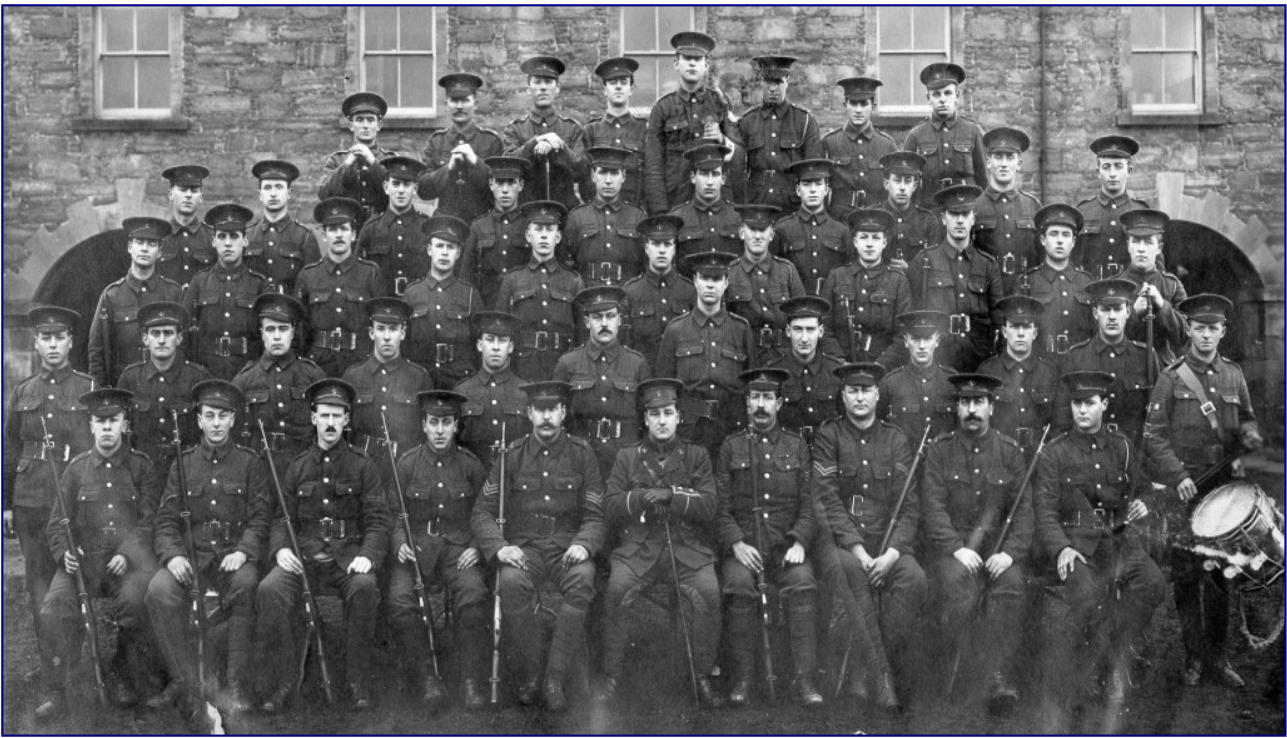


# The Great War And The Cocaine Panic in Britain

Although the French accused the Germans of smuggling cocaine in order to deliberately weaken the French race, it was in Britain that the truly nationwide drug panic broke out. The hysteria was largely generated by the media, politicians, and military establishment. The *Times*, for example, hailed cocaine as a grave danger even “more deadly than bullets.” The problem was grossly exaggerated and presented as a threat not only to the British troops on the front but also to the British Empire. The panic ensued mainly because of the Canadian soldiers temporarily stationed on the Isles waiting to be deployed to the Western Front. In 1914–1915 between 200,000 and 250,000 Canadians passed through London. In January 1916 a Canadian major based near Folkestone in Kent discovered the source of the supply of cocaine to his units. He carried out what today would be called a “sting operation” by buying a packet of cocaine from a man named Horace Dennis Kingsley and a London prostitute called Rose Edwards. They both admitted obtaining the drug in a West End pub from a man who supplied all local women of easy virtue. Kingsley and Edwards were sentenced to six months’ hard labor for “selling a powder to members of HM Forces, with intent to make them less capable of performing their duties.” In the course of their trial it emerged that some forty men in a local camp had developed a drug habit.

This widely publicised incident became a true bomb- shell and the grist to the mill of the proponents of bringing addictive substances under tight governmental control. Other minor incidents, such as robbery and a fatal beating, which also involved the Canadians, only confirmed the public belief in the already well-established but false media myth that it was the Canadian troops who had brought the cocaine habit to Britain. In the period 1906–1910 politicians, clerics, officials of the judiciary, and various social activists in Canada frequently raised the problem of the increasing consumption of cocaine. The issue was widely discussed in parliamentary debates as well as in the professional medical journals. The Canadian soldiers had not, however, created the cocaine problem in Britain; they merely aggravated it by fuelling the demand for the drug that already existed.



The Royal Newfoundland Regiment in World War 1 (Source: Wikipedia)

Before the war cocaine was a common ingredient in medicines and tonics for hay fever as it cleanses the respiratory track by reducing swelling of the mucosa and nasal discharge. The most popular American drug, called Ryno's Hay Fever, the content of which was 99.9 percent cocaine, was touted as the best cure for a clogged, reddened, and sore nose, to be used when it gets "stuffed-up." Also the British Burroughs Wellcome & Co. manufactured the already mentioned Tabloid cocaine tablets marketed as perfect for singers and public speakers longing to improve their voices. Overall, mass-produced cocaine, which was believed to be as harmless as tobacco, had become widespread well before the war, and soldiers were but a minority of its users. Thus, if the consumption of drugs in Britain developed into a problem, it was a problem not so much of the army alone but of society at large. Cocaine's presence in literature might be illustrative of the extent of its non-medical use; one of the finest examples is Sherlock Holmes. He is an eccentric character and a cultural icon whom Arthur Conan Doyle made a habitual user who takes cocaine to combat boredom and boost his mental faculties. The world's most famous detective is, in fact, a regular recreational cocaine taker. Holmes's habit is directly observed in the novel *The Sign of the Four* (1890) and in the short story *A Scandal in Bohemia* (1891). At the very beginning of the novel Holmes injects into his arm a 7 percent solution of cocaine in front of Dr. Watson, contentedly sighs with pleasure, and relaxes in his armchair. He dopes himself for intellectual stimulation, as his mind revolts against apathy and stagnation. Conan Doyle is a moralist here, for he makes Dr. Watson express his own anxiety about the harmful effects of cocaine use:

But consider! Count the cost! Your brain may, as you say, be roused and excited, but it is a pathological and morbid process, which involves increased tissue change, and may at least leave a permanent weakness. You know, too, what a black reaction comes upon you. Surely the game is hardly worth the candle. Why should you, for a mere passing pleasure, risk the loss of those great powers with which you have been endowed?

Watson's concerns were loudly echoed in wartime Britain. In February 1916 many pharmacies were fined for selling soldiers cocaine and morphine without observing the restrictions of the 1868 Pharmacy Act. Among those punished were not only the famous London store Harrods but also Savory & Moore, a well-known Mayfair pharmacy with a long tradition. In a December 1915 edition of the *Times* Savory & Moore advertised a small mail-order medical kit in a handy case containing, among other items, cocaine and heroin. And Harrods offered small packages of morphine and cocaine complete with syringe and spare needles, which was recommended as "A Useful Present for Friends at the Front." Girls often brought to the train station a cocaine kit as an ideal gift for their loved ones leaving for war. Despite itself advertising cocaine products, the *Times*, like most other papers, created alarm by suggesting that supplying soldiers with this drug would inevitably undermine the combat effectiveness of the British Army. In the February 12, 1916, issue, its journalist expressed no doubt that

[t]o the soldier subjected to nervous strain and hard work cocaine, once used, must become a terrible temptation. It will, for the hour, charm away his trouble, his fatigue and his anxiety; it will give him fictitious strength and vigour. But it will also, in the end, render him worthless as a soldier and a man.

The *Daily Chronicle*, too, contributed to heating up the cocaine hysteria by reporting, for example, that soldiers were literally crawling into chemists' shops to get the drug. Readers were informed that the habit "is driving hundreds of women mad. What is worse, it will drive, unless the traffic in it is checked, hundreds of soldiers mad." The consequences of cocaine taking were said to be terrifying, as crazed soldiers turned aggressive, insubordinate, and sometimes even committed murders. It was suggested, in essence, that the armed forces were plunging into confusion and anarchy. Moreover, in the first months of 1916 the police confirmed that a well-organised underground market for cocaine existed in London. Drug dealers in the West End used Soho prostitutes, popularly known as "cocaine girls" or "dope girls," to distribute cocaine to military personnel. The press and public opinion immediately linked cocaine with sex, hedonism, moral decay, and enemy subversion. Because in the popular imagination drugs were clichéd and commonly associated with hostile foreign influences, they were easily portrayed as a tool of war employed by the scheming enemy to undermine the spirit of Britannia. And the wartime conditions only favoured the rise of numerous conspiracy theories and xenophobic narratives. As we know, however, the world's largest cocaine manufacturer and supplier was not in hostile Germany but the neutral Netherlands.

The politicians, particularly Sir Malcolm Delevingne, the undersecretary of state at the Home Office; military commanders; and the media promoted and reinforced the view that intoxicants were a secret or unfair weapon (today we would perhaps call it "asymmetric") deployed by the Central Powers, mostly Germany, which was, after all, a pioneer country in the production of cocaine. The drug covertly supplied by the Germans was believed to get British soldiers addicted, thus eroding their combat performance, undermining military discipline, and ultimately causing a rapid decay of the army. Sir Francis Lloyd, a general in command of the London district, accurately captured the essence of the cocaine panic that seized public opinion: "I am told that this evil practice is exceedingly rife at the present time. It is doing an immense amount of harm, I am told. They say that it is so ingrained that once you take it you will not give it up." The drug plague was therefore allegedly destroying the British military. Sir William Glyn-Jones, the secretary of the Pharmaceutical Society, warned with regard to morphine, though he could well have been, to an

extent, talking about cocaine, “It was an exceedingly dangerous thing for a drug like morphine to be in the hands of men on active service ... It might have the effect of making them sleep on duty or other very serious results.” Of course, cocaine could not make troops sleep on duty, though it was claimed it had other debilitating effects. With politicians and media playing on the paranoid fears of enemy subversion, the moral panic around cocaine was spreading at lightning speed and turning into mass hysteria not only over cocaine but over drugs in general.



There were great fears about providing soldiers with morphine and cocaine (Source: Wikipedia)

Given such an explosive social climate, with public opinion highly susceptible to manipulation, the military command could not stay idle. It seemed that it was high time to take emergency action in defence of the army and Britain’s fighting power. Hence, under intense and relentless public pressure, on May 11, 1916, the Army Council issued an order banning any unauthorised sale or supply of psychoactive substances — mostly cocaine, but also codeine, hemp, heroin, morphine, and opium — to any member of the armed forces, except for medical reasons and only by prescription. All violations would constitute an offence punishable by six months’ imprisonment. Further regulations were introduced under the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA), which was already in force having been passed four days after Britain entered the war in August 1914. DORA served as the cover for various wartime regulatory schemes and social control mechanisms, including censorship and a limited prohibition on alcohol.

The Act allowed the executive to create criminal offences through regulation, hence under DORA regulation 40B, passed on July 28, 1916, the sale of cocaine and opium-based products to military personnel without a non-reusable prescription was prohibited for anyone except for medical practitioners, pharmacists, and veterinary personnel. Soldiers could face court-martial if accused of violating the ban. The historical importance of DORA 40B lay not so much in its scope, since it was limited to cocaine and opium and covered neither marijuana nor heroin, but in the essence of the prohibitive principle, that is, putting particular substances under strict state control and criminalising their sale and use. The subsequent Dangerous Drugs Act of 1920 retained most of the provisions of DORA 40B, thereby transforming the wartime regulation into a peacetime law. The drug control regime was significantly widened to cover not only military personnel but also all citizens. Moreover, the list of controlled substances was extended to include cocaine, heroin, morphine, raw opium, and also, to an extent, barbiturates. The Act brought Britain in line with national control regimes introduced earlier by the United States (under the Harrison Act of 1914) and the Netherlands (under its opium act of 1919) and, above all, with the demands put forward by the Versailles peace conference on the need to impose restrictions on the international trade in opium. Therefore, the overblown problem of cocaine use in the military resulted in the adoption of strict government drug control regulations in Britain.

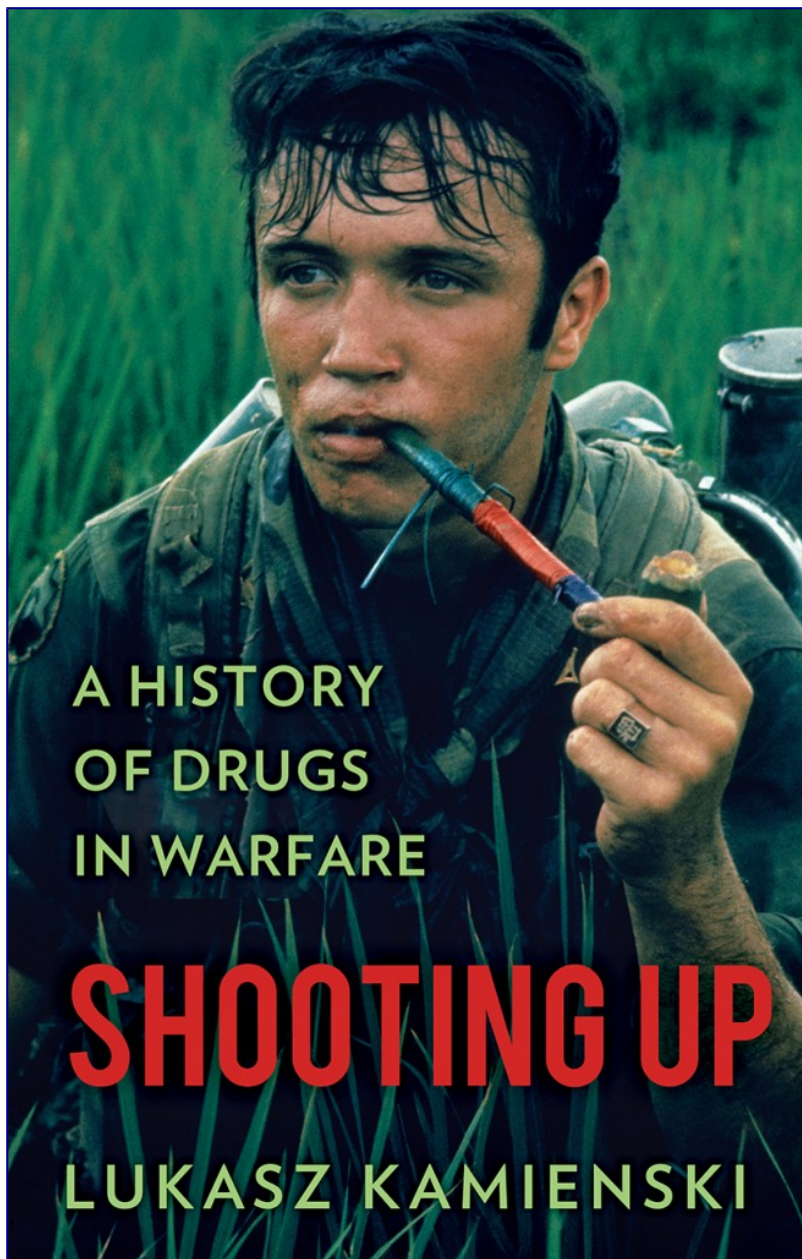
Thus the war not only favoured the rise of cocaine and morphine taking but was also critical in fostering the introduction of a comprehensive substance control regime, for the implementation of which the issue of servicemen's use and abuse of intoxicants was merely instrumental. So, similar to the opium and morphine problem and the "soldiers' disease" in the aftermath of the American Civil War, the cocaine crisis in Britain was widely exaggerated and grossly overestimated. The findings of the Select Committee on the Use of Cocaine in Dentistry unequivocally debunked the myth that cocaine addiction was hitting hard in the British forces:

We are unanimously of opinion that there is no evidence of any kind to show that there is any serious, or, perhaps, even noticeable prevalence of the cocaine habit amongst the civilian or military population of Great Britain. There have been a certain number of cases amongst the oversea troops quartered in, or passing through, the United Kingdom, but there is hardly any trace of the practice having spread to British troops, and, apart from a small number of broken-down medical men, there is only very slight evidence of its existence amongst the general population.

The new dimension of state control spread also into the realm of art. The film director Graham Cutts experienced this firsthand, when the Board of Film Censors tried to ban the distribution of his 1922 movie under the telling title *Cocaine*. The film sent a clear warning against the dangers of cocaine use by showing an underworld of night clubs and drug gangs, in which the stimulant is omnipresent, and ultimately brings death to a young character. Yet the authorities feared that the movie might actually encourage cocaine taking. Moral panics preclude rational interpretation and sound judgment.

To conclude, the character of the First World War with its totality, brutality, anonymity, and harsh conditions on the frontline, propelled the military demand for cocaine, and not merely for its medical value. Along with alcohol, tobacco, and morphine, it allowed for temporary escape from the terrifying reality of modern warfare. Although cocaine would never again achieve such popularity among combatants, it soon emerged as a highly fashionable intoxicant among bohemian

artists and in the world of popular culture. It was the war indeed that was in part responsible for the rise of cocaine in European societies. If the First World War brought cocaine to the frontline, the drugs of choice during the Second World War would be amphetamines.



(Source: Hurst & Co.)

*This is an excerpt from [Shooting Up: A History of Drugs And War](#) by Lukasz Kamienski, published with permission from Hurst & Co. Publishers and released in the UK on 31st March 2016. Copyright © 2016 by Lukasz Kamienski. Lukasz Kamienski is Assistant Professor at the Faculty of International and Political Studies, Jagiellonian University, Kraków.*