases [asphyxiating, poisonous or other gases, and all analogous liquids] from their lands*”²⁰¹ The delegates of France, Hungary, Italy, Japan, Poland and Turkey approved this initiative, adding that an expert committee would need to distinguish those chemicals which could be used for military ends from others that were necessary for industrial applications.²⁰² Although the ban on exportations of chemical weapons and precursor chemicals was seen favourably during the first stages of the Arms Traffic Conference, it was eventually abandoned. The reasons for abandoning the export ban are not clearly discussed in the national newspapers, however, the secondary literature suggests that the concerns outlined by Theodore Burton could not be satisfactorily addressed.²⁰³

¹⁹⁹ Barton. *Counterterrorism Between the Wars*, p. 103

²⁰⁰ “Der Entwurf des Waffenhandelsabkommens.” *Berliner Tageblatt*.

²⁰¹ Ibid, *Berliner Tageblatt*. The original proposition was taken over in the *Berliner Tageblatt* stating: “*Der Gebrauch von betäubenden Mitteln und anderen Gasen, Flüssigkeiten und anderen ähnlichen Mitteln im Kriege wird durch die öffentliche Meinung der zivilisierten Welt verurteilt, und dieser Gebrauch ist durch Verträge verboten, die von den meisten delegierten Staaten unterzeichnet sind. Die Unterzeichner des Abkommens stimmen somit einem Verbot der Ausfuhr solcher Gase und Flüssigkeiten zum Gebrauche im Kriege aus ihren Länder zu.*”

²⁰² Ibid, *Berliner Tageblatt* and “A la conférence sur le controle du trafic des armes.” *Le Matin*.

²⁰³ Warren. “GAS, GAS, GAS!”, p. 56

The scope of the Geneva Protocol was therefore limited again to the prohibition on the use – instead of the research, trade and storage – of chemical weapons. It should be noted that Poland also proposed the inclusion of a ban on bacteriological weapons into the Protocol, although there had been no precedent use of such weapons before.²⁰⁴ In comparison to war gases, air planes and submarines, this newly anticipated weapons technology did not seem to be taken all that seriously: in *Le Matin*, for example, the columnist Guy Launay asserted that using pest, typhus, cholera or whooping cough as a weapon would present a considerable threat to invading soldiers who “*would immediately catch those charming diseases*” themselves.²⁰⁵ Nevertheless, it was decided that the Geneva Protocol should also include bacteriological weapons which gave rise to the following wording:

“Whereas the use in war of asphyxiating, poisonous or other gases, and of all analogous liquids materials or devices, has been justly condemned by the general opinion of the civilized world; and whereas the prohibition of such use has been declared in Treaties to which the majority of Powers of the world are Parties; and to the end that this prohibition shall be universally accepted as a part of International Law, binding alike the conscience and the practice of nations;

Declare:

*That the High Contracting Parties, so far as they are not already Parties to Treaties prohibiting such use, accept this prohibition, agree to extend this prohibition to the use of bacteriological methods of warfare and agree to be bound as between themselves according to the terms of this declaration.”*²⁰⁶

The document was signed on June 17th, 1925 by the delegates of forty-seven countries. Although the phrasing of the Geneva Protocol was in large part copied from the unsuccessful Washington Naval Conference, France had apparently let go of its previous concerns and therefore became one of the forty-one countries to ratify the Treaty before the Second World War. Seven countries decided not to ratify the Protocol until much later, most notably the United States that had previously vied for a more extensive version with the suggestion to regulate or prohibit research, export and storage of war gases. The historian, Christopher

²⁰⁴ “Der Entwurf des Waffenhandelsabkommens.” *Berliner Tageblatt*.

²⁰⁵ Launay. “ÉCHOS ET PROPOS – BACILLES.” *Le Matin*.

²⁰⁶ League of Nations. *Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or Other Gases, and of Bacteriological Methods of Warfare*. See Document G in the Appendix of this thesis for the whole article.

Warren, suggests that the public opinion on a ban of the use of chemical weapons shifted significantly in the United States due to the efforts of general Amos Fries.²⁰⁷ Mobilising the American chemical industry as well as several veteran groups, Fries had successfully lobbied against the ratification of the Geneva Protocol. According to *Le Matin*, even the American Chemical Society had voted against a ban on chemical warfare during a general assembly in which more than one thousand American scientists and professors were present. In their view, chemical weapons were “*less terrible than former carnages*”.²⁰⁸

In the German and French press, such lobbying efforts do not seem to have occurred. This does not mean that the adoption of the Geneva Protocol was void of criticism. A lengthy article by Berthold von Deimling in the *Berliner Tageblatt*, for example, expressed ambivalent feelings towards a prohibition on chemical weapons.²⁰⁹ Apparently, some of Von Deimling’s contemporaries did not trust the intentions behind the Protocol. They asserted that an effort to humanise warfare through the prohibition of certain weapons technologies would merely serve to keep the institution of war itself alive. In this sense, poison gas was considered to be so destructive that armed conflicts between nations would end too quickly as far as the military was concerned. Nevertheless, Von Deimling did not necessarily doubt the intentions of the Protocol, but he was convinced that it would hold no real value in times of war as all nations would do everything in their power to get the upper hand, claiming to act in self-defence when using a particularly controversial means of destruction. At the same time, Von Deimling estimated that poisonous gases posed a real threat to the civilian population that could not effectively be defended against. In his view, the threat of chemical weapons could only be solved decisively through Germany’s entry into the League of Nations and the establishment of a close Franco-German relationship.

On the other hand, *Le Matin* seemed to pay little attention to the Geneva Protocol, occasionally giving an update on the resolutions of the Conference. The newspaper’s apparent indifference towards the renewed debate on chemical weapons may have been influenced by the fact that France was dealing with a rebellion in Morocco in which chemical weapons also became a prominent issue. The conflict originated in the early 1920s when indigenous Berber tribes came together to fight off Spanish and later French colonial rule in the Rif region. The Spanish army retaliated violently, dropping poison gas from airplanes on insurrectionists and

²⁰⁷ Warren. “GAS, GAS, GAS!”, p. 57

²⁰⁸ “Les chimistes américains protestent contre l’interdiction des gaz asphyxiants.” *Le Matin*. Translated from French: “*Les chimistes américains estiment que les effets des gaz asphyxiants « sont moins terribles que les anciennes boucheries ».*”

²⁰⁹ Von Deimling. “Das Genfer Kampfgasverbot.” *Berliner Tageblatt*.

civilians alike. In January 1925, *Le Matin* commented drily on the bombardments, stating that the natives of French-Morocco living close to the border of the Spanish occupied territory were “*following the spectacle attentively from the terrasses of their homes.*” “*What is serious*”, *Le Matin* continued “*is the arrival at the French hospital of wounded natives as well as women and children affected by asphyxiating gases. Several deaths have already occurred and there is a certain emotion in native circles in this regard.*”²¹⁰ One cannot entirely avoid the impression that this article comes across as somewhat laconic in comparison to *Le Matin*’s usually strongly opinionated reporting on chemical weapons. Given that France had entered the conflict on the Spanish side in 1924, *Le Matin* was perhaps changing its tone to avoid fanning the flames even further in French-Morocco as well as in France itself. According to the *Berliner Tageblatt*, certain far right political groups had openly argued for the use of war gases by the French colonial army, accusing Prime Minister, Paul Painlevé, of being a “*repulsive, bloodhungry cretin*” [“*abscheulicher, blutgieriger Kretin*”] for unnecessarily putting French soldiers at risk by refusing to use a superior weapons technology.²¹¹ On the one hand, Painlevé’s public refusal showed that the prohibition on chemical weapons was working. Indeed, having publicly approved the Geneva Protocol, the *Berliner Tageblatt* pointed out that France would have been seen as exceptionally hypocritical if chemical weapons had been used against the insurgents. As historian Olivier Lion points out, however, behind closed doors France’s rejection of chemical weapons was less certain.²¹² Colonial administrator of the French Protectorate in Morocco, Hubert Lyautey, insisted that the French government provide the necessary armaments to the colonial army, including projectiles filled with asphyxiating gases. Although Painlevé initially refused the demand, he eventually caved in, informing Lyautey on May 20th, 1925 that shipments with airplanes, explosives and asphyxiating gases would be sent to the Protectorate, but should not be used without explicit authorisation of the French government. Nevertheless, Lion points out that these shipments were never sent out in the end, for reasons that are not entirely clear. Her only suggests that the French government must have thought it impossible to normalise relationships between French and Moroccans ever again, had chemical weapons been used against the insurgents. It should also be noted that Germany was not entirely blameless in the conflict either as it

²¹⁰ “*Au Maroc espagnole.*” *Le Matin*. Translated from French: “*Les indigènes suivent avec attention ce spectacle des terrasses de leurs maisons. Ce qui est grave, c’est l’arrivée à l’hôpital français de blessés indigènes, ainsi que de femmes et d’enfants atteints par les gaz asphyxiants. Plusieurs décès ont déjà eu lieu et il existe à cet égard une certaine émotion dans les milieux indigènes.*”

²¹¹ “*Die Nationalisten für den Giftgaskrieg.*” *Berliner Tageblatt*.

²¹² Lion. “*DES ARMES MAUDITES,*” p. 498

provided the airplanes and chemical gases to the Spanish colonial army. However, it is not entirely clear whether these deliveries were condoned by or even known to the German government.

Conclusion

Chapter 3 sought to answer the question how French and German national newspapers evaluated chemical weapons during the interwar period in the context of the international community trying to reinstate a prohibition on their use.

After World War I ended, a newly formed German democracy had to negotiate peace with the Allied Powers, resulting in the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. This treaty reaffirmed the prohibition of chemical weapons for Germany in Article 171, broadening the definition of the Hague Declaration to “*asphyxiating, poisonous and other gases*” in an attempt to close the most important legal loopholes. Nevertheless, this prohibition in the Versailles Treaty did not inspire a great deal of discussion. The German government was itself much more concerned with Article 143 that made Germany solely responsible for the war, implying significant reparation payments and cessions of land. The question what Germany’s responsibility was in starting or escalating chemical warfare was never really extensively discussed in the *Berliner Tageblatt* or *Le Matin*.

The Five-Power Treaty of the Washington Naval Conference in 1921/1922 sought to extend the prohibition on chemical weapons to the major powers in the Pacific as well as on the European continent. The United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, France and Italy adopted a resolution prohibiting the use of “*asphyxiating, poisonous and other gases*”, however, the Treaty was eventually never ratified by the French government. This change of heart was reflected in *Le Matin*’s reporting on chemical weapons which was significantly different in contrast to World War I. Citing prominent French chemists, *Le Matin* suddenly did away with the notion that chemical weapons were more barbaric or uncivilised than conventional weapons, therefore seemingly abandoning the Chemical Weapons Taboo altogether.

Be that as it may, a new effort to prohibit the use of “*asphyxiating, poisonous and other gases*” arose with the Geneva Protocol. When the prohibition was adopted, however, the *Berliner Tageblatt* seemed rather sceptical about its effectiveness as the prohibition did not structurally improve the bilateral and multilateral relationships between countries.

Apart from the occasional update on the proceedings of the Geneva Conference, *Le Matin* remained uncharacteristically silent on the topic of chemical weapons. This disinterest may have been caused by the fact that France was occupied with the rebellion of Berber tribes in the Rif Region in Morocco. This conflict also saw the use of gas bombs against civilians by the Spanish army (and provided by Germany) about which *Le Matin* awkwardly avoided any moral reflection.

Conclusion of the whole thesis

This thesis set out to investigate the public representation of chemical weapons in German and French national newspapers from 1899 to 1925. Based on the concept of the so-called ‘Chemical Weapons Taboo’ by Richard Price, this study further looked at how French and German national newspapers reproduced and used the moral stigma on chemical weapons in their own articles during that time period.

Richard Price sees the origin of the taboo in the Hague Declaration in which various nations decided to ban chemical weapons pre-emptively, before anyone had ever witnessed their effects. As we have seen in Chapter 1, the Hague Conferences in general and the ban on chemical weapons in particular did not inspire moral considerations in the press as much as practical concerns.

The prohibition on chemical weapons was conceived in a time in which industrial chemistry became an increasingly visible part of modern life. On the one hand, industrial chemistry achieved a level of material abundance never before experienced in human history, on the other hand, it also became clear that it entailed some significant drawbacks. The numerous chemical factories that were established throughout Europe polluted the environment, especially threatening more traditional ways of living of the land. Furthermore, industrial chemistry played an important role in the creation of new weapons technologies. Most notably, the discovery of dynamite was seen as a symbol of chemistry’s destructive potential. In 1887, twelve years before the first Conference in The Hague, the French caricaturist, Albert Robida surmised what chemistry’s destructive potential might develop into in future wars. His oeuvre seems to be the only of its kind that imagined chemical weapons in such a concrete manner before the Great War. Although the chemical weapons in Robida’s stories were capable of destroying entire towns in the blink of an eye, his descriptions remained playful, lacking psychological depth and moral reflection.

In 1898, Tsar Nicholas II proposed a Peace Conference between the world’s nations. The arguments the Tsar brought forward in the Conference’s announcement drew not on idealist notions of abolishing all future wars, but on pragmatic considerations. European powers followed a deterrence strategy in which military armament was seen as the best guarantor for peace. In the Tsar’s view, however, this strategy had resulted in an arms race that drew resources away from general economic development, in fact making a future

conflict more likely than not. Both, the French and the German press, were rather sceptical about the Tsar's intentions. They accused the Tsar of moral hypocrisy for proposing a Peace Conference, while being the leader of a highly autocratic regime. Instead the newspapers suggested that the Peace Conference was a Trojan horse that hid the Tsar's colonial ambitions behind the higher ideal of peace. In this sense, persuading other European nations of disarmament could give the Russian Empire an advantage concerning the colonial expansion into Asia. *Le Matin* even suspected a conspiracy behind the Conference that was supposed to make France more vulnerable to attacks with the intention of eventually wiping it from the map. Only when the Conference was more concretely planned out, did the French and German press warm to the idea, however, emphasising the need to prioritise national interests over international ideals.

When the Conference started, the idea of quantitative disarmament died a quick death. What remained were discussions on which types of weapons should be banned. Richard Price points out that the discussions between the delegates of the Conference on qualitative disarmament were guided by three general criteria. 1. The level of control over the weapon; 2. The usefulness of the weapon; 3. The weapon's potential to create unnecessary suffering. Chemical weapons came up as a topic of discussion after Russian delegate Captain Scheine proposed a ban on all projectiles that could diffuse asphyxiating or deleterious gases. It is not clear for which specific reasons Scheine suggested the topic. The other delegates insisted that the proposition be specified to include only those projectiles which had the sole object of diffusing asphyxiating or deleterious gases as otherwise the prohibition would technically encompass conventional explosives as well. While most participants agreed to this prohibition, the United States objected, asserting that chemical gases could turn out to be a more humane form of warfare. Given that the United Kingdom only wanted to agree in case of universal assent, they also disengaged the prohibition. While reporting on the adoption of the prohibition on chemical weapons, the French and German newspapers did not have an opinion on it, nor reflected on its moral implications. Even the rejection of the United States and United Kingdom did not garner much interest, apart from the remark that the prohibition would become less effective as both countries covered so much territory in the world. The overall lack of moral judgement is perhaps not that surprising, given that chemical weapons remained an abstract concept until World War I.

As we have seen in Chapter 2 of this thesis, the prohibition on chemical weapons and the taboo it entailed started playing a much more prominent role during the Great War. The way

in which the French and German press discussed various uses of chemical gases in their articles was highly situational and changed over time. After the belligerent armies were locked in a stalemate at the Western front, depleting large amounts of resources without making any progress, the German OHL decided to look into chemical warfare in the hopes of breaching the trenches and extorting a decisive battle. The first large scale attack with chemical gases was launched on April 22nd, 1915 in which 700 tons of chlorine gas created a four kilometre wide gap in the Allied Powers' front. This was a significant result that the German army – itself surprised by the success of the new weapon – failed to take advantage of. Although a clear infraction on the Hague Declaration, the French press did not immediately react with outrage to this first attack. Instead the first articles speculated how the Germans had executed the attack or tried to relativise the new weapons technology, asserting that war gases were less effective than conventional weapons. In addition, it was stated that the Germans had already done so many morally abhorrent things that the war had reached the height of dreadfulness long before the gas attack.

In a matter of weeks the tone of the French press changed from relativisation to outrage. The articles condemned war gases as particularly barbaric and featured horrid descriptions of Allied soldiers dying a slow and painful death through these gases. In contrast to the United Kingdom, the French government decided to leave the counter measures to the military which promptly launched its own chemical weapons programme without inciting any debate in the press. A number of articles in *Le Matin* even expressed a sense of satisfaction at the progress French chemists were apparently making in creating chemical weapons to use against German soldiers. A transcribed speech by the French War minister, Albert Thomas, further stated that mere retaliation was not sufficient, but that the Allied Powers had to compete with the German chemical industry for initiative and invention. This explicit intention to introduce new – and perhaps even deadlier – chemical agents on the battlefield shows that France had abandoned any moral concerns in wielding chemical weapons itself. It is important to note that articles justifying retaliation in kind in the French press also often included derisive comments on the German people in a broader sense. The accusations were not limited to the German army or military leadership, but every aspect of German culture and society had suddenly become suspect, including the working class or pacifist and socialist movements before the war. Perhaps such an attempt at othering is easily overlooked in the flood of war propaganda, however, it also presented a common feature of articles reporting on the use of asphyxiating gases in non-military situations during and after the war.

The German newspapers maintained the position that the Allied Powers had used war gases first. Indeed the French army had experimented with hand grenades containing so called '*engins suffocants*' as soon as 1914. Although these hand grenades were by far less lethal in comparison to the chlorine attack of April 1915, the German press called their use into question, insisting that the hand grenades presented a breach of the Hague Declaration and justified Germany's retaliation in kind. Given the absence of moral evaluations about the French use of gas in the German press in 1914 or early 1915, it seems likely that the reference to gas grenades was used post-hoc to create a narrative that would allow Germany to keep face in front of neutral countries. Similarly, the German press also justified the sinking of the Lusitania, an Atlantic cruiser which carried hundreds of civilians, by alleging that it had transported contraband war materials, including precursor chemicals for war gases.

These justifications in the French and German press show that there was a need to give reasons for the use of chemical weapons, implying that a moral stigma actually existed and had to be overcome by creating a narrative around specific uses of war gases. In French national newspapers, the justification of chemical retaliation did not merely entail reference to the Hague Declaration, but also encompassed the othering and barbarisation of German culture and society as a whole. In the German press, the use of chemical weapons by the German army was justified in a less emotionally charged manner. There seemed to have been a need to point out, however, that the Allied Powers had no moral high ground and that their outrage was hypocritical. Furthermore, in the discussions around the sinking of the Lusitania, the German press seemed to have actively used the moral stigma on chemical weapons to its own advantage. The fact that more than one thousand civilians had died when the cruiser was torpedoed by the German navy created international outrage against Germany that was addressed in a press release of The Wolffsche Telegraphenbureau. It asserted that the German army had received reports on the ship carrying precursor chemicals for the production of war gases in the United Kingdom. The press release tried to argue that the mere suspicion of such chemicals being on board the ship justified the attack of the German navy even though no efforts had been undertaken to confirm these reports first.

Whereas the discussions around the use of chemical weapons was highly morally charged concerning their military use, in other cases they did not incite any debate at all. A number of newspaper articles during the Great War in the French press reported on the use of unspecified "asphyxiating gases" in police arrests. The chemicals used in these arrests were probably akin to modern tear gas, however, given that there had not yet been a legal distinction between tear gas and other chemical gases, it is remarkable that the reporting of

the French press remained rather matter-of-factly. During the Great War, there were a total of three cases in which asphyxiating gases had been used or prepared against civilians: the first was a Senegalese soldier on sick leave who had gotten lost and barricaded himself in a fort near Paris, the second was a deserter and the third a fugitive who had shot someone in a quarrel and hid in his apartment. The absence of moral reflection on the use of asphyxiating gases in these arrests displays a certain double standard in the evaluation of chemical weapons use in the French press. On the one hand, the German use of such weapons was decried as barbaric and justified equally harsh or harsher retaliation, on the other hand, not a word of indignation or hesitance slipped out of the pens of French journalists when gases were suddenly introduced into civil situations. It is not clear to what degree war-censorship prevented the articles from expressing any concerns about this issue, however, it is equally curious that the French newspapers were allowed to publish anything at all about these arrests. In a more unforgiving analysis of these events, one may come to the conclusion that the amorality of these reports show that the moral stigma on chemical weapons did not apply to certain groups. In this sense, colonial subjects, criminals and deserters would be numbered among the hated German barbarians.

In the last year of the Great War, the International Committee of the Red Cross tried to break the vicious cycle between the belligerents which consisted of developing and using ever deadlier chemicals against each other. This attempt at de-escalation turned out to be fruitless, however, as the Allied Powers expected Germany to draft a specific proposal first, putting the responsibility on the other party entirely. The German Empire completely dismissed the plea in the beginning, asserting that the Allied Powers only sought to take away an advantage from the German army. A couple of months later, did Germany reconsider the plea when the war was as good as lost but the change of heart fell on deaf ears.

In October 1918, Germany finally admitted defeat and witnessed a complete transformation of its political system in a matter of weeks that resulted in the end of the Hohenzollern monarchy and the birth of a republic. This new democracy was thrown into the deep end, having to negotiate an armistice and eventual peace treaty with the Allied Powers. The result of these negotiations was the Versailles Treaty, containing in Article 171 a newly phrased prohibition on the use, manufacture and importation of chemical weapons that was more ironclad than the formulation of the Hague Declaration. Although the Versailles Treaty was only limited to Germany, we have seen in Chapter 3 that the interwar period also featured two attempts at prohibiting the use of chemical weapons internationally. The Five-Power Treaty of the Washington Naval Conference and the Geneva Protocol restarted discussions in

the press on whether international disarmament was actually a feasible goal, eliciting pessimistic responses in both French and German newspapers. One of the most recurring arguments in this context pointed out that the use of chemical gases during the Great War had shown that international treaties could not be trusted to produce effective results.

In the case of the Versailles Treaty, neither the German, nor the French press were particularly focused on Article 171. Article 143 appeared much more relevant at the time, given that it gave Germany and its allies sole responsibility for starting the war, a notion that seemed to underlie the harsh reparation demands and punishments in the Versailles Treaty. In response, The Weimar Republic set up Investigation Committees that were supposed to find out to what degree Germany could actually be held responsible for certain war crimes. The Committee that investigated the use of chemical weapons ended up drafting a report that acquitted Germany from all responsibility, reaffirming the idea that Germany's chemical weapons programme had only been a response to the Allied Powers' use of chemical weapons. When the report was finally published in 1927, the French and German press did not comment on it any further.

Although the reporting on Article 171 of the Versailles Treaty seemed rather indifferent, this did not mean that the topic of chemical weapons was wholly off the table. During the Washington Naval Conference of 1921/1922, the United States tried to persuade France, the United Kingdom, Japan and Italy to sign a new prohibition on chemical weapons. The French press was extremely sceptical about such a ban as the Five-Power Treaty did not address the problem of Germany's vastly superior chemical industry that appeared capable of changing from the production of industrial chemicals to war chemicals in the blink of an eye. Curiously, *Le Matin* also started to put the moral stigma on chemical weapons up for debate. In an interview with the French chemist Daniel Berthelot, they suddenly gave room to the view that chemical weapons were not more barbaric than conventional explosives. This change of mind did not entail a reflection on *Le Matin*'s previous reporting on chemical weapons. On the other side of the Rhine, the Washington Naval Treaty was seen as an overall success, although it must be noted that Germany did not really have any stakes as it was not invited to attend the Conference and was already prohibited from using or manufacturing chemical weapons itself.

Although France eventually refused to ratify the Five-Power Treaty, the issue of prohibiting chemical weapons resurfaced during the Geneva Arms Traffic Conference. Initially this Conference sought to regulate the import and export of a variety of weapons, however, the only result it produced was the Geneva Protocol that prohibited the use of

chemical weapons. When the prohibition was adopted the *Berliner Tageblatt* was not very positive, suggesting that nations at war would always manage to find a reason to employ highly controversial weapons. Instead the German newspaper considered it to be far more important to tackle the problem on a more structural level by forming strong international relationships, especially between Germany and France.

The French press on the other hand did not discuss the Geneva Conference in great detail. France had other worries at the time, given that the Spanish Protectorate in Morocco was failing to suppress a rebellion among local Berber tribes which threatened to spill over to the French Protectorate. In these so called Rif Wars, the Spanish did not shy away from using chemical weapons against indigenous people, an act of war that did not elicit any moral reflection in the French press. *Le Matin* published an article reporting on the use of these gases by the Spanish, however, awkwardly avoiding to express any moral judgement. When the conflict eventually spilled over to the French protectorate in 1924, certain far-right nationalist groups demanded that the French government use chemical weapons against the rebels in order to protect the lives of French soldiers. Officially the French government refused these demands, however, the secondary literature suggests that behind closed doors Prime Minister Paul Painlevé authorised the shipments of chemical weapons to the French colonial army. Although in the end the French never used these weapons during the Rif Wars, the amorality of the reporting in the press again discloses a double standard in the evaluation of the use of chemical weapons. Similar to the police arrests during the Great War in which chemical gases were used or prepared against certain outcast groups in French society, the employment of such gases against indigenous Moroccans did not elicit any moral outrage or even reflection.

Concluding remarks

Through systematic engagement with primary sources, this thesis has shown that the reproduction and use of the Chemical Weapons Taboo in French and German national newspapers was often situational and sometimes even highly inconsistent, giving credence to Michelle Bentley's thesis that the Taboo can be easily exploited by self-interested actors.

Richard Price's impression that the Taboo remained intact even during World War I – because uses of chemical weapons had to be justified and because they were not used against civilians – must be further nuanced. It may, for example, be true that the belligerent armies of

World War I did not employ chemical weapons against civilians living close to the front, however, the complete absence of moral reflection in the French press on the use of gases during police arrests, reveals a significant double standard in the reproduction of the Taboo, even if the chemical in question were not lethal:

The fact that newspapers such as *Le Matin* or *Le Temps* did not speak out on behalf of Bambala Lambassé, Nicholas Chaumon and Edmond Heulard, gave off the impression that it was somehow more permissible to use gases against certain outcast groups in society; an omission that is actually powerfully dehumanising which is further explicated by *Le Matin*'s awkward neutrality towards the gas bombardments of Berber civilians in 1925. It would be interesting to see if— and how such double standards in the reproduction of the Chemical Weapons Taboo continued, especially with regard to enforcing colonial rule and the use of Cyclone-B during the Shoah.

Nevertheless, it must again be emphasised that this thesis only barely touched on newspapers with a different political inclination than *Le Matin* or the *Berliner Tageblatt*. It is very much possible that other newspapers more decidedly positioned themselves against chemical weapons or “asphyxiating gases”, reacting consistently to different uses in the interwar period.

Another interesting question is whether the prohibition on asphyxiating and deleterious gases during the Hague Conference of 1899 was indeed guided by “*chance occurrences and fortuitous connections*” as Richard Price asserts. The fact that chemical weapons were already quite concretely imagined before 1899 (i.e. by Albert Robida) may have actually had an influence on Captain Scheine's suggestion to prohibit asphyxiating and deleterious gases. To that end, it would be necessary to assess whether Robida, or science fiction authors like him, were widely read in Tsarist Russia and other parts of Europe.

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Appendices

Table A: raw data for Figure 3, frequency of use of ‘asphyxiating gases’ and deleterious gases in Le Matin and the Berliner Tageblatt from 1899 to 1925

	Berliner Tageblatt		Le Matin	
	Number of hits for: "stickgas*" OR "erstickend* gas*"	Number of hits for: "giftgas*" OR "giftige* gas*"	Number of hits for: "gaz asphyxiant*"	Number of hits for: "gaz déletère*"
1899	5	5	0	3
1900	0	4	4	4
1901	1	8	2	3
1902	1	5	3	3
1903	0	4	1	2
1904	0	15	0	8
1905	1	10	0	6
1906	3	12	4	12
1907	3	21	2	8
1908	1	8	0	11
1909	6	12	0	4
1910	7	16	1	7
1911	4	6	0	9
1912	5	22	0	7
1913	4	15	0	12
1914	2	17	1	3
1915	51	28	107	20
1916	14	11	79	5
1917	4	10	51	7
1918	0	13	24	1
1919	1	11	15	3
1920	1	10	8	0
1921	0	21	17	0
1922	1	23	28	3
1923	0	7	16	2
1924	0	25	15	8
1925	0	25	20	5

Document B:

**Announcement of the Hague Conference on August 24th, 1898 to private, diplomatic circle at the court in Saint Petersburg; publication in newspapers on August 29th.
French transcript/translation of Count Mouraviev's circular as published by 'L'Aurore' on August 29th.**

Le maintien de la paix générale et une réduction possible des armements excessifs qui pèsent sur toutes les nations, se présentent dans la situation actuelle du monde entier, comme l'idéal auquel devraient tendre les efforts de tous les gouvernements.

Les vues humanitaires et magnanimes de Sa Majesté l'empereur, mon auguste maître, y sont entièrement acquises, dans la conviction que ce but élevé répond aux intérêts les plus essentiels et aux vœux légitimes de toutes les puissances; le gouvernement impérial croit que le moment présent serait très favorable à la recherche, dans la voie de la discussion internationale, des moyens les plus efficaces à assurer à tous les peuples les bienfaits d'une paix réelle et durable et à mettre avant tout un terme au développement progressif des armements actuels.

Au cours des vingt dernières années, les aspirations à un apaisement général se sont particulièrement affirmées dans la conscience des nations civilisées. La conversation de la paix a été posée comme le but de la politique internationale. C'est en son nom que les grands Etats ont conclu entre eux de puissantes alliances; c'est pour mieux garantir la paix qu'ils ont développé, dans des proportions inconnues jusqu'ici, leurs forces militaires et continuent encore à les accroître sans reculer devant aucun sacrifice.

Tous ces efforts pourtant n'ont pu aboutir encore aux résultats bienfaisants de la pacification souhaitée. Les charges financières, suivant une marche ascendante, atteignent la prospérité publique dans sa source. Les forces intellectuelles et physiques des peuples, le travail et le capital, sont en majeure partie détournés de leur application naturelle et consumés improductivement. Des centaines de millions sont employés à acquérir des engins de destruction effroyables qui considérés aujourd'hui comme le dernier mot de la science, sont destinés demain à perdre toute valeur à la suite de quelque nouvelle découverte dans ce domaine. La culture nationale, le progrès économique et la production des richesses se trouvent paralysés ou faussés dans leur développement ; aussi, à mesure qu'ils s'accroissent, les armements de chaque puissance répondent-ils de moins en moins au but que les gouvernements s'étaient proposé.

Les crises économiques, dues en grande partie au régime des armement à outrance et au danger continuel qui git dans cet amoncellement du matériel de guerre, transforment la paix armée de nos jours en fardeau écrasant que les peuples ont de plus en plus de peine à porter. Il paraît évident dès lors que, si cette situation se prolongeait, elle conduirait fatalement à ce cataclysme même qu'on tient à écarter et dont les horreurs font frémir à l'avance toute pensée humaine. Mettre un terme à ces armements incessants et rechercher les moyens de prévenir des calamités qui menacent le monde entier, tel est le devoir suprême qui s'impose aujourd'hui à tous les États.

Pénétrée de ce sentiment, Sa Majesté a daigné m'ordonner de proposer à tous les gouvernements dont les représentants sont accrédités près la cour impériale la réunion d'une conférence qui aurait à s'occuper de ce grave problème.

Cette conférence serait, Dieu aidant, d'un heureux présage pour le siècle qui va s'ouvrir ; elle rassemblerait dans un puissant faisceau les efforts de tous les Etats qui cherchent sincèrement à faire triompher la grande conception de la paix universelle sur les éléments de trouble et de discorde. Elle cimenterait en même temps leurs accords par une consécration solidaire des principes d'équité et de droit sur lesquels reposent la sécurité des Etats et le bien-être des peuples.

Document C:

The Hague Declaration (IV,2) concerning Asphyxiating Gases. The Hague, 29 July 1899.

The undersigned, Plenipotentiaries of the Powers represented at the International Peace Conference at The Hague, duly authorized to that effect by their Governments, inspired by the sentiments which found expression in the Declaration of St. Petersburg of 29 November (11 December) 1868,

Declare as follows:

The Contracting Powers agree to abstain from the use of projectiles the sole object of which is the diffusion of asphyxiating or deleterious gases.

The present Declaration is only binding on the Contracting Powers in the case of a war between two or more of them.

It shall cease to be binding from the time when, in a war between the Contracting Powers, one of the belligerents shall be joined by a non-Contracting Power.

The present Declaration shall be ratified as soon as possible.

The ratifications shall be deposited at The Hague.

A 'procès-verbal' shall be drawn up on the receipt of each ratification, a copy of which, duly certified, shall be sent through the diplomatic channel to all the Contracting Powers.

The non-Signatory Powers can adhere to the present Declaration. For this purpose they must make their adhesion known to the Contracting Powers by means of a written notification addressed to the Netherlands Government, and by it communicated to all the other Contracting Powers.

In the event of one of the High Contracting Parties denouncing the present Declaration, such denunciation shall not take effect until a year after the notification made in writing to the Government of the Netherlands, and forthwith communicated by it to all the other Contracting Powers.

This denunciation shall only affect the notifying Power.

In faith of which the Plenipotentiaries have signed the present Declaration, and affixed their seals thereto.

Done at The Hague, 29 July 1899, in a single copy, which shall be kept in the archives of the Netherlands Government, and copies of which, duly certified, shall be sent by the diplomatic channel to the Contracting Powers.

Document D:

World War I: the ICRC's appeal against the use of poisonous gases

One of the most distressing characteristics of the war at present causing so much misery to the human race is the daily violation of the most solemn undertakings, of what are known as the laws of war, of the agreements made in the hope of diminishing war's cruelty. Far from alleviating the evils which war brings in its train, it may be said that scientific progress in aeronautics, ballistics and chemistry have merely aggravated the suffering and, above all, extended it to the whole population, so that war from now on will be nothing but a ruthless work of destruction.

Today we wish to raise our voices against a barbarous innovation which science is in the course of perfecting, that is, making it more murderous and more refined in its cruelty. We are speaking of asphyxiant and poisonous gases, the use of which, it seems, is growing to a scale hitherto unsuspected.

The Regulations adopted at The Hague respecting the laws and customs of war on land contain the following: " It is especially forbidden to employ poison or poisoned weapons " , and to employ arms, projectiles, or material calculated to cause unnecessary suffering " . Asphyxiant or poisonous gases are without any doubt one of the poisons forbidden under the Convention. Medical personnel who have recovered troops affected by these gases from the battlefield, not to mention the nurses who have treated them in the hospitals, are all unanimous in testifying to the terrible suffering caused by these gases, which is more harrowing to see than that resulting from the worst of wounds " .

The fact that such procedures have become common practice in war is in itself intolerable. But we insist that anyone who at tempts to render this method of combat still more cruel will carry a steadily increasing weight of responsibility for having driven warfare in a direction contrary to the humane ideas which seemed to be gaining ground, the living proof of which appeared to be the Red Cross. For this is not an act that an army can spurn as being repugnant, since its own existence is at stake. A combatant confronted by an enemy using these gases is forced, despite himself, to do the same; and, if he does not want to be in an inferior position which might be fatal to him, he will try to outdo his enemy, to concentrate all his efforts on ensuring that the poisons are ever more harmful and more widespread in their effects. Each side will compete with the other in the race to invent the deadliest and the cruellest methods.

We are now being told of new volatile poisons, which can be manufactured all the more easily in abundance since the raw material from which they are produced is readily accessible. We are shown projectiles loaded with these poisonous gases scattering death in atrocious form, not only among the combatants but also behind the lines, among the non-combatants population, over a wide area in which every living creature would be annihilated. We protest with all the strength of our being against this method of warfare, which we can only describe

as criminal. And, if, as is probable, the adversary is obliged to resort to counter-attacks or reprisals to force his enemy to relinquish this abhorrent practice, we can foresee a struggle the ferocity of which will exceed the greatest barbarity the world has known.

For this reason, we of the Red Cross, we whose flag is the emblem of that feeling of humanity which seemed of late to be emerging even in battle, call upon the Sovereigns, the Governments and the generals, first of all, and then upon the nations now ranged against one another. We appeal to this same feeling of humanity, which we do not believe is extinguished even after three years of war.

Do you wish your victory to be only the complete destruction of those fighting against you? Do you wish your triumph to turn to shame because it is no longer due to the valour and steadfast courage of your children? Do you wish to salute, on his return, not a brave man who has unhesitatingly risked his life for his country, but a man who, at no danger to himself, has succeeded in eliminating his enemies with the help of poisons, thereby inflicting abominable suffering on his victims?

We are unable to believe that decent people in every country are not repelled by this prospect, and for this reason we unhesitatingly demand a ban on this appalling method of waging war. This requires an immediate agreement which the various armies must undertake to observe faithfully. If the International Red Cross succeeds in bringing about this agreement, if it could be signed under the Red Cross flag, it would be a return to the principles which prompted the Conventions of Geneva and The Hague, and such a document, able to save thousands of lives, would do great honour not only to the armies but also to the nations which sign it.

IN THE NAME OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS:

Edouard NAVILLE, Acting President

Adolphe D'ESPINE, Vice-President

Dr. F. FERRIERE, " "

Alfred GAUTIER " "

Adolphe MOYNIER, Treasurer

Horace MICHELI

Edmond BOISSIER

Frédéric BARBEY

William E. RAPPARD

Paul DES GOUTTES, Secretary General

Ref. DP 1918-001-ENG

Document E:

Treaty of Versailles (V, 171), concerning the use of asphyxiating, poisonous or other gases,

Article 171

The use of asphyxiating, poisonous or other gases and all analogous liquids, materials or devices being prohibited, their manufacture and importation are strictly forbidden in Germany. The same applies to materials specially intended for the manufacture, storage and use of the said products or devices.

The manufacture and the importation into Germany of armoured cars, tanks and all similar constructions suitable for use in war are also prohibited.

Article 172

Within a period of three months from the coming into force of the present Treaty, the German Government will disclose to the Governments of the Principal Allied and Associated Powers the nature and mode of manufacture of all explosives, toxic substances or other like chemical" preparations used by them in the war or prepared by them for the purpose of being so used.

Document F:

The Washington Naval Conference (V), concerning the use of asphyxiating, poisonous or other gases. Washington, 6 February, 1922.

Treaty between the United States of America, the British Empire, France, Italy, and Japan, Signed at Washington, February 6, 1922

The United States of America, the British Empire, France, Italy and Japan, hereinafter referred to as the Signatory Powers, desiring to make more effective the rules adopted by civilized nations for the protection of the lives of neutrals and noncombatants at sea in time of war, and to prevent the use in war of noxious gases and chemicals, have determined to conclude a Treaty to this effect, and have appointed as their Plenipotentiaries:

[...]

Article V

The use in war of asphyxiating, poisonous or other gases, and all analogous liquids, materials or devices, having been justly condemned by the general opinion of the civilized world and a prohibition of such use having been declared in treaties to which a majority of the civilized powers are parties,

The Signatory Powers, to the end that this prohibition shall be universally accepted as a part of international law binding alike the conscience and practice of nations, declare their assent to such prohibition, agree to be bound thereby as between themselves and invite all other civilized nations to adhere thereto.

Document G:

Geneva Protocol

Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or Other Gases, and of Bacteriological Methods of Warfare. Geneva, 17 June 1925.

The undersigned Plenipotentiaries, in the name of their respective Governments:

(Here follow the names of Plenipotentiaries)

Whereas the use in war of asphyxiating, poisonous or other gases, and of all analogous liquids materials or devices, has been justly condemned by the general opinion of the civilized world; and whereas the prohibition of such use has been declared in Treaties to which the majority of Powers of the world are Parties; and to the end that this prohibition shall be universally accepted as a part of International Law, binding alike the conscience and the practice of nations;

Declare:

That the High Contracting Parties, so far as they are not already Parties to Treaties prohibiting such use, accept this prohibition, agree to extend this prohibition to the use of bacteriological methods of warfare and agree to be bound as between themselves according to the terms of this declaration.

The High Contracting Parties will exert every effort to induce other States to accede to the present Protocol. Such accession will be notified to the Government of the French Republic, and by the latter to all Signatory and Acceding Powers, and will take effect on the date of the notification by the Government of the French Republic. The present Protocol of which the French and English texts are both authentic, shall be ratified as soon as possible. It shall bear today's date.

The ratifications of the present Protocol shall be addressed to the Government of the French Republic, which will at once notify the deposit of such ratification to each of the Signatory and Acceding Powers.

The instruments of ratification and accession to the present Protocol will remain deposited in the archives of the Government of the French Republic.

The present Protocol will come into force for each Signatory Power as from the date of deposit of its ratification, and, from that moment, each Power will be bound as regards other Powers which have already deposited their ratifications.

In witness whereof the Plenipotentiaries have signed the present Protocol.

Done at Geneva in a single copy, the seventeenth day of June, One Thousand Nine Hundred and Twenty-Five.