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“Gas, Gas, Gaas!” The Poison Gas War in the Literature and Visual Arts of Interwar Europe

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Abstract The gas attacks during the First World War stood for a new kind of warfare and shaped the soldiers’ experience of living through an apocalypse never before imagined. This article examines the literary and artistic topics and forms used to express this ordeal by German, British and French writers, poets and painters, the majority of whom had fought in the war. There are striking similarities in their representation of the gas war: the impersonality of this enemy, the feeling of helplessness in gas attacks, the shock of seeing one’s comrades “guttering, choking, drowning” and not least the exposure to an infernal landscape. Nearly all of the authors and painters condemned the waste and pointlessness of the ongoing or past war, but their vision of the future often differed according to their national background. The second part of this article addresses the public battle over the interpretation and collective remembrance in the war’s aftermath. Particularly at the end of the 1920s, a wave of publications mainly in England and Germany displayed a renewed public interest in the preceding war. The written recollections and paintings of the gas warfare played a significant role here.

In his 1929 war novel *Death of a Hero*, the English writer Richard Aldington depicts at one point how his protagonist—a soldier stationed on the Western Front but a modern painter in civilian life—attempts in vain to sketch a military engagement he once experienced, a combat operation that included heavy artillery shelling, a long-lasting barrage of gunfire, and a gas grenade attack. Although he sees “the ruined village” and “the broken desecrated ground” in front of him and hears “the ‘claaang’ of the heavies dropping reverberantly into M—,” “his hand and brain” fail him (Aldington 2013, 315–316). He destroys both of his pre-war drawings, along with an old self-portrait. Aldington describes here one of the answers to the problem that was inevitably posed for the European avant-garde artists immediately after the outbreak of the war. In 1914 many of them had volunteered enthusiastically to go to war, a war from which they hoped to

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experience a purification and also a destruction of societies they regarded as outdated, decrepit, and suffocating, and from which they expected the birth of a “New World of Art” and, even more, of a “New Age.” Soon after the turn of the century, the avant-gardists had already commenced with their artistic “fragmentation of reality” (in the words of Gottfried Benn) and were creating a new kind of art both in form and content. But how should the unprecedented and initially incomprehensible experiences in the industrialized war of materials be dealt with and expressed artistically: the mass killings and mass deaths, the new demands imposed on perception and behavior induced by the long-range artillery rounds, machine gun deployments, and drumfire, by gas, grenades, aerial bombs, and the first tank attacks? (For a survey, see Jürgens-Kirchhoff (1993), Cork (1994), Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland in Bonn (2013).)

Part I

As early as September 1914, the war volunteer Franz Marc wrote with a sense of amazement:

> It is incredible that there were times in which one represented war by painting campfires, burning villages, falling horses or riders on patrol and the like. This idea strikes me as downright comical, even if I think about Delacroix […], we must do this completely differently, completely differently! (Marc 1989, 102–103)

The French writer Léon Bloy also asked himself, after visiting an exhibition of war paintings, how one could express the reality of this war “without making oneself ridiculous and without becoming a liar” (Robichon 1994, 296). A clear answer was provided in 1917 by the art historian Richard Hamann. Modern battle, Hamann wrote, had become impossible to portray. A representational portrait of a large battlefield would be unable to depict human beings at all. It could only display a vast field, ruins, vapors, clouds, and sky. Above all—according to Hamann —“the mass, the quantum of suffering that such a war has brought on the world cannot even be intimated by condensing it onto the narrow space of a picture” (in Jürgens-Kirchhoff 1993, 18).

But this was precisely what visual artists from a number of countries, almost without exception combatants and veterans, were attempting as they created important works—works they were already making during the war as well as in the 1920s and 1930s. These paintings are important or relevant because they had a major impact on contemporaries, an impact the viewer of today still senses. They often facilitate a deeper insight into the World War beyond factual knowledge. Therefore this group of sources is of particular relevance for my inquiry, namely the paintings of visual artists who dealt with the war in a critical way. Their reception by contemporaries shows that these works expressed dimensions and interpretations of the war that reverberated in postwar societies and have also found their way into our contemporary cultural memory. Pictures that were apologetic about the war are not examined here. This is due to the thematic aspect that is the focus of attention

here. As a pictorial subject, the gas war does not lend itself—saying this is almost a banal statement—to affirming war, and it is poorly suited as a motif for trivializing war, though in anti-German war cartoons after 1915 it certainly lent itself to an “irrefutable illustration of ‘Hun’ barbarity”[1]

Anyone examining the immense inventory of pictures from the First World War will notice that the European avant-garde artists, as well as the painters of other art movements critical of academicism, did not make the gas war one of their favored subjects. The “lack of pictorialness” in modern war lamented by contemporaries,[2] especially because the individual soldier’s achievement had become invisible—for which the London *Times* found the apposite phrase “the butchery of the unknown by the unseen”[3]—became particularly apparent in depictions of the gas war. What might initially seem to be the obvious and conventional approach—painting the ostensibly visible, that is, the emptiness of the ravaged battlefield, with swathes of gas—left the viewer in the dark, since the swathes might signify anything from poison gas to artificial fog or the smoke of artillery and grenade fire. This is obvious when looking at the two paintings by Ferdinand-Joseph Gueldry and Georges Leroux (Figs. 1 and 2).

Fig. 1 Ferdinand-Joseph Gueldry, Le ravin de la mort à Verdun, 1916

[1]This refers to the Dutch cartoonist Louis Raemekers’s work (Das 2012, 398–399).

[2]According to the sculptor Erich Stephani, in Leonhardt (2014, 598).

[3]*The Times*, November 1914, in Bogacz (1986, 661).

Fig. 2 Georges Leroux, L'enfer, 1921, Imperial War Museum London

Fig. 3 Gas attack photographed from the air, Imperial War Museum London

Leroux’s painting recalls one of the battles at Verdun in 1916 where phosgene was used for the first time. The view of the scene by these two artists here is competing with photography, the frequently used new medium that could presumably capture the moment more accurately and with a claim to “authenticity” (see Hüppauf 1992, 2004a) (Fig. 3).

Most importantly, the terror of gas attacks is rather absent in the two paintings. Yet works of art were created in which painters took up the challenge that a British art critic had posed to them, namely “to recover the ‘truth’ of modern war” (Bennett). Since this “truth” was hidden behind the visible reality, it seems logical that elements of cubism and futurism (rather than the more naturalistic conventions of pre-war painting) dominate the two works of art by Otto Dix and Robert Williams introduced below (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4 Otto Dix, Lichtsignale, 1917

In 1917 the war volunteer and machine-gunner Otto Dix painted a gouache entitled *Lichtsignale* (“Light Signals”), (Fig. 4). Green, red, and white flares warned of gas attacks, acting as a kind of “Gas S.O.S” (Spear and Summersgill 1991, 310). They signaled the beginning of the terror whose end Dix had painted here. In the literature written by war veterans, too, flares are a constantly repeated theme. Thus, Edlef Koeppen writes in his novel *Heeresbericht* (“Army Communiqué”) from 1930:

> ‘Lieutenant, Sir!’ He cannot say more than that. Red flares dance in front before his eyes. The green against the morning sky can only be seen dimly, which makes the red more menacing. Green-red everywhere. From Loos to the dump, like a veil, green-red is dancing, whirling. At the same time, mind-boggling gunfire. ‘Gas!’ All three of them shout this at the same time” (Koeppen 1992, 191).

The Vorticist William Roberts, an artist from the English prewar avant-garde, served until the end of 1917 as a machine gunner before he painted “The First German Gas Attack at Ypres” in the spring of 1918 as official military artist for the Canadian War Memorials Fund (see Gough 2010, 278–290; Malvern 2004, 122–124) (Fig. 5). The picture was shown in 1919 at the London Royal Academy of Arts in the exhibit “The Nation’s War Paintings,” where it generated controversy. In a panic-like flight from the gas clouds, Franco-Algerian soldiers in blue-red

Fig. 5 William Roberts, The First German gas attack at Ypres, 1918, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

uniforms come up against a rearward position occupied by Allied Canadian troops. A chaotic tangle of suffering men, not exactly a heroic narrative for a victorious nation—the Canadians ultimately did hold their emplacement—is what Roberts had painted.

Like William Roberts, other English artists also wanted to convey the horrendous front-line experiences they had gained in a war in which technology had long since carried any kind of heroic romanticism to the point of absurdity. In the last year of the war, the painter Paul Nash wrote:

> I am no longer an artist interested and curious. I am a messenger who will bring back word from the men who are fighting to those who want the war to go on for ever. Feeble, inarticulate, will be my message, but it will have a bitter truth, and may it burn their lousy souls” (in Jürgens-Kirchhoff 1993, 382, fn 110).

How artists could express this “bitter truth” of the gas war is something the English public was able to view as early as the spring of 1918 in several nationwide exhibitions (Malvern 2004, 37–55; Hynes 1990, 198–202) (Figs. 6 and 7).

None of the relentless pictures of artists like William Rogers, Eric Kennington, Gilbert Rogers or Paul Nash became a “corner stone” in “the public’s imagination

Fig. 6 Eric Kennington, Gassed and Wounded, 1918

Fig. 7 Gilbert Rogers, Gassed: In Arduis Fidelis, 1919

in the decades after the Great War."[4] This key position in the public imagination was occupied by another work, the monumental painting "Gassed" by John Singer Sargent (Fig. 8).

The British War Memorials Committee had commissioned Sargent, a very well-known American portraitist and salon painter of the late nineteenth century, to contribute a mural for the Hall of Remembrance the Committee had been planning. Sargent visited the Western Front from July through September 1918, where he witnessed the impact of a German mustard gas attack near Arras. The huge oil painting, measuring six by three meters, was selected by the Royal Academy as the picture of the year for 1919 and was admired by Winston Churchill "for its brilliant genius and painful significance."[5] Yet there were also critical voices. After visiting the exhibition in the Royal Academy, Virginia Woolf saw Sargent's painting as testimony to the belief in soldierly suffering as something that has to be counted as the price that must be paid for the "greater good of the Empire" (Harvey 2010, 149).[6] The pathway of the apparently more lightly wounded blond men with clean head bandages walking upright —two of them still carrying a gun—to the dressing station (indicated on the far right of the picture by tent poles) is depicted as a sunlit sacrificial path.

[4]Gough (2010, 197–200), on Sargent, p. 197.

[5]*The Times*, 5 May 1919, in Harvey (2010, 148).

[6]On the shifting reception of Sargent's painting—exhibited in the Imperial War Museum—between 1920 and 1939, see also Malvern (2000).

Fig. 8 John Singer Sargent, Gassed, 1919

Five years after Sargent's picture, Otto Dix published two etchings of gas victims that are far removed from causing such an impression (Figs. 9 and 10).

Fig. 9 Otto Dix, Die Schlafenden von Fort Vaux (Gas-Tote), in: Mappe "Der Krieg," 1924

Fig. 10 Otto Dix, Gas Tote (Templeux-La-Fosse, August 1916), in: Mappe "Der Krieg," 1924

There is no need for any statement from Dix about how he wanted to show the war “without all the propaganda.”[7] The two etchings come from his 50-sheet portfolio *The War*. It was issued with an afterword by Henri Barbusse, the author of the first autobiographically inspired anti-war novel *Le Feu* in 1916. Its publication was accompanied by an exhibition tour in Germany taking place in 1924—the very year the pacifist movement had declared as the Antiwar Year (Schubert 2002, 39–46). Dix’s pictures of the First World War need to be placed in the political context of the antiwar movement that gained influence in the mid-1920s (Riesenberger 1990, 250–275; Holl 1988, 138–204). In Germany it competed with a national-conservative, militaristic camp and its interpretation of the World War as an opportunity for the rebirth of an antidemocratic nation, ready for war and structured along authoritarian lines (to summarize this political vision in very abbreviated fashion). Ten years after the World War’s end, the debate about how to interpret its meaning picked up noticeably, especially in Germany and England (Hynes 1990, 423–459; Hüppauf 2004b; Eksteins 1989, 275–299). At the center of this debate were also literary works, often with an autobiographical background, in which the authors tried to come to terms with their frontline experience during the war.

Part II

The second part of this article examines the different ways in which the gas war was recalled in the anti-war and pro-war literature, the contexts in which the gas war appeared, and which general interpretation of the war was promoted by the gas war narratives.

As in the visual artworks, suffering and death by gas constitute an important topic in the war literature. In his poem “Dulce et Decorum Est,” Wilfred Owen, the famous English war poet who died in battle shortly before the end of the war, put the agonizing physicality of death by gas into haunting words:

> Gas! GAS! Quick boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling,
> Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
> But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,
> And flound’ring like a man in fire or in lime…
> Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
> As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.
> In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
> He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.
> If in some smothering dreams you too could pace

[7]Thus Otto Dix in an interview from 1957, in Dix (2014).

> Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
>
> And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
>
> His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
>
> If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
>
> Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs, […][8]

In her moving autobiography, Mary Britnieva, who was employed as a voluntary nurse on the Eastern front, likewise describes the shock of having to stand by helplessly and watch the agony of gas poisoning:

> They lay on their backs mostly, their upturned faces terribly swollen and livid—some almost blue—choking and coughing, their bloodshot eyes protruding, unable to utter a word, yet fully conscious, only their eyes and their occasional spasmodic feeble movements proclaiming the supreme agony that they were enduring. Some were even coughing up pieces of their lungs that the cruel gas had disintegrated in their living bodies. […] The realization of our helplessness was almost unbearable; a wound can be dressed and the flow of blood from a hemorrhage can be staunched, but this fiendish weapon had got science and surgery beaten."[9]

In the last volume of his serial novel *Les Thibault*, Roger Martin du Gard, the French writer who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1937, confronts his readers with a lengthy depiction, replete with all the medical details, of how it takes months for his protagonist, a physician who himself becomes the victim of a mustard gas attack during the inspection of a hospital for gas poisoning cases, to die (Martin du Gard 1972). If Owen, Britnieva, and Martin du Gard are plainly articulating their subjective concern and compassion in the face of the gas poisoning victims, these kinds of emotions are more noticeable by their absence from other writers' accounts. In *Storm of Steel*, Ernst Jünger is rather detached as he describes the following scene:

> [I]n Monchy we saw a lot of men affected by gas, pressing their hands against their sides and groaning and retching while their eyes watered. It was a sad business, because a few of them went on to die over the next several days, in terrible agony. […] Henceforth, I resolved never to go anywhere without my gas mask. (Jünger 2004, 81; 1993, 92)

The steel-hard Stormtroop stoicism praised a bit later by him—"If a man falls, he's left to lie. No one can help. No one knows if he'll return alive" (Jünger 2004, 92; 1993, 104)—is illustrated by another author who also belonged to the camp of soldierly nationalism. Werner Beumelburg writes in his best-selling novel of 1930, *Die Gruppe Bosemüller* ("The Bosemüller Group"):

> The fire trench is crashed to a pulp. They stumble across a couple of figures who are sitting there. Why aren't they going any further? […] 'Comrade,' one of them whispers, holding fast to the lieutenant's leg. 'What's wrong? What are you doing here?' 'Gas…' In the spraying flares of a hundred flames one sees their ghostly-yellow faces, their elongated necks, their circularly lacerated eyes. They regurgitate. They gasp for breath. Somebody, out of sheer

[8]Wilfred Owen, "Dulce et Decorum Est," in Barlow (2014, 40). Owen's poem is the focus of Das (2012).

[9]Mary Britnieva, *One Woman's Story*, in Hallett (2010, 75).

> helplessness, has wrapped bundles of bandages around their throats […] 'Comrade' is whispered, as the lieutenant's leg is clutched […] He tears his leg away with force. 'Comrade…' 'Forward!' screams the lieutenant. 'Form groups of four men […,] wait over there in the fire trench in front of the Vaux-Cross […]—Move on in' (Beumelburg 1930, 271–272).[10]

In her book *Augenblicke der Gefahr: Der Krieg und die Sinne* ("Moments of Danger: The War and the Senses"), the literary scholar Julia Encke has tellingly explored the measures undertaken to armor the individual against the imperceptible gas weapon (Encke 2006, 197–218). Indeed, a recurrent topic in the war literature are the emphatic descriptions of soldiers' attempts to locate gas before, during, and after the attack by way of hearing, smell, and vision. Whistling hisses, the peculiar way that gas grenades pop up, the specific formation and color of the gas clouds, the smell of bitter almonds, sweet onions, of apples, mustard, and garlic, and in particular the way comrades are watched—are there any consequences as soon as they take off their gas masks?—are frequent themes.[11] In order to make this barely discernible danger of gas describable, a menacing bodily shape is often ascribed to the gas. In Erich-Maria Remarque's *Im Westen nichts Neues* ("All Quiet on the Western Front"), the puffs of gas become a soft jellyfish animal that lays itself down in the craters and stays there to loll (Remarque 1980, 54). As depicted by Werner Beumelburg, gas is a creature that has dead eyes and frozen hands, that longingly extends its frozen hands, is not forgetful of a single crack in the ground, trickles and flows and spreads (Beumelburg 1930, 286–287).

The anonymity of the modern battlefield becomes all-encompassing. Not only is the enemy invisible; people on the own side become indistinguishable behind the gas mask. During a gas attack, the Russian officer Fedor Stepun remembers "the terrible unrecognizability of all the people all around, the loneliness of an accursed, tragic masquerade: white rubber skulls, quadratic glass eyes, long green snouts" (Stepun 1963, 318–19) (Fig. 11). There is a similar description by Richard Aldington in his war novel *Death of a Hero*. His protagonist, Winterbourne, undergoes a gas attack's aftermath. He

> stood at the end of the trench to help out the groping, half-blinded men. As they filed by, grotesques with india-rubber faces, great, dead-looking goggles, and a long tube from their mouths to the box respirators, Winterbourne thought they looked like lost souls expiating some horrible sin in a new Inferno. (Aldington 2013, 279)

How much the experience of such an unprecedented kind of inferno was shared by combatants from all countries is also demonstrated by the following passage from *Storm of Steel* by the German writer Ernst Jünger:

> With weeping eyes, I stumbled back to the Vaux woods, plunging from one crater into the next, as I was unable to see anything through the misted visor of my gas mask. With the

[10]On Beumelburg, see also Krumeich (2011).

[11]For an example, see Dorgelès (1988, 261): "Bouffioux lay huddled in a corner and no longer even wanted to remove his gas mask; the smallest little cloud of powder pressing down on us frightened him. For a whole hour we heard him stammering: 'That smells like apples … That smells like mustard … That smells like garlic …' and each time he anxiously slipped on his pig snout. Now he was no longer even taking it off, and the way he hunkered down in his hole with his wagging head made him resemble a carnival monster."

Fig. 11 Henri de Groux, Masques à gaz, 1916

> extent and inhospitableness of its spaces, it was a night of eerie solitude. Each time I blundered into sentries or troops who had lost their way, I had the icy sensation of conversing not with people, but with demons. We were all roving around in an enormous dump somewhere off the edge of the charted world. (Jünger 2004, 114; 1993, 129) (Fig. 12)

Modern weapons technology has transformed the landscape into a gigantic scrapyard. So it is not surprising that the central figure in Edlef Koeppen's *Heeresbericht*, Lieutenant Reisinger, heads off not unwillingly, together with a noncommissioned officer, on a reconnaissance mission beyond the immediate combat zone. They marvel at the sunlit green grass, the many poppy flowers, and the young birch forest nearby. Then all of a sudden the warning cry: "The leaves aren't green, but lilac" (Koeppen 1991, 356). The woods have been gassed, and even the white stems are sprayed with a greasy lilac-red fluid. Nature itself has become a weapon. The crossing turns into a problem. "For heaven's sake, don't bump into just any tree. Don't touch any leaf. Hands in your pockets. Make yourself as tight and small as possible" (ibid., 358). It is not about to turn out well. The noncommissioned officer fails to notice—with the open field already in front of him—an overhanging birch branch, which tears off his gas mask. He dies right in front of Reisinger, who is as helpless as he is shocked. Not coincidentally, Koeppen has placed this scene almost at the end of his book. It is jointly responsible in a

Fig. 12 Otto Dix, Die Sturmtruppe geht unter Gas vor, Kriegsmappe 1924

fundamental way for Reisinger's ultimate "breaking point"—as the English war veteran Robert Graves called it in his book *Goodbye to All That* (Graves 2000, 164). Koeppen's Reisinger brings his personal war to an end and ends up in a psychiatric hospital. Aldington's hero too shares a similar experience after a day-long battle with a massive use of gas. Toward the end of the war he senses "a cut in his life and personality," and "a sense of fear he had never experienced," which allows him to continue fighting only with a huge expenditure of coercion (Aldington 2013, 293–294). Finally, he commits a hidden suicide. An open admission like that of Fedor Stepun—"but hovering over all this, the insane fear of a difficult and disgusting death (by gas)" (Stepun 1963, 319)—is seldom found in the war literature. In any event, such a confession would only be expected in the pacifist war literature, though even here the nearly ineluctable dictate that doubtless prevailed among contemporaries was bravery against the enemy under all circumstances. However, the aforementioned Robert Graves, author of the best-known 1929 English war book with its telling title, links in this memoir his condition of suffering from bad nerves with his experience of poison gas attacks on the Western Front. "Since 1916, the fear of gas obsessed me: any unusual smell, even a sudden strong scent of flowers in a garden, was enough to send me trembling" (Graves 2000, 220; see also 217–218).

The autobiographically guided front literature largely screens out what caused and who was responsible for the gas war. These questions are, however, at the center of some plays, novels, and science fiction literature that appear around the same time. These works of art focus on the war-inducing nexus linking the chemical gas-producing armaments industry, the military, and government policy to each other and contemplate different ways to break up this military-industrial complex (Fig. 13).

Fig. 13 Gerd Arntz, Fürs Vaterland, 1936

In this context, the expressionist playwright Georg Kaiser uses two of his plays that were Europe-wide hits, *Gas* and *Gas 2* from 1918 and 1920, to warn against the way technological knowledge and technological processes create rules and an order of their own (Kaiser 1978). At the end of *Gas 2*, a poison gas explosion destroys all of civilization. In 1926 Johannes R. Becher, who later becomes the first Minister of Culture in the German Democratic Republic, published his gas warfare novel *CHCl = CH)*$_3$ *As (Levisite) oder Der einzig gerechte Krieg* ("Levisite or The Only Just War"), which was immediately banned by the censor. Becher creates an apocalyptic global class war that is conducted by capitalist governments with aerial poison gas bombings against the population and workers' armies. In his novel he alludes to existing literary narratives about the recent gas war. Building scientific treatises about chemical agents and the injuries caused by poison gas into his horror story, Becher goes on to contrast this doomsday scenario with a bright Communist future that he illuminates for the reader. In one part of that future world, the proletariat, protected by the Soviet air fleet, will own and control the industries that make chemical dyes and weapons (Becher 1985).[12]

With his assumption that the war of the future would be an aerial war using gas and bacteria, in which cities would be gassed and the population thereby drawn into what is now a total war, Becher falls into line with the new horror scenario invoked by literature in the 1920s and 1930s. In France, Germany, England, Italy, and the USA, pacifist writers, but also authors from military circles and authors of science fiction in postwar Europe, conducted a *Zukunftskrieg* (future-war fiction) in which the inhabitants of Paris, London, and Berlin as well as entire tracts of land were sometimes destroyed from the air by poison gas. If these scenarios as employed by pacifist writers were meant to warn against a new war, in the hands of the military

[12]For a detailed discussion, see Berman (1985); Vollmer (2003).

authors they served to promote a new arms buildup or rearmament for each country's air force (Schütz 2005).

In the war literature of all the countries that participated in the First World War, there are hardly any differences in how the new perceptional and behavioral impositions caused by the gas war are represented. Gas warfare intensified the impression of the enemy's anonymity as well as magnifying the unrecognizability —in Stepun's words—"of all people all around" (Stepun 1963, 318). Furthermore, in many of the European literary and pictorial works on the war the destruction of nature and of the landscape by modern weapon systems is addressed and condemned. The artists are aware that this devastation had been heightened even more by the gassing of the environment, which becomes a weapon in its own right. Helplessness in the face of agonizing dying and of death by gas is also a common theme in literature and visual arts of interwar Europe, frequently coupled with horror visions of a future total gas and aerial warfare.

Yet there are differences: That soldiers often reacted to the "new Inferno" of the gas war with a mental breakdown—suffering a gas shock as a variation of shell shock—is addressed almost only by English writers, whose military career prohibited the verdict of cowardice often associated with breakdown.[13] Robert Graves and Richard Aldington, gas victims themselves, used their descriptions of psychological injuries at the end of the 1920s to affirm their overall interpretation of the war as completely meaningless. This places them in the ranks of those European writers and visual artists who had already come to the same conclusion during the war and in the 1920s like Wilfred Owen, Henri Barbusse, Roland Dorgelès, Erich Maria Remarque, Edlef Koeppen, Roger Martin du Gard, and Fedor Stepun, to mention only the authors quoted above.[14] In the German spectrum of writers, however, a completely different interpretation was propagated by the advocates of soldierly nationalism who glorified the war experience like Ernst Jünger and Werner Beumelburg. The former Stormtroop officers saw an armored and heroic "New Man" emerging from behind the gas clouds of the war. Their combat continued after 1918—this time against the Weimar Republic.

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[13]This point has been emphasized in Cook (1999, 233–238).

[14]In this context, the historian Jay Winter emphasizes a "communality of European cultural life in the aftermath of the war" (Winter 1995, 227).

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