

BOOK REVIEW

Peter Thompson, *The Gas Mask in Interwar Germany*

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Pp. 320. ISBN 978-1-109-31486-2. \$130.00 (hardback).

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Peter Thompson's *The Gas Mask in Interwar Germany* approaches the multilayered social, economic and cultural implications of contemporary reflections on industrial warfare using the example of gas as a weapon. He touches on a wide variety of topics in this context, so that his work is reminiscent of John Law's concept of 'fractional coherence'.

The central group of actors consists of technicians and scientists who acquired the status of specialists during the First World War. Thompson describes their influence on public discourse, especially during the Weimar Republic and National Socialism, without losing sight of the intentionality of this group's actions. The guiding thesis is that, against the background of the experience of gas as a weapon during the war, a specific expert culture emerged. These 'gas specialists' are said to have had a formative influence on the contemporary national perception of science and technology as potential threats. Although its significance for the course of the war was relatively minor, the topic of 'gas' was of great importance due to its dominance within the discourse and should be understood as one aspect of the contemporary reflections, worries and hopes in connection with progress.

What all the gas specialists had in common was that they were able to maintain the expert status they had acquired during the war in the years that followed, despite their different social reference systems. The influence of this group, in turn, significantly shaped the idea in Germany that the threat of poison gas in future wars could be countered through the utilization of science and technology. In this context, a disciplined, well-equipped and prepared population was considered essential to avoid being caught defenceless against the threat posed to urban areas by the combination of planes and poison gas bombs.

This concept was outlined in the course of the development of the contemporary German theory of total warfare: the civilian population could no longer be distinguished from combatants and therefore it was the task of the state to make suitable provisions for the event of war or disaster. These ideas fitted seamlessly into older, right-wing conservative ideals regarding the nation as a meaningful entity above the individual – an ideology of self-sacrifice that was also central to the National Socialist world view. A comparison with France and England, which Thompson only touches on, can show that this development was specific to Germany. This is demonstrated by the fact that plans to evacuate urban agglomerations did not play a role in Germany.

For Thompson's research approach, the actual use of the gas mask is of secondary importance; he rather asks how it was charged with sociocultural meaning. The gas mask serves as his leitmotif, but the author does not fail to take into account the

shortcomings of this technical artefact. Based on the efforts to supply as many people as possible with gas masks in England, France and Germany in the late 1930s, for example, he is able to show that the gas mask was even elevated to the status of a fetish, in which the promise of individual safety was inscribed, and at the same time it became a symbol of state welfare. In the case of the German Reich, this welfare only extended to those citizens who conformed to the National Socialists' construct of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. In a subsequent chapter on the use of Zyklon B in the gas chambers of the concentration camps, Thompson also considers this aspect. He places particular emphasis on the fact that it is not possible to draw a direct connection between the military use of poison gas and its use in the Holocaust. Rather, he tries to show 'rhetorical and conceptual threads that developed across the interwar technological proposals of the gas specialists, the rhetorical racism of Nazi geopolitics, and the attempted chemical genocide in the gas chambers of the Holocaust' (p. 13).

The book is an accessible introduction to the topic and consists of individual thematic chapters – such as the self-perception and external perception of soldiers wearing gas masks (pp. 85 ff.) or the portrayal of the gas war in the literature of the 1920s (pp. 201 ff.), to name just two. These individual sub-chapters are rigorous in themselves and can also be used as text fragments in teaching.

Given the subject matter, it is not surprising that the text is largely based on secondary literature. The gas experts at the focus of the study are primarily examined using a discourse analysis approach. In other words, the historical actors are made tangible through their written statements. In a few cases, there are also biographical excursions. In this context, the life of Fritz Haber plays a particularly important role – although the exposition is largely based on older secondary literature, a circumstance that can probably be explained by the state of the sources.

The book is characterized above all by a very detailed contextualization with a clear focus on developments in the German Reich. The advantage of this is that it provides a generally understandable approach to the complex topic, but on the other hand it means that the systematic analysis of the 'gas specialists' at the centre of the study takes up relatively little space.