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32. Was chemical warfare not used in World War Two for moral as opposed to prudential reasons?

Viewpoint: No, moral considerations did not play a primary role in belligerents' decisions to abstain from using chemical warfare.

The question is somewhat misleading, for chemical warfare was used in World War Two. Germany killed millions of European Jews with Zyklon B, because this lethal gas was easy to produce and it spared German men, arms, and bullets for the front. This unparalleled murder program was a form of chemical warfare, insofar as the destruction of European Jewry constituted a central war aim of the Nazi leadership: The outcome of Germany's war against Great Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union was strongly affected by Germany's labor and transportation resources, yet the German leadership did not hesitate to prejudice these resources by giving highest priority to the destruction of Europe's Jews. There were also other, far more modest instances of chemical warfare. Italy killed Ethiopians with chemical weapons in a prologue to the Second World War, and Japan used chemical weapons in its long war against the Chinese. Nonetheless, it is remarkable that Germany, Italy, and Japan, on the one hand, and Great Britain, France, the United States, and the Soviet Union, on the other hand, never used chemical warfare against each other, despite the widespread use of poison gas in the First World War. This abstinence requires explanation, for these belligerent nations possessed chemical weapons. Moreover, they did not hesitate to use other weapons of equivocal morality, as Dresden and Nagasaki remind us, not to mention countless wanton massacres of Soviet and Chinese civilians.

The German army initiated the use of chemical warfare in 1915 with chlorine. The idea was to create a gap in the western front and thereby overcome the operational stalemate of trench warfare. During the Great War, the German army did not achieve any strategic successes with its gas attacks, but it gained some local tactical victories. Soon the other belligerents also used gas against the German armies; however, chemical warfare never

decided the issue, because poison gas was difficult to deliver and both sides developed adequate defensive measures. The war remained largely one of attrition, in which the belligerent nations pitted not only their armies against each other, but also the sum of their economic, industrial, agricultural, human, cultural, and political resources. The social, economic, and political change wrought by this four-year struggle was devastating, as a series of European revolutions made all too clear. Worse, another European war was likely. Military planners in the interwar period were confronted with two possible scenarios for future war. First, they could improve weapons and tactics, in order to regain mobility and the possibility of a speedy victory, thereby heading off the specter of extreme social, economic, and political dislocation. Second, they could prepare for a war even more "total" than the First World War had been; that is, they could prepare to attack directly the civilian populations and industrial bases of their enemies on a massive scale. Chemical warfare appeared efficacious for both purposes.

The experience of poison gas in the Great War had been bad enough, however, for the great powers to agree to forsake the use of chemical (and biological) weapons in the Geneva Protocol of 1925, which France ratified in 1926, Italy and the Soviet Union in 1928, Germany in 1929, and Great Britain in 1930. (Japan did not ratify this treaty until 1970, and the United States Senate took another five years to do so.) Despite this protocol, none of its signatories trusted the others to abstain from chemical weaponry. Military discourse assumed that the enemy would use chemical weapons as a matter of course. Western military custom and law had long permitted armed forces to take measures normally considered beyond the pale, should "military necessity" call for them. Hence all the great powers continued secretly to develop chemical weapons, albeit (at least ostensibly) not for first use against each other, a restriction which did not apply outside the European periphery. British Brigadier General Charles H. Foulkes wanted to use gas in the Afghan War in 1919, but the India Office killed this proposal because of expected political fallout in India. British soldiers got their chance in the Russian civil war, where they made a few gas attacks. Far more serious were the Italians' attacks on Ethiopia's soldiers and civilians (airplanes spread mustard gas with sprayers), which led all European powers to step up their chemical weapons program. Finally, the Japanese used gas and chemical smoke sticks against the Chinese.

The Japanese, however, never used chemical weapons against the Chinese on a mass scale, and some eighty percent of what they used only caused tears or sneezing. By the end of 1941, 1,948 dead and some 26,600 wounded could be attributed to Japanese chemical weapons, as opposed to some two million Chinese casualties overall. For one thing, the Japanese appear to have lagged in their development of lethal agents, delivery systems, specialist personnel, and doctrine. More significantly, the Chinese used space to their advantage, leaving the Japanese to deal with a front some 3,000 kilometers long by 1943. Most chemical attacks had limited local significance or experimental character. With inadequate chemical stockpiles, a chemical attack on the United States' armed forces would have been foolish indeed, because the United States possessed huge quantities of chemical weapons and the ability to deliver them. The Japanese understood this threat. Franklin D. Roosevelt had deliberately warned them in 1942 not to initiate chemical attacks against the United States and not to continue the use of chemical weapons in China, lest the United States retaliate with its own chemical weapons.

The dimensions of the United States' chemical weapons program were enormous. The government spent two million dollars on chemical armaments in 1940, sixty million dollars in 1941, and a billion dollars in 1942. Personnel employed to develop these armaments increased from 2,000 to 6,000 to 20,000 people during these three years. Although this chemical weapons capacity included the production of smoke bombs and shells, the ability of the United States to deliver gas also grew enormously. The American arsenal started the war with 1,500 aerial spray tanks and ended with 113,000. Roosevelt favored such a massive buildup, in order to be prepared for a Japanese attack; however, he was against the first use of such weapons, which he considered morally reprehensible. In fact, Roosevelt's moral rejection of chemical warfare restrained not only his own senior officers, but also Winston Churchill, who seriously contemplated using gas against German soldiers and civilians. The United States was the only major belligerent power to refrain from chemical warfare for openly moral reasons. Yet this country was never threatened in the existential way that other nations were; that is, the first use of chemical weapons never seemed "necessary" to the United States for its survival. Moreover, it is fair to ask what Harry Truman might have done, had the United States not had the atomic bomb, which shortened the Pacific war dramatically. The point is this: Roosevelt used a moral argument because he could afford to, but he did not think the country could afford such a moral stance should Germany or Japan initiate a

chemical attack against its armed forces. Just how ready the United States was to fight a chemical war is demonstrated by the fact that it transported chemical weapons to the theaters of war, in case their use should become "necessary." For example, the United States sent some 100 tons of mustard gas to Bari, a port in Sicily, at the end of November 1943. (On December 2, this gas leaked because of a German air attack, and the toxic effects became deadlier still because of the total secrecy surrounding the shipment and the resultant ignorance of the real danger the sailors and townspeople faced. Over 1,000 people died.)

France and Britain also developed and produced chemical armaments on a large (albeit smaller) scale. The lightning speed of the Wehrmacht's campaign against France initially prevented the use of gas from becoming a real possibility for any of the belligerents. After Britain stood alone in western Europe, however, Churchill began pushing to use these weapons, despite an agreement with Germany not to do so and despite the objections of his advisors, who feared German retribution. Britain initially did not possess enough gas to head off an expected German invasion, a problem Churchill took seriously enough to demand weekly production reports. Even after the Battle of Britain, Churchill continued to press his military to consider options for the use of chemical warfare, especially when Germany began sending the V-1 and V-2 to London, and again when he worried about the speed of the Allies' penetration of France. As late as July 1944, he demanded proposals for how to spray gas on Germany, including German civilians. His planners also considered using anthrax. Fortunately, the war sped up, ending less than a year later.

Why did Germany's villainous leadership not initiate chemical warfare, especially when it was faced with defeat and unconditional surrender? Unknown to the Allies, Germany had developed the world's first nerve agents--Tabun, Sarin, and Somar, which were far deadlier than the Allies' phosgene and mustard gas. Hitler did not use these weapons at the beginning of the war, because he did not need to and perhaps because of an aversion to chemical weapons caused by his own experience in the trenches of World War One, when he himself had been subjected to a gas attack. In 1943, however, Hitler considered using his nerve agents. He asked the industrialist and chemical agent expert Otto Ambros about the enemy's likely chemical weapons potential. Fortunately, Ambros incorrectly assumed that the Allies also possessed a nerve gas capability, because basic knowledge about these chemicals had been developed some forty years earlier. This false information--reinforced by clear

Allied air superiority and a lack of gas masks for Germany's civilian population--led Hitler to avoid using nerve gas against the Allies.

Finally, the Soviet Union's chemical armaments program and policy deserve more attention than they have received in the historiography. This gap in our knowledge will improve now that the Soviet archives are open, but it seems safe to believe a Soviet officer, who after the war testified that Stalin had not used chemical weapons because he had feared German retribution; chemical weapons had only been intended for retaliation against German first use. In any case, the Soviet Union had hosted Germany's chemical weapons program before 1933, so Stalin had reason to be cautious. Moreover, no one would accuse this Soviet leader of having allowed moral scruples to interfere with his application of violence.

All of the great belligerent powers of the Second World War refrained from using chemical warfare against each other for prudential reasons. Only the United States used moral arguments, which it could better afford to consider, but which should not obscure its massive build-up of and readiness to use chemical weapons throughout the war. The United States' failure to ratify the Geneva Protocol until thirty years after the war reflected this "pragmatic" approach to chemical armaments.

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