

Through Clouded Eyes: Gas Masks and the Canadian Corps in the First World War.

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Through Clouded Eyes: Gas Masks and the Canadian Corps in the First World War

Tim Cook

Abstract

Despite causing over a million casualties, being employed in a variety of tactical roles, and acting as a psychological weapon, poison gas has largely been shunted to the periphery in the historical analysis of the First World War. The notion was that once the first chlorine attack at 2nd Ypres in April, 1915, failed to achieve a breakthrough on the Western Front, poison gas became a non-entity. This article argues that chemical warfare did not in fact disappear but continued to expand in scope and intensity through the introduction of more efficient delivery systems and deadlier gases. As a result, the need to provide protective devices stimulated the evolution of a series of gas masks. Poison gas remained, however, a disruptive and powerful psychological weapon that by 1918 plagued all soldiers on the Western Front. Using the Canadian Corps as an example, this article will examine the evolution of the gas mask and the technological

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struggle that raged on the Western Front through a material history paradigm.

Résumé

Même s'il a fait plus d'un million de victimes, rempli divers rôles tactiques et servi d'arme psychologique, le gaz toxique a été essentiellement relégué à la périphérie des analyses historiques de la Première Guerre mondiale. L'idée acceptée est qu'après l'échec de la première attaque au chlore, qui n'a pas créé de percée sur le front ouest, à la deuxième bataille d'Ypres, en avril 1915, le gaz toxique est devenu quantité négligeable. L'auteur de l'article soutient que, loin d'avoir disparu, la guerre chimique a gagné en ampleur et en intensité, grâce à la mise au point de vecteurs plus efficaces et de gaz plus meurtriers. En conséquence, la nécessité de fournir des dispositifs de protection a stimulé l'évolution d'une série de masques à gaz. Le gaz toxique est néanmoins resté l'arme psychologique puissante et perturbatrice qui rongait tous les soldats du front ouest en 1918. Prenant comme exemple le Corps canadien, l'auteur étudie l'évolution du masque à gaz et la guerre technologique qui faisait rage sur le front ouest, dans l'optique de l'histoire de la culture matérielle.

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