In bringing before you the subject of tonight’s lecture, I do so with the painful feeling that it is a very dry subject – indeed, one which may be instructive, but cannot be made amusing; I can only, therefore, express my pleasure and surprise that the uninviting nature of my title should not have prevented more from attending this evening.

This is a quotation from the published records of an earlier meeting, comparable to the present one. They are the opening phrases of a paper on “Explosive Bullets and Their Application to Military purposes”, read by a Major G.V. Fosbery, V.C. H.M. Bengal Staff Corps, in a meeting of the Royal United Services Institution, held in London, under the chairmanship of Rear-Admiral Sir Frederick W.E. Nicolson, in the evening of Monday, 20 January 1868. If nothing else, this proves that at least on one earlier occasion a group of professional people met in this country to discuss an aspect of the use of conventional weapons.

The date of that previous occasion, January 1868, is significant. In November of that year an International Military Commission assembled at St. Petersburg “in order to examine into the expediency of forbidding the use of certain projectiles in times of war between civilised nations.” And that Commission “having by common agreement fixed the technical limits at which the necessities of war ought to yield to the requirements of humanity”, drew up the text of a Declaration by which “the Contracting Parties engage[d] mutually to renounce, in case of war among themselves, the employment by their military or naval troops of any projectile of a weight below 400 grammes, which is either explosive or charged with fulminating or inflammable substances.” This so-called St. Petersburg Declaration was signed on 11 December 1868 by the representatives of seventeen States, and thus became the first conventional undertaking to renounce the use in war of a specific category of weapon.


1 Journal of the Royal United Services Institution (1879) pp. 15-27.
Major Fosbery’s explosive bullets obviously fell within this category. It may therefore be of some interest to see how he dealt with the matter in January 1868; was he already then predicting a ban on their use? To be sure, he expressed some concern at “hear[ing] the use of rifle-shell in war condemned as cruel, cowardly, or useless.” For his part, however, he “trust[ed] that the rifle-shell may receive, at all events, thoughtful consideration, as a candidate for the office of peacemaker to begin with, and as having a tendency to shorten any war once commenced, where its use is properly persevered in.” More specifically, he attributed to the rifle-shell which he had himself perfected and tested in actual war-time conditions in India, a number of beneficial effects: it would “explode gunpowder enclosed in stout cases, such as artillery limber-boxes at extreme range and when an ordinary bullet would in no ways affect it.” It was “a ready means of estimating distances … more especially amongst mountains.” And, last not least, it had a profound effect on enemy morale.

But was it not true that the explosive bullet was a cruel weapon? In order to deal with this argument Major Fosbery introduced a character who took this position and who, he said:

takes to himself credit, and honestly enough, I doubt not, for humanity, and a kind regard for the comfort of his fellow-creatures, even when arrayed in arms against him. Yet he will take a scientific pride in the acknowledged weapons and usages of war, and use them with a good conscience to the best effects…. On land he disembowels [his enemy] with rockets, buries in his path the self-acting fougass; tears his body with the angular fragments of segment-shell; plies him with grape and canister, old iron, and broken bottles; undermines him; fills up his wells, and destroys his habitations and supplies, and makes him to die of hunger, of thirst, and exposure, or linger, it may be, for weeks, from the fearful wounds of the bayonet, the sabre, or the Snider-Enfield bullet, the latter, by the bye, almost equalling in their effects on the body any produced by rifle-shell, as may be seen by the fragments into which such a bullet divides when fired into water. All this, moreover, with the best possible intentions and most serene good faith. But let me ask you, is this really humanity? Are any of the deaths to which the greater number of the killed in war are put, strictly speaking humane? or, if they are not, what is this humanity of which so much is made? Is it indeed a branch of that quality which leads us to clothe the naked and feed the hungry, only developed in another direction? or is it not rather a