

**UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL BULLETIN
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Florida International University
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Doctoral Dissertation Defense

Abstract

Britain Can Take It: Chemical Warfare and the Origins of Civil Defense in Great Britain, 1915-1945

by

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This dissertation argues that the origins of civil defense are to be found in pre-World War II Britain and that a driving force of this early civil defense scheme was fear of poison gas. Later iterations of civil defense, such as the Cold War scheme in America, built on already existing schemes that had proven their worth during WWII. To demonstrate not only that WWII civil defense served as a blueprint to later civil defense schemes, but also that poison gas anxiety served as a particular tool for the implementation and success of civil defense, this dissertation explores several aspects of British civil defense. The dissertation is organized thematically, exploring the role of civilians and volunteers in the civil defense scheme, as well as demonstrating the vital importance of physical manifestations of civil defense, such as gas masks and air raid shelters, in ensuring the success of the scheme.

By the start of World War II, many civilians had already been training in civil defense procedures for several years, learning how to put out fires, recognize bombs, warn against gas, decontaminate buildings, rescue survivors, and perform first aid. The British government had come to the conclusion, long before the threat became realized, that the civilian population was a likely target for air attacks and that measures were required to protect them. World War I (WWI) saw the first aerial attacks targeted specifically at civilians, suggesting a future where such attacks would occur more frequently and deliberately. Poison gas, used for the first time in WWI, seemed a particularly horrifying threat that presented significant problems. Civil defense was born out of this need to protect the civil population from attack by bombs or poison gas. For the next five years of war civil defense worked to maintain British morale and to protect civilian lives. This was the first real scheme of civil defense, instituted by the British government specifically for the protection of its civilian population.

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