

Reviews

Kathryn Meyer and Terry Parssinen, *Webs of Smoke: Smugglers, Warlords, Spies, and the History of the International Drug Trade*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998. 313 pp. ISBN 0-8476-9016-4

Fifty pages into Kathryn Meyer's and Terry Parssinen's *Webs of Smoke: Smugglers, Warlords, Spies, and the History of the International Drug Trade*, the authors state that "the anti-opium campaign was popular among the officials and intellectuals of the time, but not among the peasants, who could make a good living by planting poppies." This statement could apply to almost any time and place in the history of the commerce in narcotics, and it is one of the issues lying at the heart of this book. Indeed, much of this monograph is taken up with showing how different interests and interest groups, whether these were British, American, Chinese, Japanese, communist, nationalist or capitalist, clashed with one another during the modern history of drugs. Few of these actors had similar programmes or beliefs; even fewer seemed to co-operate with one another to really try to curb (or eventually demolish) international narcotics trafficking. Where co-operation could be found very clearly was amongst smugglers—the vast networks, liaisons, and associations of traffickers who kept the trade in drugs alive. These parties and their interactions form the real core of this book.

The monograph is organized around people; an interesting choice, when the subject matter at hand is not human, but a class of commodities. This works and it doesn't. On the one hand, Meyer and Parssinen give us a very nuanced window into the many different groups acting on both sides of the law (often at the same time), sketching out convincingly exactly who populated the international world of drugs. 'Bureaucrats', 'Merchants', 'Nouveaux Riches', 'Europeans', 'Warlords', 'Sol-

diers', 'Spies' and 'Americans' form the majority of these people-centred chapter headings. Using these parties as an organizational matrix gives the reader a full sense of how many different kinds of people were involved in this commerce, and therefore how difficult it was to curtail the trade by agencies charged with suppression. A certain amount of repetition ensues because of this structural decision as well, though, as actors float in and out of the narrative, and continually need to be re-introduced. This schema also makes a temporal flow of events rather difficult to follow, as chapters aren't historically sequential but overlap freely.

One of the great virtues of this book is the complex strands it draws together in showing the many dimensions of the drugs trade. Individual personalities were crucial, such as the English statesman Delevinge, who rigorously tried to stamp out narcotics trafficking both as a practical issue of governance and as a Christian matter of conscience. Events were vital as well, such as both World Wars, the 1929 Depression, and certain more successful drug acts and treaties, all of which affected structural ebb and flow. Large companies (such as some of the great European pharmaceutical manufacturers) evince the muscle of capitalism, as huge concerns tried to maintain profits in an era of shifting political climates around drugs. National governments were also important, spanning those that were completely unwilling to help in suppression (such as Turkey), to those that were deeply ambivalent about doing so, for both economic and political reasons (such as the United Kingdom). Supranational structures (such as the League of Nations and after it the United Nations) were also involved, though their power on the ground never matched the power of their rhetoric. Even geography was crucial to this story, as some fascinating paragraphs about Yunnan's human and topographical diversity, as both related to drug smuggling, make abundantly clear.

There are a few oddities and lacunae in this study; perhaps the most obvious is the title. Though this book purports to be (and is, to an extent) a 'History of the International Drug Trade', this is a history focused on East Asia and not the rest of the world. Links are drawn to European manufacturers, American

political lobbies, and to opium production in India, Persia and Turkey, but a truly international history would also cover other regions. Southeast Asia, where some very good work on the history of opium has already been done, is touched upon only briefly here (James Rush's benchmark study *Opium to Java* has not been consulted; several other standard works are also missing). Latin America, with its trajectories of cocaine production and smuggling, has not been explored at all. French and German sources, not to mention Dutch or Spanish ones, are also not utilized either (to be fair, Chinese and Japanese works are used; the message here may be that a truly international history of the drugs trade needs to be a much larger, collaborative project.) These are quibbles, though, in what otherwise is a bold, broad and thought-provoking work. The history of the international commerce in narcotics is an enormous subject; *Webs of Smoke* is a worthy attempt to unravel some of these outstretched threads.

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