A [short] History

Archival Activations no.6

Mariame Kaba

U.S Police Tear Gas



I've been protesting since I was a very young person.

I attended my first protest in 1983 after the NYPD murdered a young Black man named Michael Stewart. Over the years, I've collected protest-related items and ephemera of various kinds including protest related photos. Many images depict cops deploying tear gas against protesters. In 2024, police have repeatedly used tear gas against anti-genocide protesters on college campuses. Most of the public barely bats an eye at this indiscriminate use of a chemical weapon. Society has normalized it. In the United States, tear gas is considered a standard police weapon used to disperse and repress crowds. It is generally discussed and marketed as a non-lethal and humane policing tool. However, the truth is that tear gas is both traumatizing and dangerous, and has been used by cops to intensify rather than prevent violence.

A demonstrator throws a canister of gas back at the police in Sproul Place at The University of California in Berkeley, CA, 1970.

While I haven't experienced tear gas in protests I've taken part in, I have witnessed cops spraying people with pepper spray. It's horrible.

For example, in July 2015, I took part in a Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) Conference in Cleveland, OH:

traveled to Cleveland on a bus with a group of young Black organizers,

had affiliations with BYP 100. On our way to meet the bus that would take us home to Chicago, I and others stumbled upon a group of people demanding that the police release a 12 or 13-year-old Black boy who they had in handcuffs.

By the time I arrived, the boy was sitting inside a bus shelter surrounded by cops and over two dozen Black people who had attended the M4BL convening. One person, a comrade, was on her phone, reaching out to the boy's mother. I realized no one was going to leave until she arrived on the scene.

The police escalated the standoff when they tried to move the boy towards one of the police cars parked in the street. The growing crowd followed, and some people shouted at the cops to release the boy. Others yelled out that his mother was on her







way. Meanwhile, more Black people were making their way to the scene.

The police further escalated the confrontation by pepper spraying several people indiscriminately. They sprayed us as my friend Page said,

"Like we were bugs."

I guess we were lucky that they didn't use tear gas against us.

From top: A woman clutches her baby as she runs from a house in which police had tossed tear gas. Atlanta, GA, 1966.

Two unidentified girls suffering from tear gas are arrested by police and marched to a van. Albuquerque, NM, 1971.

Police throw tear gas bombs at demonstrators that were trying to claim the body of a construction worker, who was killed during a fight between police and striking workers. Police had buried the body of the worker secretly. Lima, Peru, 1961.



From weapon of war to "non-lethal" weapon

Tear gas refers to a range of chemical compounds that can be weaponized as a particulate smoke, vapor, or liquid spray. Tear gas affects the mucous membranes and respiratory system, causing tearing, blurred vision, coughing, difficulty breathing, and skin burns, among other symptoms. Tear gas has also caused miscarriages and long-term respiratory problems.

Tear gas first appeared in Germany in the late nineteenth century. It originally saw widespread use during World War I. Tear gas was not deadly like mustard and chlorine gas. But it could penetrate some early gas masks or improperly fastened masks, causing Above: Riot police using tear gas to disperse demonstrators in Algeria, 1960.

Below: The active ingredient in Chemical Mace attaches to sensory receptors on nerve endings and produce the sensation of burning pain. 1967.



soldiers to remove their protective gear, leaving them vulnerable to the more lethal chemicals. It could also linger in an area for a long time, catching soldiers without protection. In short, it was used in warfare not as a safer option, but as another way to kill and incapacitate foes.

Following World War I, chemical weapons were widely condemned as inhumane in the United States and around the world. However, industrial interests were eager to keep marketing and selling wartime chemical agents, and conservatives saw tear gas as a possible tool for suppressing protest and dissent.

In the United States, General Amos Fries began a public relations campaign in the 1920s to promote "war gasses for This publication is the 6th zine in my Archival Activations series. In it, I share some historical background about the US police and their use of tear gas, along with archival photos and documents from my collection. I hope that more people will come to oppose its use and support efforts to ban it.





California Arms Company "Gas Warfare! On Crime, Riot & Revolution: Tear Gas, Armored Cars, Bullet Proof Glass, Firearms, Machine Guns, Bullet Proof Vests.

peace time use" in "dealing with mobs as well as with savages," as some of the tear gas promotional materials stated. Fries and his allies ignored veteran testimony about the horrors of gas warfare, successfully presenting tear gas as distinct from non-lethal gasses and encouraging its deployment against unarmed civilians.

In one publicity effort in 1921, Fries tear gassed a Girl Scout troop to demonstrate the weapon's safety. "The resulting mental image painted by 60 girl scouts weeping and vomiting because of tear gas exposure ultimately did not provoke the positive public reaction [Fries] intended," scholar Jack Leff commented drily.

Despite that setback, Fries soldiered on, and tear gas was used against protestors and in labor disputes. In 1932, the National Guard fired tear gas while violently evicting the "Bonus Army"—an encampment of veterans protesting unpaid

Seamans strikers routed by police tear gas in Everett, MA, 1939.



wages in Washington DC. The troops killed two men, and two newborns were reported to have died as a result of inhaling tear gas.

Incidents like this prompted Senate investigations, but tear gas advocates and manufacturers had too many military and commercial connections to be held accountable or regulated.

Global pacification

Over the next thirty years, authorities normalized the use of tear gas to target protestors both domestically and internationally. Countries overcame and defied international bans on war gasses. Tear gas became a tool for authorities to target Communists in Austria in 1929, and to target strikers in Hamburg, Germany, in 1933. South Africa used tear gas against indigenous demonstrators, and Britain used it to disperse protesters



Southern University BATON ROUGE, LA 1970



University of California BERKELEY, CA 1969



University of Wisconsin MADISON, WS 1969



Duke University DURHAM, NC 1969

in Palestine in the 1930s. One Muslim man gassed by police during a protest in a Peshawar jail in 1947 suffered serious burns and eventually died after vomiting blood.

In the US, tear gas was central to police response to civil rights and anti-Vietnam protests. The police sometimes used tear gas on its own to disperse a crowd, but more often they employed it as a "force multiplier," driving people out into the open or scattering them, making them more vulnerable to being hit with batons or fists. According to scholar Anna Feigenbaum,



Police fire tear gas in crowds of 60,000-100,000 people in Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1963.



Protesters flee cloud of teargas fired by police during a general strike in Dhaka to protest destruction of an ancient mosque in India. More than 200 people were injured in scattered violence in two days. Dhaka, Bangladesh, 1992.

the police also used it as a punishment, targeting peaceful protestors or those they judged disrespectful or noncompliant.

Tear gas has other benefits for the cops. It makes protestors appear disorganized as they flee, wail, and cry in pain, reinforcing the notion that protestors are lawless agents of chaos. As one colonial administrator observed, tear gas made protestors "look silly" as they panicked, ran, sobbed, and scattered; depriving protestors of their dignity was good propaganda. According to New York Times journalist Roy Reed, the tear gas used during the 1965 police attack on protestors on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, impaired reporters' vision, allowing police to attack protestors with impunity.

Police brutality, often filmed or captured on camera, horrified many spectators, and prompted government scrutiny, recommendations, and regulations. However, these official reactions rarely advocated for the abolition of tear gas, which was still viewed as a less lethal, more humane option. For example, following the Kent State killings in 1970, the President's **Commission on Student Unrest** issued a report acknowledging that the deployment of tear gas heightened tensions and



Demonstrators run from tear gas thrown at them by police after a new confrontation over "People's Park." Berkeley, CA, 1969.

resulted in National Guardsmen shooting and killing four students. Nonetheless, the report recommended that campus authorities continue to carry tear gas launchers, because this was a safer alternative to firearms.



"Depriving protestors of their dignity was good propaganda."

A trio of youths feel teargas used by police to stop a march toward the South Vietnamese Embassy. Washington DC, 1969.









Tear gas in the modern era

The dynamics of tear gas, as well as the rhetoric surrounding it, have persisted in the vein established by 60s protests. Tear gas continues to be a key weapon in policing and police deployed it extensively during the Occupy protests following the 2008 financial crisis and the George Floyd protests against police brutality in 2020.



individuals have been injured by tear gas since 2015

According to a 2023 ACLU report, tear gas has injured around 119,000 individuals since 2015. Medical researchers have also found situations where tear-gas canisters caused fatal penetrating head injuries. Amnesty International has launched a website to document the widespread use of tear gas against protesters throughout the world.

Yet, as Amnesty International points out, there are no international regulations on trade in tear gas. In the United States, there is no regulation governing the use of tear gas on humans, and no federal research has been conducted into the effects of tear gas exposure. Despite more than a century of well-documented hazards, harms, and injuries as well as strong evidence that tear gas increases rather than deescalates conflict, policymakers continue to consider it nonlethal and humane. There is little national or international official effort to regulate it, let alone abolish it. As a result, authorities frequently use tear gas against protestors to silence speech, cause chaos, and impose police and state power.*

 More than 2,000 people parade through downtown Atlanta, GA protesting police brutality in Alabama, 1965.
Demonstrators were sprayed with tear gas by police in Chicago, IL, 1968.
Anti-war demonstrators in front of the White House in Washington, DC, 1970.
James H. Meredith and his son pose with a tear gas can in Jackson, MS, 1963.

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Police fired tear gas and shotguns at rock-throwing demonstrators protesting closure of a people's park near the University of California campus. Twenty-nine injuries, including five policemen, were reported injured. The violence escalated after 400 police cleared the University-owned property where students and non-students recently installed playground equipment. Berkeley, CA, 1969.

CITY OF BISBEE, ARIZONA DEPARTMENT OF POLICE H. M. WIRTZ, CHIRP

Oct. 12th. I929.

Calif. Arms Co., 225 11th St. San Francisco.

Gentlemen:

About two months ago I bought one of your "Cas Pens" and about a month ago I had occasion to use said "Pen".

A crazy drunk barricaded himself in a room and defied any one to come and get him. When I approached the door to try to talk nice to him he threw a lighted kerosene lamp thru the glass of the door at me, and then he broke all the glass out of the windows with his fist, and said he had a gun and would shoot my "guts" out if I came any closer, etc. etc. with a lot of pet names. I kept my hands off my gun and took a chance and approached to within about 5 feet of the window and discharged the "Pen".

That was all, He went to the floor as if shot, said nothing, did notning. I broke the door in, which was locked from the inside, and pulled him out in the fresh air. He was O,K. in about half an hour, so we came to jail

all peaceful.

He later told me, after he had talked to witnesses etc. that I would been perfectly justified in shooting him, but was glad that I used gas instead of lead.

I suggested that the City of Bisbee get some more "Gas and so we have received from you a recent order. And now, I want some more, so ...

Please send me, C.O.D. Parcel Post. 2 gas pens, and 12 shells.

Above: Letter (October 12, 1929) from Mariame's Collection.

Right: 1. Tear gas was thrown by police to disperse a crowd of 10,000 in Fall River, MA, 1934. 2. Gas bombs are thrown from police cars to disperse a crowd protesting police action in the riots at the Flour City Irons Works Strike. Minneapolis, MN, 1935. 3. Police fire tear gas into a Black neighborhood of Washington in response to looting and fires following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Washington DC, 1968. 4. Police fire shots and tear gas into an attic in an attempt to flush out two robbers that were trapped there in Lawrence, MA, 1956. 5. Crowds were forced to retreat by national guards who fired tear gas at a strike. Toledo, OH, 1934.









COVER

"Hartford Connecticut Police Fire Tear Gas During Racial Rioting" SEPTEMBER 3, 1969

Helmeted police moved through broken glass at a street intersection in the North End section of Hartford, CT. The white smoke in the background is tear gas fired from launchers carried by police.

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