

Despite claims, U.K. did not gas Iraqis in the 1920s, scholar says

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(PhysOrg.com) -- It has passed as fact among historians, journalists and politicians, and has been recounted everywhere from tourist guidebooks to the floor of the U.S. Congress: British forces used chemical weapons on Iraqis just after World War I.

But that claim has never been fully squared with the historical record, says R. M. Douglas, a historian at Colgate University. According to Douglas's research, forthcoming in the December issue of *The Journal of Modern [History](#)*, no such incident ever occurred.

Allegations of chemical bombings by the British erupted into the public sphere during the run up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Iraq's history of chemical weapons did not start with Saddam Hussein's gas attack on the Kurds, scholars and critics asserted. It was Great Britain when it controlled the region under League of Nations mandate in the 1920s that first used chemical weapons in the region to quell Arab uprisings. Many scholars went so far as to root Arab distrust of the West in Britain's brutal chemical attacks.

Douglas, however, finds that these claims—oft repeated in books, newspapers and political speeches—rest on very shaky foundations.

The first blunt assertion of British chemical weapons use in Iraq comes from a 1986 essay by historian Charles Townshend. In his essay Townshend refers to a 1921 letter penned by J.A. Webster, an official at the British Air Ministry. In Townshend's description, Webster wrote to

the British Colonial Office, the overseer of the Mesopotamian occupation, that tear gas shells had been used against Arab rebels with “excellent moral effect.”

Douglas’s research, however, reveals that Webster was wrong. The army had asked permission to use gas shells, but had not yet employed them in the field. And contrary to Townshend’s description of the letter, Webster’s much-quoted reference to an “excellent moral effect” represented “the Air Ministry’s estimation of what gas bombs dropped from aircraft, if used, could be expected to achieve, rather than what gas shells had already achieved,” Douglas writes.

In fact, shortly after receiving Webster’s letter, the Colonial Office sought clarification of the bombing claim from Army General Headquarters in Baghdad. General Headquarters reported, contrary to Webster, that “gas shells have not been used hitherto against [Iraqi] tribesmen either by aeroplanes or by artillery.”

Despite the evidence Webster’s letter was wrong, it still became the basis for claims of British chemical use. From there the story mutated and spread.

“In some versions, the Royal Air Force is alleged to have dropped gas bombs from aeroplanes against rebellious Iraqis, in the course of what was euphemistically known as ‘air policing,’” Dr. Douglas writes. “In others, the British Army is held to be the responsible party, employing gas-filled artillery shells.”

Though the specifics differed, each allegation treated the incident as a matter of unassailable fact. Douglas’s research suggests it is anything but.

THE WILL, BUT NOT THE WAY

Perhaps lending a measure of credence to allegations of British chemical use in Iraq is the fact that there were high-profile British ministers who very much wanted to use them.

But wanting to use them does not mean they did.

“[T]here had been two brief periods in 1920-21 during which the use of tear gas in the course of military operations had been the stated policy of the British Government,” Douglas writes. “In both cases practical difficulties rather than moral qualms ... prevented their use.”

Before 1920, the British War Cabinet had expressly denied requests by field commanders to use tear gas in occupied Mesopotamia. That changed in June 1920, when an organized Arab rebellion erupted. Winston Churchill, then War Secretary and a vocal advocate of nonlethal gas use, gave commanders in the field permission to use “existing stocks” of tear gas artillery shells.

But at that time, there were no existing stocks of such weapons in Mesopotamia. The nearest supply was in Egypt and needed to be transported to the region. By the time they arrived, the rebellion was over and the shells went unused.

Anticipating renewed hostilities, a Royal Air Force commander sought permission in 1922 to convert the unused artillery shells into bombs that could be dropped from aircraft. Churchill signed off on the request, but was forced to rescind his permission just days later when the Washington Disarmament Conference passed a resolution banning the use of tear gas. The shells, again, went unused.

There is little doubt had the timing of these events been slightly different—had the 1920 rebellion lasted longer or if there had been time to convert the shells to aerial bombs—that British forces would have

used their chemical ordnance. And that, says Douglas, may have vastly changed the course of history. Churchill had given authorization to use chemical agents without consulting his colleagues in the Cabinet, most of whom would have vigorously objected. Moreover, public sentiment against using chemical agents remained strong in the wake of German mustard gas use in World War I.

“[A]ny actual employment of these weapons would have triggered a public and political storm that might well have brought an abrupt end to Winston Churchill’s career,” Douglas writes.

Despite faulty evidence, claims of British chemical attacks on Iraqis became a popular anti-war rallying cry 80 years after the alleged incidents took place. War critics often drew parallels between Britain’s alleged gas attacks and Saddam Hussein’s gassing of Kurdish separatists in 1988.

“The symmetrical appeal of history faithfully repeating itself no doubt accounts for much of the public and scholarly credence accorded to claims that the British used chemical weapons in mandatory Iraq, their inconsistency and implausibility notwithstanding,” Douglas writes.

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