

By Mr. Reid Kirby

Book Reviews



A Poisonous Affair: America, Iraq, and the Gassing of Halabja, Joost R. Hiltermann, Cambridge University Press, 18 June 2007.

After World War I and the Abyssinian War, the Iran-Iraq War represented the next major use of chemical weapons. In this book, the author writes a detailed account with emphasis on the attack on Halabja. Using many primary sources and interviews collected over the years, the story has no heroes—the Iraqis used chemical weapons, the Iranians had their own atrocities, the Iraqi Kurds sided with Iran, and the United States turned a blind eye and sent inconsistent diplomatic signals.

The author worked for Human Rights Watch as a consultant and was in Iraq in 1992 to compile a study on Iraq's Operation Anfal. He later returned to Iran (in 2000), Iraq (in 2002), and elsewhere in the Middle East on a series of grants to complete his research. His detailed research has made one of the most complete accounts of chemical operations during the Iran-Iraq War and the political-diplomatic subterfuge surrounding those events. Many past accounts focus on chemical weapons proliferation. *A Poisonous Affair* brings clarity to the chemical battlefield, describing the motivations and strategies of Iraqi chemical strikes in a series of engagements.

Later in the book, the story changes from Iran-Iraq to the internal conflict between Iraq and Kurdish separatists. A traditional means of counterinsurgency throughout history has been the slaughter of the innocent and the resulting loss of popular support. As a U.S. Civil Defense poster once stated, "civilians—without them there is no reason to fight." The attack on Halabja made grotesque strategic logic and disintegrated Kurdish resistance. Even with this psychological defeat, Iraq took it a step further with the mass execution of civilians to change the ethnic makeup of the remaining communities.

This book examines the difficult relationship and fickle alliance between the United States and Iraq during the war. The context of this relationship is the U.S. reaction to the Iranian revolution, avoiding the larger U.S.-Soviet context that was still formidable in the minds of policy makers at the time. The persistent claim by the United States that Iran used chemical weapons, which the author finds unfounded, disrupted an international response against Iraqi chemical attacks.

The information reports of chemical casualties in battle are valuable and necessary to understand chemical-weapon effects (and the magnitude of difference between chemical fatalities and casualties). It also demonstrates the political dynamics of chemical allegations and the motivations of Iraq. To Iraq, chemical weapons ultimately kept Saddam Hussein in power by limiting the degree of military defeat from his misguided leadership and, eventually, ended the war with the threat of chemical attacks on Iranian cities.

Mr. Kirby is a project manager for Bradford and Galt. He holds a bachelor's degree in valuation science from Lindenwood College, with a minor in biology and special studies in behavioral toxicology and biotechnology.