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Michael T. Richardson

Texas Tech University, michael.richardson@ttu.edu

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Cover Page Footnote

Aliza Wong, Ph.D. Associate Dean of the Honors College, Associate Professor, Director of European Studies

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The Use of Drugs in Warfare and Its Consequences

Michael T. Richardson

Texas Tech University

Abstract

How prevalent has the use of psychoactive substances been in warfare throughout history and what are the consequences of drug-fueled warfare? In conducting this research, I read several texts on not just the history of drugs in warfare, but also of the history of drugs in the context of globalization. When we hear the words ‘war’ and ‘drugs,’ we automatically think of the War on Drugs. While the War on Drugs is a modern event, the presence of psychoactive substances in society and warfare has existed for millennia: from the use of opium mixed with wine in Ancient Greece to the rampant use of methamphetamine in World War II. I found that these psychoactive substances were given to soldiers to maximize their efficiency in an attempt to gain a tactical advantage on the battlefield. In this attempt, governments have often created veterans susceptible to severe drug abuse and addiction; in turn, many of these soldiers have come home lacking a solid support base and returned to drugs as a way to cope. This paper seeks to track societal use of drugs of many kinds and its relation to the conduct of warfare.

Keywords: Drugs, War History, World History

“Of all of civilization’s occupational categories, that of soldier may
be the most conducive to regular drug use.”

- D. T. Courtwright, *Forces of Habit: Drugs and the
Making of the Modern World*, 2001

Psychoactive substances – drugs – have long played a central role in the formation of human culture, in the same vein as dance, song, and literature. The desire to transcend beyond what the mind and body allows is ancient (Breen 5). From cannabis use going back 12,000 years, potentially being one of humanity’s oldest cultivated crops (Warf 419), to wine and opium in ancient Greece, the use of mind-altering substances has existed for centuries. Conflict and war between people have existed for the same amount of time, if not longer. Some of the oldest evidence of inter-group violence exists at a site in Kenya, where the massacred remains of 27 individuals were found, dating back about 10,000 years (University of Cambridge 2016). As the Americas and the rest of the world became interconnected, drugs became a globalized commodity and its usage more frequent. If the use of psychoactive substances – and the desire for increased stimulation, an escape – has been central to the formation of human culture, then the use of those substances in warfare is simply an extension of society. The histories of drug use in society and in warfare are intertwined. This paper will explore how different drugs have been used in varying societies and what role drugs have played in warfare and in soldiers’ lives to portray the inescapable importance and centrality of drugs in history.

Before exploring this subject, it is important to include a short note on the terminology included in this paper. According to the World Health Organization, “psychoactive substances

are substances that, when taken in or administered into one's system, affect mental processes, e.g. cognition or affect." A drug is often defined as a substance that causes some change in an organism's physiology and/or psychology. Therefore, a drug is a psychoactive substance and vice versa. Under this definition, caffeine, alcohol, cannabis, methamphetamines, and psychedelics (acid, LSD, DMT, etc.) are all drugs. For the purposes of this paper, modern socio-political definitions on what makes a drug "licit" or "illicit" will largely be ignored. The categorization of drugs was mostly non-existent when the seeds of the global drug trade were planted.

According to the World Health Organization, in 2018 just over a quarter of Europeans smoked tobacco. Drugs such as tobacco and alcohol are popularly considered social drugs. Bars and smoke shops facilitate socialization while consuming these substances. Alcohol can open one up at a party, tobacco can stimulate conversation, and cannabis can relax a stressed or anxious mind. Opium has long been used to induce a state of euphoria. Today, drugs dominate pop-culture around the world. They are the focal point of many songs and movies and TV series, such as *Scarface* or *Breaking Bad*. The entertainment industry taps into the ancient obsession with drugs. Party drugs, such as MDMA, popularly known as Molly, are used rampantly at music festival. Psychedelics have led to life-changing realizations for many people. However, drugs can also destroy lives. The US Department of Health and Human Services stated that in 2016, daily opioid-related drug overdose deaths were over 130, bringing the total for 2016 over 47,600 (HHS). These substances have also led to the mass incarceration of non-violent drug offenders in the US and extrajudicial killings in the Philippines in wars on drugs. As drugs can have beneficial effects, they too can come with a human cost. In short, there is no place in the

world where drugs do not have some form of societal importance. No time in history has this not been the case.

“Humans are the only animal that prepares, trades, and explains drugs. Drugs play a significant role in human societal differentiation, cultural and material exchange, and in some cases, conflict... [Drugs] are part of the fabric of our world – and our shared histories, from Peru to Africa to China (Breen 5).” The transference of drugs during the Age of Globalization is as important as the transference of currency and even ideas, with historian Dr. Benjamin Breen invoking a coinciding “Age of Intoxication,” when drugs were not bound by categorization. Before 1492, Europeans had no notion of what tobacco was. A family of plants native to the Americas would become an extremely lucrative global industry by the time of the Industrial Revolution. The most common drugs can be divided into two categories, the big three and the little three: alcohol, tobacco, caffeine, and opium, cannabis, and coca (Courtwright 9-52). In the context of globalization, these drugs were undoubtedly an important part of the Columbian Exchange and the formation of the modern world.

In an article titled *Psychoactive Substances in Prehistoric Times: Examining the Archaeological Evidence* published in *The Journal of Archaeology, Consciousness and Culture*, Dr. Elisa Guerra-Doce notes that there is archaeological evidence of ancient drug usage as far back as 2,000 B.C. (Cooper-White). Cannabis has a long history of global usage, with Dr. Ernest Abel suggesting its usage dates back as far as 12,000 years ago (Warf 419), putting cannabis in line with wheat as one of humanity’s oldest cultivated crops. Barney Warf, in an article published in the *Geographical Review*, includes many examples of cannabis use dating back thousands of years. Cannabis saw usage in Neolithic China, Korea, and Japan. Burial sites of the Scythians “frequently contained *cannabis sativa* seeds (Warf 420).” It was the same Scythians,

and other Bronze Age tribes, that helped to bring the plant to South Asia, the Middle East and Eastern Europe. Warf goes on to mention cannabis usage in Central and Western Europe, Africa, and the New World in the CE years. The spread of cannabis is linked to increased globalization. Where cannabis entered the New World from the Old World, tobacco entered the Old from the New. As the world became shaped by globalization, the use of cannabis remained an undercurrent in human history. As drug use has long been an aspect of societies, its use in war has an equally long track record.

In the *Odyssey* by Greek author Homer, the mythical medicine nepenthes was mixed with wine for soldiers dealing with the traumas of war (Kamienski 32). “Nepenthes” was “something capable of causing oblivion of grief or suffering (*Merriam-Webster*).” As Lukasz Kamienski puts it in his book *Shooting Up: A Short History of Drugs and War*, this was a “drink of oblivion,” a mixture of wine and opium; a drink meant to alleviate the effects of war on the human psyche. While opium is not explicitly mentioned in the *Odyssey*, nepenthes itself is defined as an anti-depressant drug, a drug eliminating grief and suffering. Opium works in the same way. Through the lens of ancient Greek writers, the same phenomena of war seen today are described, where some soldiers attain solace in substance. While this case of the Greeks is an example of treatment in the aftermath of battle, there are also cases of preparation before battle. The berserker Vikings of Scandinavia are believed by some historians to have eaten mushrooms before battle to enter a trance-like state. This theory was first suggested by Samuel Lorenzo Ødman in 1784 (Kamienski 40). Ødman compared the trancelike behavior of Viking warriors to that of Siberian tribes who were known to have used mushrooms. He found that both groups behaved similarly. These mushrooms, either *Amanita muscaria* or *Amanita pantherina*, possibly acted as the vector by which Viking berserkers became berserk. The use of mushrooms by Vikings is just a theory – a

theory with ample evidence, nonetheless. On the contrary, there are drugs that have undeniably played a significant role in the history of warfare.

Every culture has their own drink of choice. To the Russians, it is vodka, Scotch whiskey for the Scottish, Irish whiskey for the Irish, American whiskey or bourbon for Americans, and the list goes on. Alcohol has long been a central aspect of societies and a central aspect of empire-building in colonial and imperial times. Furthermore, alcohol as a drug of warfare has had the longest “career” of any drug and has been the most widespread (Andreas, 251) and has played four major roles in warfare: medical, stimulant, mental-therapeutic, and physiological (Kamienski 6). In ancient Greece, wine was the drink of soldiers. During the Roman period, legions received a daily ration, a practice that continued well into colonial times. Germanic tribes drank beer, while Vikings drank ale and mead. Rum eventually became known as the sailor’s drink and had a very distinct and close relationship to the Caribbean. Rum also holds an equal degree of importance in the American War of Independence, with one observer stating that it was rum that kept Americans armies together (Andreas 23). However, alcohol also played a detrimental role to the success of some armies in history:

The devastating impact of alcohol on Russian fighting effectiveness was, however, nothing new. As early as 1758, during the Seven Years’ War (1756-1763), the Russians did not manage to crush the Prussian forces at the battle of Küstrin, most probably because their left wing unit had gotten heavily drunk on vodka, which the overjoyed soldiers had accidentally discovered. Ultimately, some 20,000 Russians were captured and the battle ended indecisively... Yet the examples of the catastrophic impact of vodka on the Russian conduct of war are plentiful (Kamienski 14).

From the time of ancient Greeks and Romans, to that of colonization in the New World, to the strife of World War I, alcohol has been a staple of military life, for better or for worse. Soldiers have found solace and joy in drink – a lubricant for their hectic and chaotic lifestyles. World War I is a perfect example of the historical importance of the drink in the life of the soldier. To ensure that production of war supplies was not impacted, the British government imposed many restrictions on alcohol production and consumption on the home front. Taxes increased and pub hours were restricted. However, on the front, soldiers were still receiving their daily rations. Alcohol was served as a remedy for stress, fatigue, and hardship with many soldiers taking to the alcohol with religious fervor (Andreas 49-50). Veterans of the war wrote afterwards that if it were not for the rum ration, they would not have won. What was different about World War I when compared to previous wars was the technology and tactics used. New weapons and technologies ravaged the land and the people in it. It was a truly industrialized war. With industrialized weaponry came industrialized drugs.

The Netherlands became the world's leading producer of pure cocaine around 1910, supplanting Germany. The main source of coca leaves in Europe came from Bolivia and Peru, again reinforcing the idea that the drug trade is very much tied up in the theme of globalization. Factories, such as those belonging to Dutch company Nederlandsche Cocainefabriek (NCF) were dedicated to the production of pure cocaine (Oneindig Noord-Holland). As the Netherlands remained neutral in World War I, NCF sold to both the Central Powers and the Allies (Kamienski 95-96). World War I saw widespread usage of cocaine in the trenches, and even among fighter pilots. Though specific estimates for cocaine usage are not available, it was used for medical and performance purposes and its use was not limited to one side. The Allied Powers and Central Powers made use of the drug – administered by commanders, doctors, and even self-

prescribed by soldiers (Kamienski “Drugs”). World War I sowed devastating death and destruction upon Europe. As advancements in technology gave way to more destructive warfare, so too did those advancements increase the production and use of drugs. Unprecedented warfare resulted in an unprecedented rise in the use of cocaine. How else could a soldier deal with the trauma of a war of attrition? Chemical therapy is certainly one possibility. The dopamine rush that comes with using cocaine could be of benefit to a soldier in the trenches, as could the drink. Additionally, the use of cocaine on the German side in World War I serves as a precursor for the use of a much harder drug in World War II – methamphetamine.

National Socialism stresses the importance of performance and efficiency in the name of the State, from the factory to the track to the battlefield. The drug Pervitin, methamphetamine being the active ingredient, was an over the counter drug in Germany until 1939, at which point it became a prescription drug. Such an important drug to the Third Reich and its people that it was known as “Volksdroge,” the people’s drug (Ohler 1). During the invasion of Poland, Pervitin was administered at the behest of the individual, whether it be the individual commander, medical officer, or soldier. Methamphetamine made soldiers attentive with a clear increase in performance for days at a time. Methamphetamine made fighting easier and erased the need for sleep. The same usage was seen during the Invasion of France. Capturing France in such a short time and with relative ease came with the help of widespread methamphetamine usage (Ohler 72-74). Invasions of such magnitude and swiftness are not possible if soldiers have to sleep after every push. To control the mind of the soldier is to control efficiency. Any help the Third Reich could get in pushing its soldiers to their absolute limit was welcome. For the Nazis, time and speed were essential – and they supplied the Wehrmacht with all meth they needed.

One cannot speak of the Third Reich without mentioning the atrocities they committed, and drugs also played a role in this. Unfortunately, extreme cruelty too often comes with war. Reserve Police Battalion 101 was a group of around 500 “ordinary men” responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of innocent men, women, and children in Poland. Alcohol acted as a substance to help these men become accustomed to what their task was. After one of their first massacres at Józefów in Poland, “[they] arrived at the barracks in Biłgoraj, they were depressed, angered, embittered, and shaken. They ate little but drank heavily. Generous quantities of alcohol were provided, and many of the policemen got quite drunk (Browning 68).” Alcohol has found its place throughout history - among the darkest chapters of humanity is no exception.

The Vietnam War was the first true pharmacological war; a war in which drugs were not just recommended, but a true instrument to the war effort. In addition to the drugs US soldiers used on their own time, US Armed Forces consumed over 225 million prescribed stimulant pills between 1966 and 1969 (Kamienski 188). Soldiers going on multiple day missions were sometimes given steroid injections, in addition to receiving a medical kit containing painkillers, codeine, and Dexedrine. Antipsychotic drugs were also heavily prescribed to reduce the mental trauma associated with combat in Vietnam, combatting mental breakdowns. These drugs provide short-term effects, contributing to low combat trauma during the war itself but an unprecedented level of PTSD cases after the war. Self-prescribing gave soldiers a sense of control over their situation in the chaotic atmosphere of jungle fighting, “psychopharmacological self-medication gave the soldiers a feeling of control, even if just over themselves in the conditions, in the wake of which they were usually helpless (Kamienski 199).” By the time the US withdrew from Vietnam, 70 percent of US soldiers had used some form of intoxicant; half of US soldiers smoked marijuana and over a quarter used heroin (Kamienski 188).

Drug use in Vietnam was so widespread, that it contributed to President Nixon's declaration of the "war on drugs." On May 27th, 1971, congressmen Morgan F. Murphy and Robert H. Steele presented a report to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs in which spoke of heroin usage among Vietnam soldiers. The frenzied media coverage of these reports created a "general anxiety in society." Not even a month later, Nixon said to Congress, "public enemy number one in the United States is drug abuse (Kamienski 209)." In that same message, he acknowledged American drug use in Vietnam. Thus, amid a disastrous war effort in Vietnam, a new front was being created at home. Drugs were used as a scapegoat for failures in Vietnam, the idea being that American soldiers were perpetually stoned in Vietnam and unable to perform efficiently. However, this idea is wholly incorrect. Soldiers in Vietnam reached for drugs mostly during downtimes, not during combat (Kamienski 213). Not much is needed to be said about how soldiers were welcomed back from Vietnam. No doubt the demonization of drugs and warlike language used to discuss confronting drugs contributed to the environment Vietnam veterans found on US soil. As Lukasz Kamienski put it, "The hell of Vietnam was often replaced by a hell of rejection, lack of understanding, condemnation, stress disorders, in a phrase – by the misery of the inability to get back to 'normal' life in a society that did not, and did not want to, understand their experience and condition (Kamienski 210)." Where drugs played a significant role in the lives of soldiers in Vietnam, they were demonized in America. There were too often atmospheres void of understanding meeting veterans upon their return from Vietnam. Warfare undeniably alters the human condition for all whose lives are affected by it. A society not willing to harbor empathy for others is a broken society.

What we see is a potential for substance abuse to become an issue for a soldier once they return home. This is not just a product of drug use while deployed. There are a wide variety of

factors that can contribute to substance abuse among veterans, including deployment duration and frequency, combat involvement, age, etc. (Larson, et al.). One of the largest contributing factors to Substance Abuse Disorder (SUD) among veterans is PTSD. A 1996 study on chronic PTSD among Vietnam combat veterans found a potential link between the onset of PTSD symptoms and the onset of SUD (Bremer, et al. 369). According to the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, “Almost 1 out of every 3 veterans seeking treatment for SUD also have PTSD. More than 1 of every 4 veterans with PTSD also have SUD” (USDVA). Experiencing combat can be an overwhelmingly traumatic experience with serious and long-lasting implications on the psyche of those involved. As noted throughout this paper, alcohol has had a long-standing relationship to militaries throughout history, with many having intense drinking cultures, to the point of leading to military blunders. It is no surprise that when combined with the other aspects of military life, that SUDs can develop among veterans.

The histories of drugs and warfare are a shared story. Drugs have advanced in the same way that technology has, though not expressly for the purpose of warfare. Today, sniper-rifles are the preferred weapon of marksmen, where bows stood dominant. Where Incans chewed on coca leaves, those same coca leaves became industrialized and cocaine found a home in the trenches of World War I. The warrior mentality must be created. There are various means to create this mentality, with drugs being able to assist in this – whether through numbing the emotions or elevating aggression. Barbara Ehrenreich wrote:

Almost any drug or intoxicant has served, in one setting or another, to facilitate the transformation of man into warrior. Yanomam Indians of the Amazon ingest a hallucinogen before battle; the ancient Scythians smoked hemp, while a neighboring tribe drank something called “hauma,” which is believed to have

induced a frenzy of aggression. So if there is a destructive instinct that impels men to war, it is a weak one, and often requires a great deal of help (Ehrenreich 11).

Warfare itself creates the conditions that predicate the use of drugs. As stated previously, the desire for an escape has been a staple of humanity and warfare only increases that desire. Drugs can provide that escape. If warfare creates the conditions conducive to drug use on the battlefield, it is possible for that drug use to be continued once a soldier comes home.

Understanding the history of drugs can help us come to a better understanding of them, an understanding clean of baseless assumptions and modern prejudices. Stigma surrounding substance abuse and addiction only makes it harder for those struggling to get help. A better understanding of drugs combined with consideration of the effects of warfare on the mind allows us to have more compassion not just for veterans, but for anyone who struggles with substance abuse.

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