

What's your poison?

Secret Science:

A Century of Poison Warfare and Human Experiments

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Schmidt is Professor of Modern History at the University of Kent. He has been Wellcome Trust Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at St Antony's College, Oxford, amongst other positions. His research interests, so we are told on the back flap of the jacket, include 'the history of modern medical ethics, warfare, and policy in twentieth-century Europe and the United States.' And he is the author of several books including *Medical Films, Ethics and Euthanasia in Germany, 1933-1945* (2002), *Justice at Nuremberg* (2004), and *Karl Brand: The Nazi Doctor: Medicine and Power in the Third Reich* (2007).

Seemingly the right man for the job.

Chemical warfare began late on the afternoon of 22 April 1915 near the Belgium town of Ypres when the German military released 160 tons of pressurized liquid chlorine from 6,000 steel cylinders along a four mile front. Germany had been a signatory of the Hague Declaration Concerning Asphyxiating Gases in 1899, a codicil as it were to the Hague Convention Respecting the Laws and Customs of War, that was signed in total by some twenty-six countries including Britain, France, and Russia. However, Germany had not violated that Declaration as it stated that signatories must abstain 'from the use of projectiles, the sole object of which is the diffusion of asphyxiating or deleterious gases'. So, they didn't use projectiles. It's all right then, OK?

Germany's gas attack 'initiated a Europe-wide chemical arms race on an unprecedented scale' in which there was 'no time to worry about ethics' and on the Western Front the British retaliated with the use of poison gas delivered by the Stokes mortar, the sole purpose of which was the delivery of chemical projectiles; and thus Britain was the first country to

contravene the terms of the Hague Declaration, not Germany. It was against this background that the Allies started making up for lost time, and none more so than Britain with the establishing of the research station in Wiltshire known as Porton Down (and still going today).

Schmidt is largely concerned with Porton and one wonders why the name wasn't used in the title or subtitle to give a clearer impression of the book's contents. Yes, there are 'walk-on' parts for the United States and Canada and a few other countries but these are dealt with essentially *en passant*. Porton is the main concern. Schmidt charts in great detail the research and development at Porton but he is equally concerned with the 'fluid' ethical and moral aspects of such research and the use of volunteer human guinea pigs (termed 'observers' at Porton!) and the question of consent. Yes, the service personnel were 'volunteers' and gave their consent, but was it always *informed* consent? Schmidt highlights the very moving case of twenty-year-old RAF Leading Aircraftman Ronald Maddison who in 1953 was subjected to exposure to the highly toxic Sarin¹ and died shortly after. It took his family fifty years to find out what actually happened.

Schmidt's research has been prodigious and, as an example, the bibliography runs to nearly forty pages; but this is within the fields he has selected (I'll return to this). He has thrown up much of interest. For instance, the US Army did research on the susceptibility of human skin to various agents and this showed that 80 per cent of 'negroes' were resistant to mustard gas as compared with only 20 per cent of 'white men'. The report's author noted that it should be possible 'to obtain coloured troops who would all be resistant to mustard gas blistering in concentrations harmful to most white men. Enough resistant whites are available to officer them'. Or the fact that thousands of travellers on the London Underground were unknowingly exposed to a 'plague-like' bacteria in 1963

¹ Classified as a weapon of mass destruction by UN Resolution 687. It was discovered by German scientists at I G Farben in the late 1930s. This was the substance released on the Tokyo subway by the Aum Shinrikyo sect in 1995 that resulted in thirteen deaths.

in a 'dispersal' test. There's much like this throughout the book.

There are many leads here that need to be followed up. One that struck me was the case of Major D. C. Evans, British Army, who was the senior military liaison officer at the British Joint Service Mission in Washington DC, and thus responsible for the exchange 'of top-secret chemical warfare information between the two Allied powers'. In January 1948 he was sent to Nuremberg to assist in the prosecution of the I G Farben chemical conglomerate. His secondary purpose was to seek, on behalf of the Ministry of Supply, technical data about Nazi warfare experiments on humans and 'mass exterminations' using hydrogen cyanide (I G Farben trade name Zyklon B). This, in the words of Schmidt, 'took him right to the heart of Nazi war crimes'. Evans appears to have gathered much information but Schmidt rather trails off as to what exactly the Major did and who he saw, and one wonders whether it resulted in some Operation Paperclip shenanigans with the result of German scientists and others coming over to the Allied side now that hostilities had ceased.

A section three-quarters of the way through the book is headed 'Truth Drugs' and runs to some eleven pages. Schmidt asserts that Britain's exploration of 'truth drugs' seems to have 'partly' come from the United States with a visit to the UK by Henry K. Beecher, a Harvard anaesthetist and former member of the OSS (Office of Strategic Services). Beecher was tasked by his bosses to gather information on drugs and narcotics and assess their potential as weapons. This assignment was part of Operation Artichoke² set up by the CIA in 1951.

Another of Beecher's objectives was to identify scientists who could be recruited for secret work back in the US. Schmidt then goes on to discuss LSD experiments with service personnel at Porton Down in the 1950s done at the behest of MI6 who were much vexed by questions of mind control, truth drugs and brain washing, and that's it. End of the discussion of 'truth drugs', LSD, mind control experiments, and so on. Our

² Subsequently known more famously as Project MKULTRA, though this is not noted by Schmidt.

learned professor cannot be unaware of this vast field and the literature it has produced, but he chooses to ignore it.

Now let's return to the subject of human guinea pigs. Scientists in Britain, chiefly at Porton Down, experimented on some 21,000 service personnel between 1939 and 1989. The cover story to them was that Porton was searching for a cure to the common cold or something similarly innocuous. It was rarely explained in any greater or more accurate detail. These volunteers produced certain difficulties for the authorities: they were service personnel under the government's 'duty of care' and while their treatment was 'regulated' with 'oversight' things could easily go wrong with bad publicity, not to mention legal cases ensuing (which is what happened). What was needed were 'subjects' who were not regulated for the mind control experiments, but where were these to be found?

A few years back I reviewed Albarelli's book on the death of Frank Olson in the pages of this magazine.³ Olson was a US government bacteriologist working on germ warfare projects who was probably pushed to his death out of a tenth floor window of the Hotel Statler in New York in 1953. Reviewing the book led me to do some desultory research on the UK's forays in to mind control drugs, and while I won't go through all the details again there are a number of things I'd like to mention from the review.

Where were unregulated subjects suitable for mind control experiments to be found? They were all over the country..... in mental hospital wards. The clinicians/psychiatrists were supreme rulers of these wards, no consent was needed from the patients, there was no oversight, and these rulers could do just as they liked. There were two doctors who piqued my interest. One was Dr William Sargant (1907-1988) of St Thomas' hospital in London, and the other was Dr Ronald Sandison.

The rather creepy Dr Sargant was, according to Nigel West, MI5's in-house psychiatrist, though West may have meant MI6, and it seems likely he visited Porton Down.

³ 'The Dr Strangeloves of the Mind', a review of H. P. Albarelli Jr's *A Terrible Mistake: The Murder of Frank Olson and the CIA's Secret Cold War Experiments*, in *Lobster* 59, Summer 2010.

Further, Sargant's ward sister recalls him telling tales about 'cloak-and-dagger exploits'. He was in contact with the notorious Dr Euan Cameron in Montreal, exchanging information, and this was hardly likely had he not been 'cleared' by the authorities. When Beecher was visiting the UK in 1951 he was put in touch with Sargant by Sir Henry Dale, President of the Royal Society.

Dr Sandison was pursuing LSD 'therapy' at the Powick Hospital in Worcestershire in the 1950s through until the early 1970s. In all some 683 patients were dosed in some 13,785 sessions. Sandison's research was conducted on a small scale to begin with until his friend Professor Joel Elkes, head of the Department of Experimental Psychiatry at the University of Birmingham, stepped in and arranged a £50,000 grant from the regional hospital board to build a dedicated LSD wing at Powick. This was a pretty sizeable sum in the 1950s and the question is, was the hospital board really that enlightened or was it acting merely as a conduit for money from, possibly, security or military agencies?

Dr Elkes was advising Porton Down (and thus MI6) at the time on the interrogation possibilities of LSD. He, like Sargant, believed in the 'physical, neurochemical basis for psychiatric phenomena'. No room here for psychoanalysis. Straight in with the drugs! Elkes went to work in the US in the late 1950s and remained there.

What I'm suggesting here is that research needs to be done in this area. To what extent were mental hospitals used in psycho-chemical research? There seems little or no literature on the subject beyond newspaper reports of ex-patients taking hospital authorities to court (eg the Powick case).

Finally, on Schmidt's book. He has done an admirable job on what he does cover, but he falls on what he doesn't cover. For instance, there isn't even a mention of anthrax in the nearly seven hundred pages, let alone MKULTRA and what that engendered. And where is the mention of the US Army's Fort Detrick, the centre of US biological weapons research from 1943 onwards? I could go on. Here we have *Hamlet* without

the Prince of Denmark.

Anthony Frewin

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of the British film industry.*