

# Book Review

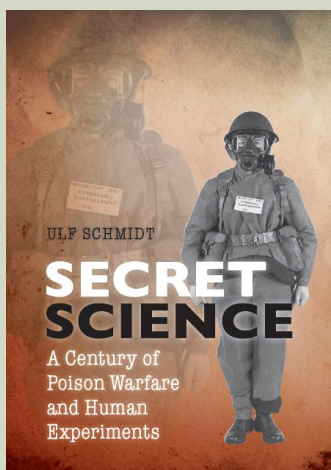
## **Secret Science: A Century of Poison Warfare and Human Experiments by Ulf Schmidt; Oxford University Press, Oxford, E-Book, 672 Pages, Price: £25.00**

**Ms. Sadaf Javed**

*The author is a researcher at the Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi.*

### Summary

The book discusses the political and cultural aspects of experimental scientists in some of the most secretive research facilities like Proton Down in Britain and Edgewood Arsenal in the United States. It also debates the notion of medical ethics and the practice of medical trials on humans.



Professor Ulf Schmidt's recent book, *Secret Science*, is a historical narrative of biological and chemical weapons and their use and misuse during 19th and 20th centuries around the world. The author has woven this book around the political and cultural milieu of experimental scientists in some of the most secretive research facilities like Proton Down in Britain and Edgewood Arsenal in the United States and documented the lives and sufferings of many servicemen exposed to toxic chemicals and gases there. The book raises a series of pertinent ethical questions about ownership and agency in medical ethics and national security in post-war European and British societies. It comprises of archival material including letters, photographs, documents and interviews of ex-servicemen, officials and scientists about various highly secretive warfare programmes.

The book starts with an interesting story of a young woman from North Europe who agreed to subject herself to a human experiment to study the image resolution of various artificially induced brain activities during an MRI scan. As part of the trial, she was supposed to inhale carbon monoxide through a gas mask and a free MRI image of her brain was offered as an incentive for her service. Here, Prof Schmidt argues that the kind of power relationship the two actors – subject and the scientist – entered into is one in which the subject lacks cognition. The rationale for agreeing to take part in such tests may even have been a wish for self-discovery, self-reflection, a longing for individual recognition and reward for many.

Today, a plethora of ethical guidelines backed up by national laws and regulations seek to protect human participation. This book traces the long and secret history of use of chemical

and biological weapons by former allied powers like the US, Britain and other European countries. It charts the ethical trajectory and history of chemical and biological weapons' use from its initial stages in response to Germany's first use of chemical weapons during the First World War to the present day international conventions to ban such weapons, including the 2013 Nobel Peace Prize to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) for enforcing the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC).

*Secret Science* largely covers the debate on medical ethics and questions the very concept of medical trials on humans and animals across nations and research cultures. The author argues that such trials have often caused deep physical and psychological damage to the subjects and the state has failed even to follow up with them. It also discusses whether the warfare trials were safe, ethical and justified, as many lives were lost during such experiments. The idea of 'consent' is raised high by the author, where he argues whether human body is just a subject and holds no credible status, to be informed about the damages the experiments is going to provide. The book deals with the complex dynamics of secret warfare research, national security and resource allocation by scientists, high-rank military officials and other government officials in order to invest more resources and money in such experimental research.

According to the author, a whole army of about 21,000 soldiers participated in secret experiments between 1939 and 1989. Lower rank soldiers, often used as 'guinea pigs', were offered incentives like free train passes, a day off, some extra pocket money. In many cases, argues the author, the veterans were misinformed, there was no concept of informed consent, and would rarely know about the lethal nerve agents and mistake it

for common cold drug trials, leading to severe reactions including disability or even death.

This book comprises ten chapters and recalls many memories of chemical warfare including Ypres, Belgium in 1915, the first major chemical warfare attack in modern history where 5,000 Allied soldiers died, and many others including Natzweiler concentration camp in Germany. It also opens doors to Porton Down, a secretive military research facility established in Britain during the First World War. This facility had many experimental labs for testing chemical weapons. The famous 1953 case of Ronald Maddison, a wireless mechanic, is highlighted in the book, in context of warfare research on human subjects. In fact, throughout most of the twentieth century, the British government neither denied nor officially confirmed the existence of Porton Down.

Professor Schmidt's work offers the readers a detailed analysis of evolving field of military medical ethics, not only from a philosophical or ethical perspective, but also by providing a historical narrative of the evolution of the field of research over the last century. It discusses the ethics of military medicine, which were shaped not so much by established or emerging medical ethics standards but by the rule of law. It also highlights the widespread question of integrity and secrecy. The author argues, secrecy in military facilities, including Porton, was socially and temporally constructed and rarely, if ever, absolute. It also argues how the high rank officials, military men and scientists misused their power and status in order to guard themselves and the work done at facilities by prioritizing issues of national security over humanitarian obligations.

Importantly, it gives prominence to the role of memory; it has documented and brought to life largely forgotten 'medical memories' of servicemen involved in military

experiments. Therefore, this book can be used as a reference in order to understand what an acceptable justification for the 'infringement of personal inviolability' for experimental subjects could be. It raises a series of important and exceedingly difficult questions in relation to the historiography and methodology of medical ethics.