

Which of these give a more accurate picture of soldiers' experiences



The First World War, also known as the Great War, took place between 1914 and 1918. The western front refers to the lines of trenches, when Britain was in battle against enemies. Poems were written in large quantities during this World War, mainly by military personnel but also by some non-combatants. Stories during this period were mainly memoirs or autobiographies of soldiers.

Official accounts were reports produced by the government by high ranking military officials. These were normally published in national newspapers but sometimes were also used in diaries and official war art. I would expect to find that stories are the most accurate accounts for the experiences of soldiers on the Western Front.

Poems

The first of the two poems I have chosen is, 'Dulce et Decorum Est', by Wilfred Owen.

This poem was written in 1917, by Owen which makes it a very appropriate choice as he was a soldier in World War One, who had experienced the Great War from the frontline, in which he fought with the Manchester Regiment as a second lieutenant. It describes how traumatic the attacks involving gas were, and the aftermaths which it caused. Owen witnessed many of his fellow men killed and injured due to the mass gas attacks of the German army.

The poem was first drafted by Owen in Craiglockhart, Scotland, where he was receiving therapy. He was encouraged to write poetry by his doctor. The

experiences of many soldiers were reflected by this poet, as gas attacks caused a lot of pain to all men affected, both physically and mentally. I believe that many people who read this poem, would have believed that these experiences were typical as they would definitely heard of the trauma caused by attacks with both chlorine and mustard gas during WWI.

The second poem I am going to analyse is, 'Poison', by Gilbert Frankau.

This poem was written in April 1919, and its subject, the Hungarian army making their first gas attack at Ypres, Belgium, on April 12th 1915. The poet shows a lot of passion about the subject due to his beliefs of gas being immoral. This is proved by the language used, such as 'Murdered most meanly, Poisoned!', which brings the poem to a very traumatic end and reflects the experiences in which the soldiers would have felt who were victims of the gas attacks in Ypres.

Frankau, the poet, fought in the war for Britain from its outbreak in 1914. He later progressed to become a captain. This is evidence that this source is reliable because he would have had first hand experience of war and known how it affected him and fellow soldiers. This poem is in ways, very similar to 'Dulce et Decorum Est', as the same views of the effects of gas are expressed and the poems also use similar language.

Stories

The first story of the two stories I have chosen is an extract from 'All Quiet on the Western Front', by Erich Maria Remarque.

The author was present on the Western Front which instantly suggests that the author had first hand experience of warfare and had also experienced gas attacks. In October 1917, he was transferred to the Western Front, 2nd Company, Reserves, Field Depot of the 2nd Reserves Guards Division at Hem-Lenglet. He fought for the Germans between June and July 1917.

During this period, people wrote about their experiences of war because their lives had all been involved with war. Warfare was occurring all over Europe, there was no escaping it. It was because of this, that so many people, mainly soldiers, felt the need to express their experiences of war through writing. The quantities of stories, written during the Great War, were enormous.

In this story, the experiences expressed would have been quite typical. For example, as it describes the horror in which gas caused for many soldiers and how cautious they were about it. The book was published in January 1929, in which it sold 2.5 million copies in the first eighteen months of print. I believe that stories should be used by historians, as they give first person accounts of what happened by people who were there.

My second choice is an extract from, 'Memoirs of an Infantry Officer', by Siegfried Sassoon.

The author of this book, Sassoon, assigned to the Royal Welch Fusiliers, thought in the war in which he had lost his brother. After a number of encounters with the Germans on the Western Front, the military authorities decided he was unfit to fight and was sent to Craiglockhart Hospital, where he met Wilfred Owen.

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The book, first published in 1930, gives accounts of Sassoon's life in WWI and shortly after he retired from service. Sassoon fought on the Front from spring 1916 to the summer of 1917. The above extract refers to a personal experience of War by Sassoon, makes a number of references to gas. This shows that gas was a very threatening method of causing both physical and mental distress to soldiers on the Western Front.

It also explains other trench problems such as trench-foot and trench-mouth diseases, and how it was very difficult to accommodate yourself in the trenches because of the poor design and the weather conditions. These experiences would have been extremely typical, as poor conditions were very common on the Western Front and there was great fear during the war caused by chlorine, tear and mustard gas. This extract bares many resemblances to Remarque's, 'All Quiet on the Western Front', as it mentions many of the same situations.

Official Accounts

The first official account I have chosen, is a photo of victims of tear gas in WWI.

The picture above shows the 55th (West Lancashire) Infantry Division's soldiers who were blinded by tear gas at the Battle of Estaires. This picture has been mistaken as portraying mustard gas victims but this is definitely not the case. Tear gas was used solely to paralyze soldier's sight and this lead to very low morale for soldiers who were victims, as this caused a lot of distress both physically and mentally.

The picture is very successful in showing how frail and helpless the gas left its victims and how they could easily be killed by enemies after reacting with the gas. The gas, although not damaging sight permanently, had a very fast and good success rate. This picture shows the troops holding on to each other whilst waiting for treatment. This was because the gas caused almost complete blindness for a period of time. The photographer is 2nd Lt. T. L. Aitken which shows the source's legitimacy. He took this photograph on the 10th April 1918. Tear gas was used along with mustard and chlorine gas during WWI.

My second choice is an extract from Douglas Haig's 1st despatch on the subject of German gas attacks carried out between the 27th and 30th of April 1916.

Douglas Haig was a soldier and senior commander for the British Army in WWI. He was a man of very high regard and trusted as an experienced military personnel who knew what he was talking about, hence his despatches being reliable enough to be classified as official accounts. He led the British Expeditionary Force from 1915 to the end of the war. He is more famous for his leadership in battles such as The Somme and the 3rd Battle of Ypres. His famous image was due to his success which led the Germans to surrender in 1918. The extract above from his despatch, describes the situation of a gas attack by the Germans, near Wulverghem, Belgium. This extract is very detailed and helpful for someone studying tactics of the war; however, it does not represent the experiences of soldiers much at all. This is probably due to Haig's formal writing techniques and how he stays quite neutral in order to not give out either a too negative or positive account.

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Conclusion

In conclusion, out of the sources I have studied, I believe that stories show the most accurate picture of soldier's experiences of gas in WWI.

Firstly, I believe this because most stories of this period were written by soldiers, who had experienced war in their lives considerably and been inspired to write, after or during battle, normally to create a very effective anti-war view. The two other types of sources also give an accurate picture but are less reliable than stories, in my opinion, because they lack the detail which can express the feelings of the soldiers and details of the situation.

Secondly, all stories seem to tell more than any other source and can help a historian understand the horrors of gas usage in the war, which caused so many proud soldiers to perish.

The least helpful sources would have to be official accounts. I find this because they only seem to give a synopsis of a battle or incident and do not seem to express the experiences of the average soldier on the front. Poetry sources gave an accurate account of soldiers' experiences of gas, however, were too brief and are not factual enough to give accurate impressions of the soldier's experiences of gas.