

History Lecture #19 Gas, Bombs, and Submarines

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Audio 1

Chemical Weapons

- The great war occurred at the intersection of the old and the new world and at a time of great technological revolutions
- Many thought certain technologies could be war winners
 - First being chemical weapons
- The use of poison gas was pioneered by German soldiers in 1915 at the battle of Ypres
- The gas has devastating effects on the body
- The gas used at Ypres was Chlorine
- When it was breathed in it formed hydrochloric acid inside the body
- The victim is unable to breathe so they suffocate
- It took a lot of gas to lethally hurt you
- So then Mustard gas was brought in
- It could exist as a liquid or a vapor
- It would cause fluid filled blisters on the body
 - Tended to be worse on areas of sweat
 - It was very painful
- Blisters would form on your eyeballs and would blind you
- If you breathe it in then blisters would form on your lungs and suffocate you
- All sides began to experiment with gas and develop gas masks
 - This creates a modernist nightmare
 - It becomes the future of the battlefield
- Gas was the solution to the problem of breaking through on the western front
- You would drench the enemy with gases and everyone would die and then you can easily win
 - Easily win a battle
- Chemical weapons created a future of warfare based on chemistry

Air Power

- This was another technological weapon
- The airplane was the first new machine of the 20th century
- Armies were very quick to adopt air power as a way to achieve results
- Airplanes were primitive to say the least
- Attempts to use airplanes on the battlefield were unsuccessful at first
 - Armies pushed engineers to make better planes
- 1914 planes become defensive observation platforms
 - Not for attacking but for spying
- This puts in evolution the airplane as a weapon
- This is the creation of strategic bombing
 - You forget the battlefield all together
 - You attack cities, destroy the enemy at home
 - You don't have to fight the enemy if you destroy their home they collapse
- ★ • The Germans were the first to embrace this idea
- ★ • They use zeppelins not airplanes however
 - Becomes a butt of humour
 - But that quickly changed as people realized the danger it posed
- In 1917 zeppelins were pulled out in favour of airplanes
- There became a public demand of retaliation
 - If Germans are going to bomb us (British) were going to bomb them
- Forget about the battlefield - attack enemy civilians
 - Where is the morality?

Unrestricted Submarine Warfare

- This was another weapon that had war winning capability
- It wasn't as new as gas or the airplane
- It wasn't something to be feared at the beginning of the war
- People were still talking about big ships not submarines
- Submarines were really heavy and slow and only had 4 torpedoes
- They were very vulnerable to attack

- But in 1914 Germans attacked and were able to sink British cruisers
 - Maybe the submarine could have an impact on the war
- May 1915 the Germans declared unrestricted submarine warfare
 - Any ship that wasn't German they would sink in the warzone
 - One of the most famous ships that were sunk was the Lusitania (American ship)
- This was shocking as a small metal tube could sink such a strong and mighty ship
- Germans pledged not to attack passenger ships in the future and they would provide ships a warning so cargo would sink but the people wouldn't die
 - This was to reassure people around the world that this was strictly military
- Military vessels described as cargo ships were created
 - Eventually this makes Germans go back to unrestricted submarine warfare
- These all new better submarines take a new toll on British shipping
 - Nearly 25% of all British ships leaving the isles were sunk
 - Negative effect on British trade, they were a country that relied on trade from their allies and colonies
- Submarine warfare becomes an emotional subject
 - Very much like airstrike warfare
 - Both attack innocent civilians

Problems

- Gas was a problem as it creates chaos on the battlefield
- Once people develop masks it becomes an inconvenience
- People eventually didn't become terrified by gas
 - They knew gas didn't actually kill that many people
 - 6000 died from gas compared to the larger scheme
- It wasn't completely useless it can be used in a convenient sense
 - It reduced the effectiveness of the enemy by forcing them to be wearing their mask all the time
- Gas doesn't change the battlefield just gives generals different weapons for fighting
- Zeppelin and airplane bombings weren't completely effective either
 - There was no aim, no way to target
 - Drop a bomb and hope for the best
- Airplanes were mostly for just observation
 - Allows to see the battlefield from above and see what's happening so one can command their soldiers effectively
- Airplanes allow generals to fight the war more efficiently
- Submarines were looked to win the war
 - British convoy system made submarines easy to defend against making them a minor threat
- A blockade enforced by surface vessels were helpful in this
- One of the ways Germany was defeated was starvation because of the blockade

Tanks

- This is a subject that is used to discredit generals
- Haigs rejected tanks because they replaced horse
- But tanks gave decisive results in a short period of time , few people needed to die and were mostly cheaper
- They were enormous
- They were very difficult to steer
- Moves at 3.7 miles an hour
- Carries a crew of 8
 - Very unpleasant
 - Fumes, tiny, hot
- Communication was impossible
 - Shook radios to pieces
- The problem with the tank is that it wasn't developed enough for it to be useful
 - It couldn't have won the war
- The tank doesn't become effective as a weapon until 20 years later

Themes

- Modernity (technology)
- Old vs. New
- Innovation (airplanes, gas, gas masks, zeppelins, strategic bombings)
- Humanity vs. Inhumanity
- Civilians

- The best technology in the World war wasn't the new technology but was the innovation of older technologies
 - Machines tanks increased the normal energy of guns
 - Trucks that provided technological advantage as it allowed anything and everything to be moved and this was better than the tank
 - Despite the modern technologies the first world war came down to the old fashioned way of doing things
 - Soldiers still have to do the work
 - These new technologies play important roles but at the end of the day the war had to be won by soldiers in action