


BOOK REVIEW

Susan R. Grayzel. *The Age of the Gas Mask: How British Civilians Faced the Terrors of Total War*

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Susan R. Grayzel's *The Age of the Gas Mask* is a fascinating social and cultural history of the gas mask from its rudimentary invention in 1915 after the Germans released chlorine gas at the Second Battle of Ypres to a symbol of the “militarization of everyday life” (193) during World War II. Rich in archival, journalistic, and cultural sources, Grayzel investigates the “vast, state-sanctioned cultural project” (5) to engage British citizens in the creation of a new normal, imagining an ever-present threat of gas and thereby accepting carrying the gas mask as part of routine practices. Focusing on this material object, Grayzel gives new meaning to total war, illustrating how British governments attempted to control individual bodies and behaviors through the domestication of the gas mask, erasing the boundaries between civilians and soldiers.

Grayzel's chapters move chronologically from the creation of early respirators for soldiers in World War I through governments' efforts to provide gas masks to every citizen and the publicity that accompanied these efforts to the end of World War II. Grayzel uses this narrative to explore the ways British culture became saturated with the gas mask and the points of resistance the gas mask provoked. Without creating panic, British officials wanted to convince the public of the real danger of gas and the citizen's duty to have and always carry a gas mask and to always be prepared to put it on. Many Britons, however, found the masks frightening, claustrophobic, and unnecessary and fought actively and passively against official guidelines. Grayzel sets this story in the global context, demonstrating, for example, how the Italian use of gas in Ethiopia in 1935 ramped up efforts of civil defense at home, and how, while Britain needed rubber from its colonies to produce gas masks, colonial bodies were marginal to the protective discourse surrounding gas masks.

Grayzel creates a vivid picture of the messaging to which Britons were exposed, especially through journalism. Pressure campaigns to convince citizens of their duty escalated throughout the 1930s and into World War II. Yet Grayzel shows that if the key word was preparedness, the Government itself fell short. When people lined up to collect their masks on “Gas Mask Sunday” (117) in September 1938, for instance, the Government failed to have ready gas masks for babies and children. Once babies' masks were available, however, this provoked horror and anxiety, especially for mothers. Publicity focused on normalizing this ultimate domestication of war and teaching mothers how to care for their children through proper gas mask use. Gas masks, in this way, Grayzel argues, were supposed to incorporate mothers, babies, and children into the total war effort, and symbolize a completely integrated citizenry.

Grayzel demonstrates throughout the book that for pacifists and antimilitarists, many of them women, gas masks posed new and horrifying challenges to their antiwar projects. Gas masks signified the acceptance of chemical weapons, a violation of the 1925 Geneva Gas Protocol. (At various points, Grayzel identifies Britain's ratification both in 1929 and 1930, and my check of the sources Grayzel cites confirms this confusion about dates. Some clarity here would have been helpful.) This tension is important throughout Grayzel's analysis: once gas masks became policy and practice, Britain was not-so-secretly consenting to chemical weapons, even if it formally opposed them. Gas masks provided a focus for disarmament arguments, a material object to which war opponents could point to challenge the state. Grayzel has uncovered a wide range of cultural sources that bolstered these positions. Fiction, plays, and visual sources spoke to cultural anxieties about gas masks and their inability to protect humanity from devastation, and their ubiquity created antigas mask pressures.

As Grayzel argues, the gas mask symbolized the ways that the state hoped to control people's wartime behaviors and emotions. Responses to the gas mask were unpredictable, however; people used them in subversive and humorous ways, told jokes about them, and sang about them in music halls. And, while Britons foiled the Government's push to have every civilian always carry a gas mask, Grayzel's analysis points to the ways the culture of the gas mask did meet the government's expectations: it created a vigilant population that paid attention to other people's behavior. Grayzel highlights the ways that in letters to newspapers, citizens offered solutions to deal with noncompliance, such as fines and prohibition from riding public transportation. One writer went so far as to suggest "the random release of tear gas" (170) so that those without masks might realize the errors of their ways once literally hit in the face.

The provision of a gas mask to every British citizen was supposed to be a sign of the state's benevolence and care for the welfare of its peoples. Yet Grayzel shows the ways that struggles over the provision of gas masks indicated a hierarchy of value placed on British bodies. This hierarchy could be explicitly racist, as in (unethical) mustard gas testing of British and Indian troops in India that affirmed assumptions that white, British skin was more sensitive and therefore more deserving of protection. Indeed, Grayzel carefully unpacks the ways British governments prioritized particular bodies throughout the empire, showing, for example, that the categories "European" and "non-European" figured into the ways that masks might be distributed. While colonial subjects and those serving in the colonies desired the provision of gas masks, it became clear that for both practical and cultural reasons, the gas mask was primarily an object of the metropole.

Grayzel comments that the world of the gas mask where "the enemy might ... kill without discrimination" inaugurated our world, a world of "accelerated climate change and mass terror," including the threat of nuclear destruction and "violent action by non-state agents" (14, 198). When I read this, I immediately thought of the rash of wildfires destroying neighborhoods in a moment and the school lockdowns and active shooter drills my daughter routinely practiced in her K-12 years. The imaginary of chemical weapons has been supplanted in our world, for now, by the imaginary of mass shootings. What Grayzel shows us through *The Age of the Gas Mask* is how the state makes us complicit in practices that support the militarization of our lives—and that we should question the normalization and domestication of these practices and the culture that produces them.