

The politics of heroin: Cia complicity in the global drug trade, afghanistan, southeast asia, central america.

The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade, Afghanistan, Southeast Asia, Central America

Alfred W. McCoy

Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 2003

710 p.

Subject, Methods, Database:

A historical study of the opium and heroin trade and its political context, based on primary and secondary sources, including interviews with some of the key players of the developments in Indochina in the 1950s through 1970s.

Content:

The book falls into four main parts. Following a preface that illuminates the fascinating story behind the story and a brief introduction on the history of heroin, the first part deals with the cross-Atlantic heroin trade from the 1940s through 1970s, with special emphasis on the Mafia and Marseille based Corsican syndicates. The second part, taking up some 300 out of 530 pages (not counting the notes), describes in great detail the development of the Asian opium trade from colonial times up to the end of the Vietnam War. In the third section McCoy critically reviews the U.S. wars on drug from Nixon to Clinton, while the fourth part specifically addresses the question of CIA involvement in drug trafficking in the context of covert warfare in Afghanistan and Nicaragua during the 1980s and 1990s. Opium had become a major commodity in world trade before it was outlawed early in the 20th century as a result of increased medical awareness of addiction and a global

temperance movement. Prohibition drove opium into an illicit economy eventually controlled by upland drug lords and urban crime syndicates. By the late 1990s, 180 million people, or 4.2 percent of the world's adult population, were using illicit drugs worldwide, including 13.5 million for opiates, 14 million for cocaine, and 29 million for amphetamines. These figures, Alfred McCoy suggests, are the outcome of a long process of ill-fated political intervention, starting with the promotion of opium use in China and among the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia by European colonial powers. Britain fought two successful wars in 1839 and 1858 to force the Chinese empire to lift the ban on opium that had been in effect since 1729, while revenues from state-licensed opium dens contributed significantly to colonial finances. During and shortly after World War II, McCoy claims, the United States spoiled a unique opportunity to eliminate heroin addiction as a major social problem when the "radical pragmatism" of its intelligence agencies, the OSS and its successor, the CIA, enabled the "Sicilian American Mafia" and the Corsican underworld of Marseille to revive the international narcotics traffic. The alliance, directed against the Italian and French Communist parties, "put the Corsicans in a powerful enough position to establish Marseille as the postwar heroin capital of the Western world and" cemented "a long-term partnership with Mafia drug distributors" (p. 47).

Half way around the globe, in Burma, the CIA was guided by the same anti-Communist rationale when it provided support to Kuomintang (KMT) forces that had retreated from China into what would soon be known as the Golden Triangle. The KMT encouraged the production of opium and centralized its marketing, selling the opium primarily to a Thai police general and CIA client. The CIA, McCoy explains, had promoted the Thai-

KMT partnership "to provide a secure rear area for the KMT" (p. 162). Later, the CIA used KMT troops as mercenaries in its secret operations in Laos, a country that was emerging as a main transshipment and production center for opium and heroin. In the 1950s, French intelligence and paramilitary agencies had secured the loyalty of poppy growing hill tribes in Laos against Communist infiltration by organizing the marketing of their crop. A decade later, the CIA adopted the same strategy, although not with the same degree of involvement, when its airline, Air America, began flying opium out of the hills for sale and refinement in facilities operated and controlled by "the CIA's covert action assets" who, McCoy notes, "had become the leading heroin dealers in Laos" (p. 289). Similarly, the U.S. long tolerated the involvement of South Vietnamese political and military figures in the opium and heroin trade. This involvement went so far that "elements of the Vietnamese army managed much of the distribution and sale of heroin to GIs inside South Vietnam" (p. 229). McCoy sums up the role of U.S. agencies by stating that "American involvement had gone far beyond coincidental complicity; embassies covered up involvement by client governments, CIA contact airlines had carried opium, and individual CIA agents had winked at the opium traffic" (p. 383).

When U.S. troops withdrew from Vietnam, the Southeast Asian drugs followed and also found new markets in Europe after American pressure had "forced Turkey to eradicate its opium fields and France to close its heroin laboratories" (p. 388). McCoy concludes that Nixon's war on drugs, while in the short term successful, merely resulted in an increased complexity of the global heroin trade. The same mechanisms of localized suppression transforming into global stimulus, McCoy argues, could be observed

in Latin America during the 1990s. Despite massive eradication efforts, the overall Andes coca harvest doubled, parallel to the introduction of poppy cultivation in Colombia which supplied 65 percent of the U.S. heroin market by 1999. Likewise, the pattern of CIA complicity, first exposed in Laos during the Vietnam War, repeated itself in Nicaragua with the support of cocaine trafficking Contras and in Afghanistan with opium trafficking mujaheddin. To attain its operational goals, McCoy notes, the CIA tolerated and concealed the drug dealing by its local assets.

Despite the seeming weight of the evidence, at the end of his book Alfred McCoy is hesitant to arrive at a definite judgment regarding the CIA's responsibility for the global drug trade: "it is difficult to state unequivocally that the individual drug lords allied with the CIA did or did not shape the long-term trajectory of supply and demand within the vastness and complexity of the global drug traffic" (p. 529). However, what McCoy seems to suggest is that had the CIA adopted a rigorous anti-drugs policy and had the war on drugs focused more on demand reduction, then the drug problem could have been less severe by the year 2000.

Assessment:

At first glance this book might be mistaken for just another post-9/11 conspiracy theory which finds the U.S. government and its agencies behind every evil doing on the planet. But this impression could not be further from the truth. To begin with, "The Politics of Heroin: CIA complicity in the global drug trade" is the third, revised and expanded, edition of a true classic, "The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia", that was first published in 1972. Moreover, Alfred McCoy, the author, is a diligent researcher who looks at the broad picture, carefully weighing the evidence and arriving at

conclusions that are more cautious than the book title implies. Finally, the title of the book is misleading insofar as the role of the United States in general and the CIA in particular is not always at the center of the events that McCoy recounts.

"The Politics of Heroin", the product of a remarkably adventurous research process, has been written in the tradition of a historiography that focuses on individual actors, often two antagonists pitted against each other, rather than on broad socio-economic structures and processes, although these aspects are not ignored. McCoy's approach is convincing where he can rely on first hand information from the key players whose actions he describes, namely the veterans of French and American covert operations in Indochina. But the focus on individuals appears problematic where he has to draw on less reliable sources. The discussion of drug trafficking in the U.S., for example, is based on controversial official and journalistic sources and, by emphasizing the importance of particular notorious gangsters like Lucky Luciano and Meyer Lansky, displays a certain affinity to conventional imagery. In contrast, the chapters on the war on drugs and the CIA operations in Nicaragua and Afghanistan that have been written since the publication of the first edition reemphasize McCoy's critical perspective, adding further insights while underscoring his scathing assessment of the nexus between drugs and politics.

Overall Evaluation:

This book with a unique history of its own is a key contribution to the analysis of the global drug trade.

Further Reading:

Labrousse, Alain, The War Against Drugs and the Interests of Governments, in: D. Siegel et

al. (eds.), *Global Organized Crime: Trends and Developments*, Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic, 2003, 25-31

Rapin, Ami-Jacques, *Drugs in Laos*, in: E. Viano et al. (eds.), *Transnational Organized Crime: Myth, Power and Profit*, Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2003, 133-144

Renard, Ronald D., *The Mandalay Connection: Drugs in Myanmar/Burma*, in: E. Viano et al. (eds.), *Transnational Organized Crime: Myth, Power and Profit*, Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2003, 119-132

Thoumi, Francisco E., *The Role of the State, Social Institutions and Social Capital in Determining Competitive Advantage in Illegal Drugs in the Andes*, *Transnational Organized Crime*, 5(1), 1999, 67-96

© Klaus von Lampe, all rights reserved.

[Back to review index](#) | [home](#) | [send comment](#)

