

# German professor Herfried Münkler: Combat drones and poison gas are “humane” weapons

Johannes Stern  
16 April 2015

About two weeks after the German and French governments decided at a joint cabinet meeting to manufacture combat drones in Europe, Humboldt University Professor Herfried Münkler praised such drones as “humane” weapons in a long interview in the *Frankfurter Allgemeinen Zeitung* (FAZ). He drew a historical parallel to poison gas, which was used for the first time in the First World War, describing it also as “humane.”

When the *FAZ* noted that poison gas is perceived “as especially terrible,” Münkler replied, “There is this striking paradox. Between three or four percent die in poison gas attacks, while the death toll from artillery wounds is around fifty percent, and the rate of mortality from rifle or machine gun fire thirty percent. That means that you could actually say that gas is a rather ‘humane’ weapon, because it has a relatively low death toll.”

Münkler added that in drone attacks the operators “have much more time for observation than the pilot of a fighter bomber,” and “the collateral damage of drone attacks” is “clearly lower than that from fighter bombers.”

It is difficult to say which is more repulsive: Münkler's trivialization of poison gas attacks in the First World War, or his plea for combat drones today.

The hundredth anniversary of the first use of poison gas as a weapon of mass extermination is just under a week away. On April 22, 1915, German troops used chlorine gas in the battle at Ypres.

The *Deutsche Welle* published an article a year ago that described how a yellowish cloud of 180 tons of chlorine gas wafted out of the German trenches to the enemy lines: “There began the horror. The enveloped soldiers stumbled around, turning red, blind and coughing. Three thousand of them suffocated and an additional seven thousand soldiers, who were badly burned, survived.”

In an escalating gas war, in which more and more effective chemical weapons were put into use, “about 120 thousand tons of 38 types of warfare agents were deployed, about 100 thousand soldiers and 1.2 million men were wounded,” according to a paper published by the Federal Agency of

Civic Education.

Science historian Ernst Peter Fischer commented on the first poison gas attack in Ypres in the *Deutsche Welle* account. “At that moment, science lost its innocence,” he said. Until then, the goal of science consisted of easing the conditions of life of human beings. “Now science provided the conditions for killing human life,” Fischer said.

Fischer cited the example of the Berlin chemist Fritz Haber, who founded and headed the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Physical Chemistry and Electro-chemistry. Haber placed his entire scientific ability in the service of mass extermination. This proved no hindrance to his career. After the end of the war, the “father of gas warfare” won the Nobel Prize for chemistry and sat on the supervisory board of the chemistry giant I.G. Farben, which later produced the poison gas Zyklon B for the gas chambers in Auschwitz. Haber, who was himself Jewish, emigrated in 1933 and died shortly thereafter.

The use of poison gas, which Münkler praises as a “humane weapon,” was not just a new method for slaughtering millions of soldiers. Its use was then and remains today a war crime. It contravenes the Hague Convention of 1907 and was once again explicitly forbidden in the Geneva Protocol of 1925. In the war in Iraq and as part of the war threats against Syria, imperialist propaganda used the actual or alleged use of poison gas in these countries as sufficient grounds for war.

For this reason, Münkler's parallel between poison gas and drone warfare is particularly significant. The comparison is apt, not because they are both “humane” methods of war, but because both exemplify the development of new stages in imperialist brutality.

The US-led drone wars in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen not only violate international law, but have taken the lives of thousands of innocent victims (Münkler's “collateral damage”) in recent years. According to research carried out by the London based Bureau of Investigative Journalism, the US military has wiped out between 2.4 and 3.9 thousand people in “targeted killings” in Pakistan alone.

These victims of combat drones are not infrequently women, children or innocent participants at birthday parties, weddings or funerals.

Münkler's justification for warfare with poison gas and combat drones is utterly cynical. He accuses the opponents of gas and drone warfare of clinging to the ideal of a long bygone "heroic" age.

"The criticism of gas warfare and the criticism of drone warfare are connected in that they both have to do with the ethos of the fighter. The astounding thing is that drones are criticized in a post-heroic society, but with the arguments of the heroic society, which demands the struggle of man against man," explained the professor.

By "post-heroic," Münkler means that war is no longer fought man to man, but rather that soldiers and civilians of less developed states are slaughtered in cold blood by their adversaries—at the mercy of remote-controlled drones or poison gas, which soldiers cannot defend themselves against.

"We are observing the transformation of war into policing," he said in the *FAZ*. "Goals are being pursued in a way that can be understood as making investments in the future of the area of intervention by minimizing losses. Hegel called the weapon 'the essence of the fighter'—drones are the typical weapon of post-heroic society. There is no ethos or aesthetic of war. There is only effectiveness of battlefield management."

It requires the intellectual degradation of a German professor to try to use Hegel for the purpose of celebrating combat drones as an "effective" category of weapon above any ethical or moral criticism.

Münkler's argument is an insult to the intelligence of the vast majority of the population which opposes combat drones, but not because of any longing for a "heroic" age or a preference for fighting wars with the sword "man against man." Rather, drones are hated because no other weapon is more closely associated with imperialist aggression, war crimes and the suffering of civilian populations.

Münkler also introduces social Darwinist arguments to justify drone warfare. The "post-heroic society" is characterized "by two elements," he said in the *FAZ* interview: "A low rate of reproduction in the population. There is no longer a surplus of young men for the battlefield. And the idea of self sacrifice at the 'altar of the fatherland' is completely foreign to us."

Two years ago Münkler had already presented an argument against ethical and moral objections to modern weapons of destruction. At the fourteenth annual foreign policy conference of the Green Party affiliated *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, he gave a lecture titled: "New fighting systems and the ethics of war."

At that time Münkler warned: "Post-heroic societies such

as ours should be very careful when they talk about the ethics of war. They are playing with fire, especially when they use ethics to demand more from soldiers than they would demand of themselves."

He then told the politicians and foreign policy experts in attendance: "The 'citizen in uniform' is much closer to war drones than the soldier of a classical army, and he prefers their use to the deployment of light infantry in hostile terrain, with the goal of eliminating an actual or supposed threat in direct contact with the enemy. To express it pointedly: in the criticism of drones, the ethics of a pre-bourgeois society is giving voice to heroic ideas in a nostalgic form. This is a critique that has not been thought out to the end."

Irrespective of how "thought out to the end" is his own overblown pontification, the stance of the professor is very clear—his standpoint is highly militaristic. In a situation in which neither the population nor the majority of soldiers favors being slaughtered in open warfare on the battlefield, he recommends drones to the ruling elite as a suitable means of achieving the ends of German imperialism through military means.

The fact that Münkler now places poison gas in the same category as drones shows that inhumane and militaristic attitudes are once again running rampant in ruling circles in Berlin 70 years after the end of the Second World War. The report of the *Böll Stiftung* on the conference two years ago concluded that Münkler's presentation of "controversial combat drones as a positive new stage in weapons technology from an ethical point of view" was seen as a "minor provocation."

Since then, Münkler's "minor provocation" has become a dangerous reality. The *Böll Stiftung* campaigns for a confrontation with Russia, the German government is acquiring combat drones and Münkler himself is giving a seminar at Humboldt University under the title "Theories of war: new wars, humanitarian interventions, drone wars." In his new book, *Macht in der Mitte (Power in the Middle)*, Münkler demands that Germany once again "play the difficult role of 'disciplinarian'" in Europe. The German government is working on this too!



To contact the WSW and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**