

- **Where:** Ypres, Belgium;
- **When:** July 1917;
- **What:** CBRN Agent Released: Chemical;
- **Who:** Actor(s) involved: German Army
- **Why:** CBRN Event: Intentional



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# THE USE OF MUSTARD GAS IN WW1

**Keywords:** chemical agent – WWI – indiscriminate use

## *The facts*

The first large scale use of mustard gas as a chemical weapon dates back to WWI during the Battle of Ypres in July 1917, when the German Army released it against British, Canadian and French soldiers.

It was also called *Yellow Cross*, as the Germans marked their shells with the yellow color to indicate mustard gas. Mustard gas was not an effective killing agent, but it was an incapacitating agent used to demoralize, injure, disable the enemy. It was also used to pollute the battlefield: once in the soil, mustard gas remained active for several days, weeks or even months, depending on the weather conditions. Mustard agent has also been dispersed in such munitions as aerial bombs, land mines, mortar rounds, artillery shells and rockets.

The early countermeasures against mustard agent were relatively ineffective, since a soldier wearing a gas mask was not protected against absorbing it through his skin and being blistered. A common countermeasure was using a urine-soaked mast or facecloth to prevent or reduce injuries.

## *Legal response*

The use of poison gas violated the 1899 Hague Declaration Concerning Asphyxiating Gases and the 1907 Hague convention on Land Warfare, which prohibited the use of “*poison or poisoned weapons*” in warfare. A new norm in international law and a landmark in international humanitarian law was established by the Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use in War of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or Other Gases, and of Bacteriological Methods of Warfare, signed in Geneva on June 17, 1925, also known as the Geneva Protocol, which prohibited the use of poisonous gases and bacteriological weapons. The international community reinforced the ban with further legal tools, such as the Biological Weapons Convention or the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC), which prohibited the development, production, stockpiling, acquisition, retention and transfer of such weapons and required their destruction, and the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), extending the prohibition on use in the 1925 Protocol to the development, production, stockpiling, retention and transfer of chemical weapons, including their delivery systems.

## IN PILLS

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### **Related legal tools:**

- [Geneva Protocol 1925](#)
- [Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention \(BTWC\)](#)
- [Chemical Weapons Convention \(CWC\)](#)

### **Further readings:**

- Chemical Weapons – UNODA  
<https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/chemical/>
- Chemical and Biological Weapons – ICRC  
[Chemical and biological weapons | International Committee of the Red Cross \(icrc.org\)](#)
- [The ICRC in WWI: Efforts to ban chemical warfare | International Committee of the Red Cross](#)

### **Witness Reports:**

- Brittain Vera (1933). *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1914-1918*. New York: The Macmillan Company.

### About this publication

This memo is the outcome of research carried out in the scope of the project CBRN-ITALY on International legal obligations related to Prevention, Preparedness, Response and Recovery from CBRN events and status of their implementation in Italy.

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The project aims at developing a common understanding of CBRN events and of actors involved (stage 1), at mapping obligations stemming from the wide range of applicable norms of International Law and European Union Law (stage 2), at exploring the implementation of applicable international obligations in Italy (stage 3) and at providing recommendations to address the gaps in the International, European and Italian legal and policy frameworks in all phases of the CBRN emergency management cycle (stage 4). The research activities are thus structured around four stages: 1. Definitions, 2. Mapping International and Regional Obligations, 3. Assessing the situation in Italy, 4. Providing recommendations.

For further information on the PRIN Project CBRN-ITALY, please visit:

<http://www.cbrn-italy.it/en>

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