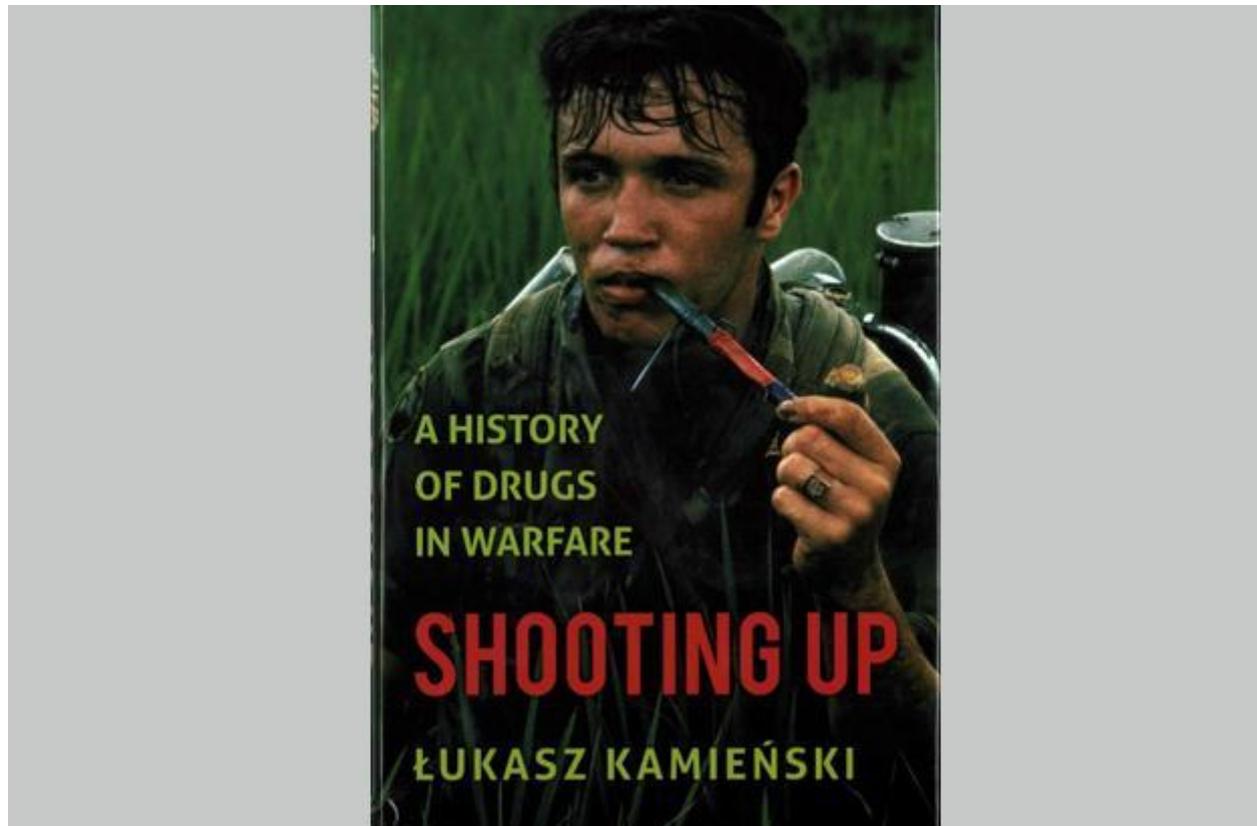


The opium armies: Drugs and war across the ages

A look at the Opium Wars in the 19th century, and the use of opium by the army in China, India and elsewhere



Lukasz Kamiński

The Opium Wars are an exceptional example of the complex connections between international politics, war, and drugs; the use of opium by troops is part of this complexity.

Given the pervasive consumption of opium in China it is hardly surprising that many soldiers of the emperor's army who were fighting in the Opium Wars to defend the country against the flood of Indian opium were, paradoxically and tragically, drug addicts.

A decade after the first Opium War, the Taiping Rebellion (1851-1864) took power in southern China. Its success was the result not only of the weakening of the country and the military caused by the war but also of the epidemic addiction rates of nearly 90 percent among the ranks of the emperor's army. The Chinese armed forces in the mid-nineteenth century can therefore be well described as the world's largest "opium army." But, of course, they were not the first military to use opium routinely.

The Sikhs, among the greatest Indian warriors, were regularly slightly high on opium for the same reasons as the Ottoman soldiers, earlier in the sixteenth century. In 1546 the French naturalist Pierre Belon, while documenting his travel experiences to Asia Minor and Egypt, reported the abuse of opium by the Turks. Belon's account was slightly exaggerated, but it is still worth invoking:

There is not a Turk who would not purchase opium with his last coin; he carries the drug on him in war and in peace. They eat opium because they think they will thus become more courageous and have less fear of the dangers of war. At the time of war, such large quantities are purchased it is difficult to find any left.

Henry Waterfield, a general major who served in India from the times of the great anti-British mutiny in 1857-1859, testified that 80 percent of Sikh soldiers were “occasional opium takers,” 15 percent used it regularly, and about 0.5 percent were heavy abusers. Another British officer, William Biscoe, reported that in his Sikh regiment nearly 60 percent of men “took it and left it off as occasion required.” In fact, in terms of combat performance “it was not considered a defect in a man if he took opium occasionally.”

When the drug was elusive, it was the army’s responsibility to supply soldiers because moderate opium eating had a positive and desired impact on the attitude and fighting performance of the troops. Sometimes the use of the intoxicant in India was so deeply rooted in everyday life and customs that it was a cultural norm. Take the case of the Rajputs, the descendants of the Hindu warrior caste of North India who, probably from the 1720s on, used opium regularly and had a habit of sharing it with their horses and camels before leaving for a mission to patrol the desert.

The Indian commander, Sirsubha Sakharm Martand, testified that

[m]y long connection with and intimate knowledge of the State army enables me to say unhesitatingly that a moderate dose of opium is an unmixed good to the consumers. Opium eating does not necessarily lead to immorality or crime. It gives staying power under great exertions such as long marches and hunting excursions. As compared with alcohol drinkers, I found opium consumers to be steady, quiet, reliable, and obedient soldiers. In my time I found 40 to 50 percent using opium in the State army.

Also the general in command of the Indian state army in Indore, Balmukund

Gayadeen, confirmed:

Opium is eaten as well as drunk in the army. The percentage of consumers in my opinion is 50. A moderate use of opium is known not to tell against the physique of soldiers. Opium-eaters are sober, quiet, obedient, enterprising, and attentive to their duties. They can stand hard marches under the influence of the drug. If the use of opium is accompanied by the use of milk, sweetmeat, or any substantial food as is usually the case, it is not only harmless but positively beneficial. It staves off hunger, and keeps the user from the effects of exposure to cold or heat. Opium is also useful to animals and makes them capable of undergoing hard work and long journeys.

Unlike the Indian military, which generally saw the moderate use of opium as enhancing fighting spirit and combat performance, opium abuse had a severe impact on the Chinese troops. This was clearly in evidence already in the 1830s during the quelling of the Rebellion of the Yao ethnic group in South China.

Xi En, the governor responsible for the suppression of the Yao uprising, repeatedly sent disturbing messages to the emperor reporting that seven in ten Chinese soldiers were opium addicts. He was pessimistic for a reason; how could an army of opium-eaters achieve any victory? The imperial investigative censor, Feng Zhanxun, wrote in a similar fashion that “[m]any Cantonese and

Fujianese soldiers smoked opium, there are even more among the officers. They are cowards and they have spoiled our operation. They are really despicable.”

Opium made the soldiers forget about hunger, withstand the cold, endure the hardships of military life, and numbed them emotionally. Also, it was used for medicinal purposes to relieve a whole range of illnesses and was often taken prophylactically, especially by the troops posted in the empire’s southern provinces. Most soldiers, however, took opium because of their addiction.

The remarkable difference in the impact of opium on the Indian and Chinese troops—positive and negative, desirable and unwanted, invigorating and debilitating—can be explained partly by the different culture of drug use, that is, the Indians being more temperate than the Chinese. There was also another phenomenon at work, because, as mentioned, depending on such factors as dose, capacity of the body to tolerate and withstand intoxicants, and the expectations and attitudes of the user, opium can have either stimulating or tranquilizing effects.

Medical and clinical studies have focused mostly on the drug’s sedative properties; therefore its boosting effects, the ones that the Indian warriors took great advantage of, at first glance might be surprising. While the Indian fighting men used opium advisedly and for the pragmatic reason of gaining combat advantage, the majority of Chinese troopers were hooked on the drug and rendered ineffective for duty.

What is more, the habit in the army had snowballing consequences: from the 1860s on, Chinese troops had been a major force that triggered the further diffusion of opium smoking among the civilians in the southern provinces. The Imperial Army, in short, turned into a powerful catalyst for the spread of the epidemic of addiction throughout society.

In his book *The Social Life of Opium in China*, Yangwen Zheng firmly argues:

Opium had demilitarized the fighting machine, as soldiers found the best way to escape boredom and combat responsibilities. Given seven thousand soldiers out of ten thousand were invalids, any battle would have been lost. Here, however, it was not only the battle against the Yao people that was lost but also the first Opium War itself.

It was not wise to send heavy opium-smokers to battle, for they lacked the will for combat. Drug abuse destroyed individual fighting spirit and the morale of the troops. Feng Zhanxun observed that “the poison of opium is that when the people smoke it, they waste themselves and ruin their business, and when the soldiers smoke it, they become tired and break the army’s discipline.”

In the same vein, the English physician C. Toogood Downing, who lived in Canton, noted that “the class of people who consume opium in China are those of the male sex, chiefly between twenty and fifty-five years old, and of all ranks in society. It affects soldiers very much, rendering them weak and decrepit.”

In that respect, it is worth mentioning the ancient Chinese thinker on war, Sun Pin, active in the fourth century BC, who grasped the ultimate truth: “When an army is internally exhausted, even numerous expenditures of energy will not result in solidity. When you see the enemy is difficult to subdue, if the army still acts wantonly between Heaven and Earth, it will be swiftly defeated.”

Lieutenant Alexander Murray remarked that he believed that the Chinese soldiers took opium to raise their courage and prepare for battle. To his surprise, and contrary to what he had expected, Murray did not see them being euphoric or numbed but only insanely manic. He recounted:

About twenty wounded men were taken into our hospital, where their wounds were dressed; but several died from the immense quantity of opium they had taken to get their courage up to the fighting point. Most of the attacking party were mad with excitement, produced probably by this abominable drug.

What Murray also expressed was actually the prevailing view among the English soldiers and officers at the time, namely that a proper enemy has his natural courage grounded in character, values, intrinsic fortitude, and proper training. During the “opium punitive expedition” against China, a well-armed British army encountered an enemy that proved to be composed of “half-humans driven mad by an abominable drug.”

For the British, an unnaturally boosted enemy was not a worthy opponent. Although military technology gave the European soldiers a decisive advantage, they did not see it in terms of an unnatural enhancement. The point is that technology was considered merely as an extension of their human abilities while opium changed the body from within. The issue was not about artificial tools of war but about the artificially created condition of a soldier.

Of course, the British were somewhat hypocritical in their reasoning—it was, in fact, they who had substantially contributed to the opium addiction they later criticized. Their expedition, moreover, was an important element of England’s drug-funded imperialism, prompting the expansion of the opium habit in Chinese society and the armed forces.

Excerpted from Shooting Up: A History of Drugs and War by Lukasz Kamienski with permission from Hurst & Co.

First Published: Sat, Jul 30 2016. 11 16 PM IST