
Reviewed by Alison McManus (Johns Hopkins University)

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Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

In a new diplomatic history of Allied World War II poison gas policy, M. Girard Dorsey observes that chemical weapons constituted both “physical” and “intangible” hazards (p. 1). An enemy arsenal of poison gas, in other words, could generate both corporeal harm and imponderable fear. The scholarly impulse to emphasize the former is a reasonable one, given the distressing physiological impacts of poisons like chlorine, sulfur mustard, and phosgene, which the combat experience of World War I and the Italo-Ethiopian War made astoundingly clear. Dorsey's monograph flips this emphasis, examining the history of chemical warfare through threats, fears, and near misses, which were powerful diplomatic forces in their own right. Her fascinating book traces the evolution of US, Canadian, and British poison gas policy from the interwar period through the end of World War II. It makes two interrelated arguments: there was “nothing inevitable” about poison gas restraint in World War II, and debates on chemical warfare complicated alliance politics, exposing minor tensions between the three anglophone Western Allies (p. 6).

By foregrounding the real threat of chemical warfare in World War II, Dorsey's monograph convincingly illuminates just how close Allied officials came to ordering poison gas attacks. Of course, as Dorsey notes, chemical weapons restraint did not extend to the Asian theater, a point to which I will return later. In Europe, belligerents seriously considered offensive gas warfare on several occasions, as demonstrated for the German context by Olaf Groehler and Rolf-Dieter Müller in the 1980s. [1] On the Allied side, the prime minister of the United Kingdom, Winston Churchill, regularly pressured his generals to attack Germany with poison gas, a point that Dorsey addresses. In addition, the US Army planned to wage chemical warfare in conjunction with its land invasion of Japan, as previously reported by John Ellis van Courtland Moon and elaborated in chapter 6 of *Holding Their Breath*. [2]
Against the backdrop of so many close calls, the problem of chemical weapons restraint has been opportune fodder for diplomatic historians and policy experts alike. Two notable works are Richard M. Price’s *The Chemical Weapons Taboo* (1997) and Jonathan B. Tucker’s *War of Nerves: Chemical Warfare from World War I to Al-Qaeda* (2006), each of which advances multicausal accounts of chemical weapons restraint in World War II. Building on their scholarship, Dorsey’s monograph highlights several moments where US, Canadian, and British officials nearly initiated poison gas attacks. These took place in 1940–41, when the British government faced a possible land invasion of the British Isles (chapter 3); in 1943–44, when Allied officials considered using chemical weapons to avenge German rocket strikes and accelerate the D-Day invasion (chapter 5); and in 1945, when the American government aimed to end the war in the Pacific as quickly as possible (chapter 6). Dorsey then evaluates how multiple factors dissuaded belligerents from ordering chemical warfare in each instance. These factors included the 1925 Geneva Protocol against gas warfare, the opinion of the international community, tactical and material limitations, and fear of enemy retaliation. The strength of these deterrents fluctuated over time and differed between belligerents. For instance, the argument of moral authority lost some of its persuasive power in Britain when a desperate UK government confronted the threat of a land invasion, while the United States and Canada remained geographically distant from centers of combat.

Throughout Dorsey’s monograph, the absence of chemical warfare is not merely a phenomenon to be explained; it is also a narrow concept worthy of careful critique. European and American belligerents did not use chemical weapons in the traditional sense, but they nevertheless devoted significant resources to gas preparedness, spent time and political clout debating poison gas policy, and regularly deployed threats of retaliation (through both public and private channels). As Dorsey succinctly argues, “In some ways, [poison gas] was used” (p. 4). This broad understanding of chemical war complements other recent scholarship on poison gas in World War II. Works such as Ulf Schmidt’s *Secret Science: A Century of Poison Warfare and Human Experiments* (2015), Susan L. Smith’s *Toxic Exposures: Mustard Gas and the Health Consequences of World War II in the United States* (2017), and Peter Thompson’s *The Gas Mask in Interwar Germany: Visions of Chemical Modernity* (2023) have powerfully shown that chemical weapons research, defense drills, and human experimentation had significant legacies, whether or not belligerents ultimately ordered poison gas attacks on European battlefields. In a similar vein, Dorsey demonstrates how the ever-present threat of chemical warfare influenced belligerents’ behavior and exposed tensions between the US, Canadian, and British governments.

One of the monograph’s greatest strengths is its inclusion of the Canadian context. With this approach, Dorsey explores the Canadian government’s efforts to balance the need for a unified gas policy against its desire for national sovereignty. These tensions predated World War II, as chapter 1 clearly demonstrates. In 1929, the Canadian Parliament debated whether to ratify the Geneva Protocol during the same year as Britain and with identical reservations (namely, that the treaty allowed for retaliatory poison gas attacks and applied only to states that had also ratified the agreement). Although the Canadian government quickly approved the protocol with these restrictions, a few members of Parliament voiced concerns about adhering too closely to the British example. For James Woodsworth and William Griesbach, the Geneva Protocol debate was an opportunity for Canada to reexamine its position vis-à-vis Britain (as well as the United States, Canada’s powerful neighbor, which did not ratify the protocol until decades after World War II). In sum, the Geneva Protocol was “a vehicle for testing where Canada’s loyalty lay” (p. 34).
The outbreak of war significantly raised the stakes of poison gas policy, prompting some belligerents to compromise their interests in favor of maintaining a common understanding with their allies. Although the British government initially took a unilateral approach to chemical weapons strategy, UK leaders recognized the need for a joint policy after the United States entered the war. The efforts to construct such a policy stretched from March 1942 into April 1944, as Dorsey recounts in chapter 4. During these debates, Canadian officials were assertive and won policy concessions, while the British government found itself on the defensive and agreed to compromises with the United States and Canada. Evidently, British influence over transnational gas policy had declined significantly since the interwar period. As a result, the combined gas policy of 1944 reconciled the interests of all three anglophone Western Allies, balancing “individual action” against “ceding sovereignty” (p. 125).

Dorsey’s monograph also raises important questions of terminology. Any scholarly work on poison gas must contend with the fuzzy boundaries around categories of chemical warfare, chemical weapons, and what it means to “use” them (p. 4). Dorsey’s concept of “use” is capacious, as is her list of chemical weapons, which includes both white phosphorus and the botulinum toxin. In contrast, her definition of “chemical warfare” is at times more circumscribed. In line with other scholars, she does not consider German chancellor Adolf Hitler’s genocidal use of Zyklon B as an instance of chemical warfare in the narrow sense, as these actions took place outside of combat zones. [4] Dorsey also draws a distinction between “centralized, consistent” chemical warfare and the attacks employed by the Imperial Japanese Army, a distinction that Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi and Ping Bu have challenged (p. 99).[5] How to interpret reports of Japan’s chemical attacks against China was a matter of significant concern for the Western Allies, who displayed a “pattern” of ignoring allegations or dismissing them as untrue (p. 178). Like modern scholars, historical actors also contended with questions of definition: What compounds were prohibited under the Geneva Protocol? What constituted “use” of a chemical weapon, and which uses could the Western Allies disregard? The answers to these questions carried significant policy implications, as Dorsey shows.

With its transnational scope, *Holding Their Breath* brings an urgent new perspective to chemical weapons in World War II. Dorsey’s study will surely be of interest to military historians, political historians, and specialists in international studies. The book offers a sobering reminder that chemical weapons restraint is fragile under the shadow of war, and it hinges on belligerents’ repeated choices to uphold restrictions. In the context of World War II, it is a remarkable coincidence that all but one of them chose restraint.

Notes


[3]. See also Donald H. Avery, *The Science of War: Canadian Scientists and Allied Military Tech-
nology during the Second World War (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998).


Alison McManus is assistant professor in the Department of History of Science and Technology at Johns Hopkins University.

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