

**GREAT WAR (1914 -
1918) - POISON GAS
ON THE WESTERN
FRONT**



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Description

Through an in-depth analysis of primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain how the use of poison gas on the Western Front dramatically altered the nature of fighting in the Great War, why each side decided to use gas even though it violated international treaties signed before the war and how the legacy of those Great War gas attacks continues to influence modern views of warfare.

Subjects

European History
World History
Geography

Grade Level

11-12

Duration

180 minutes (2 x 90 min)

Tour Links

- Flanders Fields Museum, Ypres (Belg)
- Ypres / Passchendaele Battlefield
- Passchendaele Museum, Ypres
- Poet's Corner, Westminster Abbey
- Imperial War Museum, London

Essential Questions

- Why was poison gas used on the Western Front during the Great War?
- Why did the belligerents decide to use poison gas in the Great War even though it was in clear violation of international treaties? Which side used it first? What types of gas were used? What impact did gas have on the war?
- Who was Wilfred Owen? What experiences did he have in the Great War? How did Owen's experiences in the Great War influence his writing? How do Owen's writings continue to influence modern views on gas warfare?

Academic Summary

Dulce Et Decorum Est

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of disappointed shells that dropped behind.
GAS! Gas! Quick, boys!-- An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And floundering like a man in fire or lime.--
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.
In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,--
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.

Poem by Wilfred Owen, 1917

Excerpts from an Account of the German Use of Gas at the Second Battle of Ypres Sir John French, Commander in Chief, British Expeditionary Force

Headquarters, June 15, 1915

I much regret that during the period under report the fighting has been characterized on the enemy's side by a cynical and barbarous disregard of the well-known usages of civilized war and a flagrant defiance of the Hague Convention.

All the scientific resources of Germany have apparently been brought into play to produce a gas of so virulent and poisonous a nature that any human being brought into contact with it is first paralyzed and then meets with a lingering and agonizing death. The enemy has invariably preceded, prepared and supported his attacks by a discharge in stupendous volume of these poisonous gas fumes whenever the wind was favourable.

Such weather conditions have only prevailed to any extent in the neighbourhood of Ypres, and there can be no doubt that the effect of these poisonous fumes materially influenced the operations in that theatre, until experience suggested effective counter-measures, which have since been so perfected as to render them innocuous.

The brainpower and thought which has evidently been at work before this unworthy method of making war reached the pitch of efficiency which has been demonstrated in its practice shows that the Germans must have harboured these designs for a long time. As a soldier I cannot help expressing the deepest regret and some surprise that an Army which hitherto has claimed to be the chief exponent of the chivalry of war should have stooped to employ such devices against brave and gallant foes.

It was at the commencement of the second battle of Ypres on the evening of April 22nd that the enemy first made use of asphyxiating gas. Following a heavy bombardment, the enemy attacked the French Division at about 5 p.m., using asphyxiating gases for the first time. Aircraft reported that at about 5 p.m. thick yellow smoke had been seen issuing from the German trenches between Langemarck and Bixchoote. The French reported that two simultaneous attacks had been made east of the Ypres-Staden Railway, in which these asphyxiating gases had been employed.

What follows almost defies description. The effect of these poisonous gases was so virulent as to render the whole of the line held by the French Division mentioned above practically incapable of any action at all. It was at first impossible for anyone to realize what had actually happened.

The smoke and fumes hid everything from sight, and hundreds of men were thrown into a comatose or dying condition, and within an hour the whole position had to be abandoned, together with about fifty guns.

From the diary of an unknown British soldier at Ypres

[I watched] figures running wildly in confusion over the fields. Greenish-gray clouds swept down upon them, turning yellow as they traveled over the country blasting everything they touched and shriveling up the vegetation. . . . Then there staggered into our midst French soldiers, blinded, coughing, chests heaving, faces an ugly purple color, lips speechless with agony, and behind them in the gas soaked trenches, we learned that they had left hundreds of dead and dying comrades.

By April 1915, the war on the Western Front had been raging for months. After sweeping through Belgium and getting within miles of Paris, the German Army had been stopped by Allied troops in the First Battle of the Marne in September 1914. Soldiers on both sides dug trenches that eventually stretched from the English Channel to the Swiss border, and the two sides settled into a stalemate. Over the next four years, the world would come to know the horrors of the back and forth of trench warfare, where men would fight over bits of earth sometimes no wider than a small field. Each side sought to get a “breakthrough” against the enemy, which would then allow its own soldiers to achieve victory. Leaders on each side, expertly schooled in the Napoleonic tactics of artillery bombardments and frontal assaults, failed to account for the deadly power of new modern weapons such as machine guns and flamethrowers. Attacks meant soldiers going “over the top” of the trenches and charging into “no-man’s land” in a desperate and doomed attempt to capture the enemy’s front trench. Few ever made it. A counter-attack would then follow over the same miserable bit of land. Artillery pieces fired their weapons of death by the thousands every day. Losses mounted. Reserves were called up. Green rookies quickly became grizzled veterans. More and more men were ground into the furnace of war. There was no breakthrough.

With its troops fighting on two fronts, the German High Command needed a solution. The numbers against Germany were staggering. France and Britain had millions of soldiers themselves, not counting the millions more they could put into the field from the British Dominion (Canada, Australia and New Zealand) and overseas colonies. Russia’s population, although spread across vast areas of the Tsar’s empire, was immense. The Central Powers, led by Germany and Austria, needed a breakthrough before they ran out of men. German commanders therefore looked for any advantages that might help the army. Turning to the scientific and chemical industries, they found one: poison gas.

Before the war, Germany had been the most industrialized nation on the continent. Since the creation of the German Empire in 1871, the Tsar’s government had encouraged industrial development. Science and engineering stood for progress and modernity. German chemical companies produced chlorine gas as an unintentional byproduct of their industrial processes. Other gasses could be produced by the industry as well. The problem was that the use of gas in warfare went against treaties signed by Germany after the Hague Convention of 1899. By early 1915, however, with no foreseeable end of the war, the German High Command decided to use poison gas against an unsuspecting enemy.

After a couple of small attacks that tested the delivery of gas on the battlefield, German commanders decided to use the weapon in large scale for the first time at Ypres in Belgium. At 5:30 pm on 22 April 1915, with a slight breeze flowing towards the enemy’s line, German soldiers opened almost 6000 gas cylinders. A greenish cloud drifted across the field. Canadian and French troops on the other side were completely unprepared for what was to come. When the deadly cloud reached their lines, they began choking and coughing as the water in their own lungs quickly turned to hydrochloric acid. Hundreds died without the German Army firing a shot. German troops, fearing their own death from the gas, failed to follow up on the attack, but the precedent was set. A new deadly weapon had been introduced.

Over the next three years, Allied and German armies used gas attacks as a matter of course in almost every battle. Over time, different types of gas were developed, including mustard gas, a particularly vile though not deadly weapon that caused terrible burns and blindness. Both sides also developed gas masks of increasing complexity, and by the end of the war gas attacks, although still feared by soldiers on both sides, proved far less deadly than in 1915. Each side would continue to search for the ever-elusive breakthrough that would never come. According to multiple sources, (but disputed nonetheless) ironically, in a British gas attack near Ypres in October 1918, Lance Corporal Adolph Hitler of the 16th Bavarian Reserve Regiment was temporarily blinded by mustard gas. The next month, facing what to many seemed like a coming annihilation, German leaders finally asked for and were given a cease-fire. When the war ended, leaders agreed never to use chemical weapons in war again. Unfortunately, the agreement wouldn’t last long.

Wilfred Owen, a British junior officer in the BEF who served two stints on the Western Front between 1916 and 1918, experienced such attacks. While in France, Owen wrote a number of poems about what he saw as the horrors of war. Unfortunately, he didn’t live to see them published. In the last week of the conflict, on 04 Nov 1918, leading his troops in a crossing of the Sambre-Oise Canal, Owen was shot and killed by German soldiers. His mother received the telegram informing her of his death on 11 Nov 1918, as bells were ringing letting the public know of the armistice on the Western Front. Owen’s poems were published after his death, and today he is regarded as the leading poet of the Great War, known best for his imagery on

the horrors of trench warfare and gas attacks.

Through an in-depth analysis of primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain how the use of poison gas on the Western Front dramatically altered the nature of fighting in the Great War, why each side decided to use gas even though it violated international treaties signed before the war and how the legacy of those Great War gas attacks continues to influence modern views of warfare.

Objectives

1. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain how the use of poison gas on the Western Front dramatically altered the nature of fighting in the Great War.
2. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain why each side decided to use gas even though its use violated international treaties signed before the war.
3. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain how the legacy of Great War gas attacks continues to influence modern views of warfare into the twenty-first century.

Procedures

I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: In war, should any available weapons not be used? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed below. (5 min)

II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Poison Gas on the Western Front of the Great War (20 min)
- Video – Dulce et Decorum Est (5 min)
- Video – Chemical Warfare in World War I (10 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the primary sources and articles on the use of poison gas on the Western Front during the Great War, taking notes as appropriate. (30 min)
- Group Activity – Discussion on the use of poison gas on the Western Front during the Great War (15 min)

III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail how the use of poison gas on the Western Front dramatically altered the nature of fighting in the Great War, why each side decided to use gas even though it violated international treaties signed before the war and how the legacy of those Great War gas attacks continues to influence modern views of warfare.

Extension

On tour: Passchendaele Memorial Museum, outside Ypres, Belgium

While on tour, students in Flanders can visit the Passchendaele Memorial Museum outside Ypres, where, for a small fee of only 3 Euros each, they can see for themselves a museum dedicated to the trenches and warfare of the area. Built over an actual British trench from the Great War, the museum is dedicated to keeping the memory of the battles in Flanders alive. Student can also tour a recently rediscovered Germany underground dressing post and barracks.

Web Links

Lesson Plan Websites

- www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/175898
Dulce et Decorum Est – from the Poetry Foundation
- www.firstworldwar.com/source/2ndypres_sirjohnfrench.htm
Sir John French on the use of Poison Gas (primary source) – from the Commander in chief of the BEF
- www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2376985/
Chemical Warfare and Medical Response During World War I (primary sources) – from the National Center for Biotechnology and the National Institutes of Health.
- www.iwm.org.uk/history/gas-warfare
Gas Warfare (primary and secondary sources) – from the Imperial War Museum
- www.westernfrontassociation.com/great-war-on-land/43-britain-allies/401-poison-gas-use.html
The Use of Poison Gas in the Great War – 22 Apr 1915 (primary sources) – from the New York Tribune
- www.iwm.org.uk/centenary
“First World War Centenary” – Imperial War Museums. Articles, primary sources, films, photographs and podcasts on the Great War – great resource for teachers and students.
- www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/
First World War Poetry Digital Archive (website) – from Oxford University. Fantastic resource for teachers and students studying the Great War. Contains links to primary and secondary sources, not only on the poetry (including Wilfred Owen’s works), but also other information on the Great War itself. The archive itself contains over 7000 items of text. Highly recommended.
- www.bbc.co.uk/learningzone/clips/gas-as-a-weapon-during-the-great-war/12739.html
Gas as a weapon during the Great War (website) – from the BBC, this site contains a 6-minute video as well.
- www.firstworldwar.com/weaponry/gas.htm
Weapons of War – Poison Gas (website) – from First World War website
- www.passchendaele.be/eng/museumEN.html
Official website of the Passchendaele memorial Museum (website)
- www.historylearningsite.co.uk/poison_gas_and_world_war_one.htm
Poison Gas and World War One (website) – from the History Learning Site (UK)
- www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/owen
“The Wilfred Owen Collection” (website) – from the First World War Poetry Digital Archive at Oxford University
- <http://allensaxiom.ednet.ns.ca/history%2011/Life%20in%20the%20Trenches%20of%20WWI%20ppt.pdf>
Life in the Trenches (PowerPoint)
- <http://www.selkirk.scotborders.sch.uk/subjects/englishweb/Dulce.ppt>
Dulce et Decorum Est -- PowerPoint from Selkirk High School (UK)
- teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=_QxtB6s-4oM
Gas Warfare in the First World War (video) – at almost 50 minutes, this BBC documentary is probably too long for most in-class showings, but it is well worth it. Highly recommended for all out of class showings as background material.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=tWtETJ0Pt4g
World War One Chemical Warfare (video) – from the History Channel, this 7-minute excerpt from the program Modern Marvels is appropriate for all classes.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=c49tRplMh-Y
“Dulce et Decorum Est” – reading of Owen’s famous poem from the BBC

Background Information

- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chemical_weapons_in_World_War_I
Chemical Weapons in World War I – Wikipedia article
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hague_Conventions_of_1899_and_1907
Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 – Wikipedia article
- www.passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/the_benelux_countries/country_profile
On the Road — Country Profile: The Benelux Countries from Passports Educational Travel

Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/austria/great-war-austrian-ultimatum-to-serbia

- Great War – Serbian Front: Austrian Ultimatum of 1914
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/england-and-the-great-war-causes-of-the-war-1914
Great War – Lights Going Out in 1914
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/england-and-the-great-war-armistice-day-1918
England and the Great War – Armistice Day 1918
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/great-war-clemenceau-views-at-versailles
Great War – France: Clemenceau's Aims at Versailles
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/great-war-battle-of-the-somme
Great War – Battle of the Somme 1916
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/battle-of-verdun-1916
Great War – Battle of Verdun
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/great-war-first-battle-of-the-marne-1914
Great War – First Battle of the Marne 1914
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/great-war-schlieffen-plan
Great War – Germany: The Schlieffen Plan
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/russia/great-war-eastern-front-treaty-of-brest-litovsk-1918
Great War – Eastern Front: Treaty of Brest-Litovsk 1918

Key Terms

- Chemical Warfare
- Chlorine gas
- Great War
- Mustard gas
- Trench Warfare
- Western Front
- Wilfred Owen

