

# Book Reviews

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Scott Christianson, *The Last Gasp: The Rise and Fall of the American Gas Chamber*, University of California Press: Berkeley, CA, 2010; 344 pp.: 9780520255623, US\$27.50

In his latest book, *The Last Gasp*, Scott Christianson explores the development and use of the gas chamber in the USA and examines how the nexus of history, politics and industry helped bring about the use of the gas chamber as an execution method. Although he primarily focuses on the gas chamber, Christianson also addresses the larger, perennial hot-button issue of the death penalty. Christianson's skills as a writer, historian and an investigative journalist are evidenced by the impressive scope and detail of his research. Although he opposes the death penalty, his book never comes across as dogmatic.

Originally touted as a more humane method of executing prisoners, the gas chamber proved to be barbaric and was disturbing to witnesses. Christianson describes executions in graphic detail, including what prisoners endured as they experienced the effects of the poisonous gas. The descriptions of botched executions and the consequent prolonged suffering are particularly brutal. Christianson astutely traces the development of poison gas, from its origins in chemical warfare during the First World War, through the use of cyanide in legitimate applications, including mining, insecticide and fertilizer. Later, cyanide was proposed as a useful method to kill human beings and quickly became a topic of interest among politicians, American corporations and certain powerful Americans involved in the eugenics movement.

Christianson reveals the largely unknown collaboration between American and German companies to develop and manufacture cyanide. This collaboration was initiated for less lethal uses, but continued after cyanide was being used for executions. The partnering of American and German companies did not end voluntarily, but only after when such business relationships were outlawed during the Second World War. The information Christianson uncovers in this area is extremely provocative and compelling.

A long held public perception is the idea of using poisonous gas for mass executions originated in Germany. However, while Germany was the first country to implement such a system, the idea was first cultivated within the United States. Christianson uncovers shocking material regarding the eugenics movement and the gas chamber. Certain prominent Americans were strong proponents of eugenics, including Charles Lindbergh, Margaret Sanger and several respected individuals from the medical community. Some (but certainly not all), American supporters of

eugenics, favored the idea of using lethal gas to ‘euthanize’ individuals deemed unworthy or defective. These plans were never brought to fruition in the United States, but the idea of American support for the implementation of such a program is deeply disturbing.

However, the practice of ‘mercy killings’, was instituted under Hitler’s rule. Starting with the mentally ill and the disabled, poisonous gas was later used on a larger scale, as an extension of the social engineering ideology of eugenics. Mass executions during the Holocaust, were taking place as the USA was executing prisoners using the gas chamber. Although *The Last Gasp* is clear about not drawing any moral equivalency between American use of the gas chamber and Nazi atrocities, Christianson points out, that is it hard to imagine that Hitler was not aware of the American advances and use of poison gas technology for purposes of execution.

The first American prisoner was executed in a gas chamber in 1924. Over the following 75 years, more than 600 others were executed using lethal gas. Christianson includes an appendix detailing each person executed, their state, age, race and crime they were convicted of. Most of these individuals were convicted of murder, but some were convicted of rape, or shockingly, burglary.

Christianson’s research and sourcing are extremely thorough, and some of the expanded notes are as interesting as the body of the book. Some of the issues may have generated drier reading in the hands of a less skilled writer, but *The Last Gasp* is a fascinating and gripping expose on the gas chamber. Some readers might find Christianson’s extensive description of cyanide production to be overly technical, but his diligence in providing careful details clarifies how these chemicals came to be used as an agent of death.

Through the revelations in his book, Christianson not only provides previously unearthed information about the gas chamber, but contributes to the discourse regarding capital punishment in general. His investigation, into what was to be the creation of a humane method of execution, leads to the understanding that all previous methods have proved futile, in this regard, and will probably always remain so. By shedding light on less than altruistic motives involved in the development of the gas chamber, Christianson also contributes to the discussion of what interests (political, economical, ideological) are really at play when the death penalty is carried out. The material provided in *The Last Gasp* is so thought provoking, that it is impossible not to at least consider the ideas and assertions put forth, regardless of one’s individual views. This informative and captivating book is an excellent read for undergraduate or graduate students or faculty of criminal justice/criminology, psychology, political science or sociology.

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