

## The Expansion of Global Drug Trade: Historical Milestones, Colonialism, Prohibition, and Ongoing Challenges

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### *Abstract*

*The development of the global drug trade is a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by historical, economic, and political forces. From ancient medicinal and ritualistic uses of psychoactive substances to the rise of vast illicit markets, the drug trade has evolved alongside global trade networks and shifting regulatory regimes. Colonial expansion played a critical role in commercializing drugs such as opium, coca, and cannabis; while in the twentieth century saw the emergence of prohibitionist policies and international control treaties. Despite these efforts, the drug trade continues to present significant challenges, including organized crime, public health crises, and policy debates. Understanding its historical trajectory is essential for crafting effective responses to this enduring global issue.*

*Keywords: global drug trade, colonialism, prohibition, international policy, organized crime, public health*

### **Introduction**

The global drug trade has evolved as one of the largely complex and persistent challenges presently faced by the international community, with deep historical roots and far-reaching social, economic, and political consequences. From the ancient utilization of psychoactive substances in ritual and medicine to the emergence of vast unlawful markets in the modern time, the development of the drug trade has been shaped by a series of key historical milestones (Booth, 1996; Courtwright, 2001). Colonialism played a pivotal role in expanding and commercializing drug markets, as imperial powers exploited substances such as opium, coca, and cannabis for economic gain and social control (Dikötter, Laamann, & Zhou, 2004; Mills, 2003). The 20th century has witnessed the increase in prohibitionist policies and the establishment of international drug control regimes, which sought to suppress the production, distribution, and consumption of narcotics but often produced unintended consequences, including the growth of powerful criminal organizations and widespread social harms (Bewley-Taylor, 2012; McAllister, 2000). Today, the global drug trade continues to

adapt and expand, presenting ongoing challenges such as transnational crime, public health crises, and debates over policy reform (UNODC, 2023; Global Commission on Drug Policy, 2018). Understanding the historical trajectory and multifaceted impact of the drug trade is essential for developing effective and humane responses to this enduring global issue.

The global drug trade has evolved over centuries, shaped by economic, political, and social forces. From its roots in ancient trade routes to its current status as a multibillion-dollar illicit industry, the drug trade has left a profound impact on societies worldwide. This article explores the key historical milestones, the influence of colonialism, the rise of prohibition, and the persistent challenges faced by the international community.

## **Review of Literature**

The global drug trade has been the area under discussion for wide ranging scholarly research, spanning history, social work, sociology, economics, and international relations. This review synthesizes findings from the key studies to reflect the evolution and complexity of the global drug trade and to highlight major themes relevant to the development of the global drug trade are as under:

### **1. Historical Milestones in the Drug Trade**

**Booth (1996)** provides a foundational account of opium's journey from ancient Mesopotamia to its central role in the British Empire's trade with China, highlighting how opium became both a medicinal staple and a tool of imperial power. **Courtwright (2001)** expands this perspective, tracing the global history of psychoactive substances—including opium, coca, cannabis, and tobacco—and emphasizing the interplay between trade, colonization, and industrialization in shaping drug markets.

**Dikötter, Laamann, and Zhou (2004)** focus on China, analysing the profound cultural and social impact of opium, particularly during the Qing dynasty and the Opium Wars. Their work illustrates how drug trade and consumption can destabilize societies and alter the course of national history. **Gootenberg (2008)** explores the transformation of coca from a sacred Andean plant to a global commodity, documenting the rise of cocaine in the modern era and its integration into international markets.

## 2. Colonialism and the Expansion of Drug Markets

**Mills (2003)** investigates the British Empire's role in the spread and regulation of cannabis, particularly in India and Africa, showing how colonial authorities both exploited and attempted to control local drug economies. **Goodman (1993)** discusses the integration of tobacco into global trade networks, emphasizing its economic significance for colonial powers and its role in shaping transatlantic commerce.

**Chouvy (2005)** examines Morocco's hashish trade, revealing how colonial legacies and international demand have sustained illicit economies in North Africa. **Gootenberg (2008) and Paoli, Greenfield, and Reuter (2009)** further highlight how colonial and post-colonial states have struggled to regulate drug production and trafficking, often with unintended consequences.

## 3. The Rise of Prohibition and International Drug Control

**McAllister (2000)** provides an international history of drug diplomacy, focusing on the evolution of drug control treaties in the 20th century. **Bewley-Taylor (2012)** analyses the fracturing consensus in international drug control, emphasizing the limitations and unintended consequences of prohibitionist policies. **Musto (1999)** traces the origins of narcotic control in the United States, linking domestic policy to international advocacy for prohibition and highlighting the influence of racial and social anxieties.

**The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2023)** offers annual data analysis on global drug production, trafficking, and consumption, highlighting emerging trends and persistent challenges. **The Global Commission on Drug Policy (2018)** reviews the effectiveness of international prohibition policies and programmes. It further, advocates for regulatory and harm reduction approaches, reflecting a growing international debate about the future of drug policy.

## 4. The Economics and Structure of Illicit Drug Markets

**Paoli, Greenfield, and Reuter (2009)** provide a comparative analysis of the structure and evolution of global drug markets, including heroin, cocaine, and cannabis. **Caulkins and Reuter (2009)** analyse the economics of illegal drug markets, focusing on the effects of enforcement and interdiction on supply, demand, and market adaptation. **Andreas and Greenhill (2010)** has try to examine the connection between illicit trade including drugs and

the state sovereignty in the context of globalization, arguing that illicit markets often thrive in the gaps and weaknesses of state control.

## 5. Public Health, Social Harms, and Human Rights

**Friedman et al. (2006)** has explored the implications of drug policy on public health with significant emphasis particularly on the spread of HIV/AIDS among people who are injecting drugs, and the effectiveness of harm reduction strategies. **Youngers and Rosin (2005)** assess the impact of U.S.-led drug control policies in Latin America, focusing on violence, corruption, and human rights abuses associated with militarized enforcement.

**Blickman (2017)** discusses the environmental consequences of illicit drug crop cultivation and eradication efforts, highlighting deforestation, pollution, and the displacement of rural communities. **Windle (2012)** has reviewed in his research how the organized crime syndicates operate in global drug trade historically and contemporary, emphasizing the adaptability and resilience of criminal networks.

**Griffiths, Sedefov, and Gallegos (2010)** examine the emergence of synthetic drugs and the challenges they pose for international control regimes, noting the rapid evolution of new substances and the difficulties of regulation.

## 6. Policy Evolution and Reform

The literature increasingly reflects a shift toward policy innovation and reform. **The Global Commission on Drug Policy (2018)** and **Bewley Taylor (2012)** both argue for a move away from punitive prohibition toward evidence-based regulation, harm reduction, and public health approaches. These studies highlight the need for international cooperation, flexible policy frameworks, and recognition of the complex social, economic, and cultural factors that sustain the global drug trade.

## Synthesis

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that the global drug trade is deeply intertwined with historical processes such as colonialism, the rise of prohibition, and the evolution of international law. They also highlight ongoing challenges, including the adaptability of illicit markets, the unintended consequences of enforcement, the public health impacts of drug use and policy, and the need for innovative, humane, and evidence-based responses.

## Research Methodology

Objectives of the present research are as following:

- To trace the key historical milestones in the development of the global drug trade.
- To analyse the impact of colonialism on the expansion and regulation of drug markets.
- To examine the evolution of international drug control regimes and rise of prohibitions.
- To identify and assess the ongoing challenges faced by the international community in addressing the global drug trade.

## Research Design

This study will employ a qualitative, historical-comparative research design. It will synthesize primary and secondary sources, including historical documents, policy reports, and peer-reviewed research.

## Historical Milestones of Global Drug Trade

The global illegal drug commerce has deep historical roots, evolving through distinct eras as ancient, medieval, and modern. Each era is marked by unique developments in the production, use, and distribution of psychoactive substances.

### 1. Ancient History

The use and trade of psychoactive substances can be traced back thousands of years. Production of Opium poppies were traced back to Mesopotamia as early as 3400 BCE according to Archaeological evidences. Ancient Egyptians used opium for medicinal purposes, and it was later adopted by the Greeks and Romans for pain relief and ritual use (Nencini, 1997). The birth of the drug trade can be tracked down to ancient civilizations, where psychoactive substances were used for medicinal, religious, recreational and leisure purposes. For example, opium was cultivated in the ancient Sumerian civilization and referred to as the “joy plant.” Its use spread through trade routes to Egypt, Greece, and Rome, where it was valued and known for its painkilling properties (Booth, 1996).

Cannabis was used in ancient China as early as 2700 BCE, both as a medicine and for its psychoactive effects (Li, 1974). The Ebers Papyrus, an Egyptian medical text from around 1550 BCE, mentions the use of cannabis and other plant-based drugs (Russo, 2007).

Coca leaves were chewed by indigenous peoples in the Andes for their stimulant effects, aiding in endurance and ritual practices long before the arrival of Europeans (Gootenberg, 2008).

## **2. Medieval History**

During the medieval period, the trade in psychoactive substances expanded along major trade routes. The movement of opium, cannabis, and other drugs between Asia, the Middle East, and Europe were facilitated through the Silk Road (Courtwright, 2001). Islamic physicians, such as Avicenna, documented the medicinal uses of opium and cannabis in their medical texts, influencing both Eastern and Western medicine (Booth, 1996). In the Americas, indigenous peoples used coca leaves for stamina and ritual, while tobacco became a staple crop and trade commodity after European contact (Courtwright, 2001).

The Age of Exploration and the up rise of global empires in the 16th and 17th centuries accelerated the spread of these drugs. European colonial powers introduced new crops and drugs to their colonies and home countries. For instance, the Spanish and Portuguese brought coca and tobacco from the Americas to Europe, while tea and opium flowed from Asia to the West.

In India, the use of bhang (a cannabis preparation) was integrated into religious and social rituals, a tradition that persists today (Abel, 1980). Meanwhile, the spread of coffee from Ethiopia to the Arab world and eventually to Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries marked the beginning of global trade in stimulant beverages (Weinberg & Bealer, 2001).

Tobacco, native to the Americas, was introduced to Europe following Columbus's voyages in the late 15th century, quickly becoming a major commodity in global trade (Goodman, 1993).

## **3. Modern History**

The modern era saw the industrialization and commercialization of drug trade and production across the globe. The Britishers has acquired a monopoly over opium production in India and exported it to China through its East India Company leading to widespread addiction and the Opium Wars (1839–1842, 1856–1860) (Dikötter, Laamann, & Zhou, 2004). These conflicts forced China to open its markets to opium, with devastating social consequences.

In the America's late 19th century coca was transformed into cocaine, and its use spread rapidly in Europe and North America (Gootenberg, 2008). Similarly, the separation of morphine from opium and the invention of the hypodermic syringe in the 19th century revolutionized drug consumption and increased the risk of addiction (Courtwright, 2001).

International efforts to have control over illicit drugs were seen in the starting of the 20th century, beginning with the 1912 International Opium Convention and culminating in the 1961 United Nations Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs (McAllister, 2000). Despite these efforts, the global drug trade persisted, adapting to prohibition through the emergence of powerful criminal organizations and new synthetic drugs.

### **Types of Colonialism and their Role in Promoting Drug Trafficking Trade**

Colonialism has its various forms which patronize the facilitation and institutionalization of production, distribution, and trade of psychoactive substances. Colonial powers leveraged different colonial models to maximize profits from drugs such as opium, coca, and cannabis, shaping global drug markets that persist today. An overview of the different types of colonialism and how each was used to promote drug trafficking or trade is as under:

#### **1. Settler Colonialism**

Settler colonialism involved the migration of colonizers to new lands, often displacing indigenous populations. While Land acquisition and settlement were the primary focus of settler colonies which sometimes promoted drug cultivation for export. For example: In British North America, tobacco became a major cash crop in the 17th and 18th centuries. Settlers established large plantations, and the British Empire encouraged tobacco cultivation and export, integrating it into global trade networks (Goodman, 1993).

#### **2. Exploitation (Extractive) Colonialism**

Exploitation colonialism focused on extracting resources including drugs from colonized territories, often using local labour under coercive conditions. For example: The British Empire's involvement in the Indian opium trade is a classic case. The British East India Company monopolized opium production in India and exported it to China, leading to widespread addiction and two Opium Wars (Booth, 1996; Dikötter,

Laamann, & Zhou, 2004). The revenue generated from drug trade was a major source of income for the colonial administration.

### **3. Plantation Colonialism**

Plantation colonialism established large-scale agricultural enterprises, often using enslaved or indentured labour to produce cash crops, including drugs. Example: In the Caribbean, European colonial powers established sugar and tobacco plantations. In British India, cannabis (hemp) was cultivated on plantations and taxed by the colonial government, which also regulated and profited from the sale of bhang, ganja, and charas (Mills, 2003).

### **4. Surrogate Colonialism**

Surrogate colonialism involved the settlement of third-party groups to serve colonial interests, sometimes facilitating drug trade as a means of economic control. As in Southeast Asia, the French colonial administration in Indo-China encouraged Chinese merchants to settle and manage opium monopolies, using them as intermediaries to control and profit from the opium trade (McCoy, 1972).

### **5. Internal Colonialism**

Internal colonialism refers to the domination of minority groups within a country, often exploiting their lands and labour for resource extraction, including drugs. Like in colonial Peru and Bolivia, Spanish authorities forced Indigenous populations to work in coca cultivation and mining, integrating coca leaves into the colonial economy and trade (Gootenberg, 2008).

### **6. Neo-colonialism**

Neo-colonialism describes indirect control over former colonies, often through economic or political influence, which can perpetuate drug economies. As we knew and give example of countries like India and Colombia after getting formal independence, Western pharmaceutical companies and international trade policies continued to shape drug production and export in these countries which sometimes fosters illicit drug markets (Gootenberg, 2008; Bewley-Taylor, 2012).

### **Expansion of the Global Drug Market under Colonial Rule**

Colonialism played a pivotal role in shaping the global drug market, transforming local practices into international industries and embedding psychoactive substances into global trade

networks. The expansion of the drug market under colonial rule can be analysed through four key areas:

- (1) Opium and the British Empire,
- (2) Coca and the Spanish Empire,
- (3) Cannabis and Colonial Trade, and
- (4) Tobacco and Transatlantic Commerce.

### **1. Opium and the British Empire**

The British Empire's involvement in the opium trade is one of the most significant examples of colonial powers using drugs as economic and political tools. In India monopoly over opium production was gained by the British East India Company. Then the Britishers have started exporting opium in vast quantities to China. This trade generated enormous profits for the British but led to widespread addiction and social disruption in China. The Chinese government's attempts to suppress the trade resulted in the Opium Wars (1839–1842, 1856–1860), which forced China to legalize opium imports and cede territory to Britain (Dikötter, Laamann, & Zhou, 2004; Booth, 1996).

### **2. Coca and the Spanish Empire**

The Spanish colonization of South America transformed coca from a sacred Andean plant into a commodity for global trade. While indigenous peoples used coca leaves for ritual and endurance, Spanish colonizers exploited coca for labour control in silver mines, providing it to indigenous workers to increase productivity. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, coca was further commodified as cocaine and spread roots into markets of Europe and North America (Gootenberg, 2008).

### **3. Cannabis and Colonial Trade**

Cannabis was widely cultivated and traded across colonial territories. The British introduced cannabis (hemp) cultivation to their colonies in India, Africa, and the Caribbean, both for industrial purposes (fiber) and for psychoactive use. Colonial authorities often regulated or taxed cannabis production, integrating it into local economies and sometimes encouraging its use among labourers to maintain social control (Mills, 2003). In North Africa,

French colonial authorities taxed and regulated hashish production in Morocco and Algeria, embedding cannabis into the colonial economy (Chouvy, 2005).

#### **4. Tobacco and Transatlantic Commerce**

Tobacco, native to the Americas, became a cornerstone of colonial economies. European colonists in North America established large-scale tobacco plantations, relying heavily on enslaved labour. Tobacco quickly became a major export to Europe, fuelling demand and shaping transatlantic trade routes. The profits from tobacco contributed to the growth of colonial settlements and the expansion of the Atlantic slave trade (Goodman, 1993).

Across these colonial models, drug trafficking and trade were promoted through monopolies, taxation, forced labour, and the creation of global markets. Colonial authorities often justified these practices as economic necessities, while the resulting drug economies had lasting social and political consequences for colonized societies.

#### **The Rise of International Drug Control and Prohibition**

The rise of prohibition and international drug control was a complex, multi-faceted process shaped by shifting social attitudes, political agendas, and global cooperation. This era can be explored through several key areas:

- (1) Early National Prohibition Movements,
- (2) The Birth of International Drug Control Treaties,
- (3) The Role of the United States in Shaping Global Policy,
- (4) The United Nations and the Consolidation of Drug Control, and
- (5) Unintended Consequences and the Evolution of Policy.

#### **1. Early National Prohibition Movements: Temperance and Moral Reform, Racial and public Fears**

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries the national prohibition movements gained momentum, particularly in the United States of America and some parts of Europe. The main actors of these movements were temperance advocates, religious groups, and social reformers who associated use of drugs and alcohol as crime, moral decay, and social disorder (Courtwright, 2001). Racial and xenophobic fears also played a role, with anti-opium laws in

the U.S. targeting Chinese immigrants and anti-cocaine laws targeting African Americans (Musto, 1999).

## **2. The Birth of International Drug Control Treaties: The Shanghai Opium Commission and the Hague Opium Convention**

The first international efforts to control drug crisis began with the setting of 1909 Shanghai Opium Commission, which brought together major colonial powers to ponder up on issue of opium trade in Asia. Which further after three years laid stepping stones for 1912 International Opium Convention at The Hague, the outcomes of this convention pays a way for the world's first multilateral drug control treaty among major colonial powers. This drug control treaty wanted to limit the production and distribution of all forms of opiates and cocaine (McAllister, 2000). These early treaties laid the groundwork for future international cooperation.

## **3. United States role in crafting Global Policy: Domestic Policy Export, the Harrison Narcotics Tax Act and American Diplomacy**

The United States played a leading role in promoting prohibitionist policies both domestically and internationally. The Harrison Narcotics Tax Act 1914 has regulated and effectively criminalized opiates and cocaine in the U.S., setting a precedent for other countries (Musto, 1999). American diplomats pushed for stricter controls at international forums, influencing the direction of global drug policy (Bewley-Taylor, 2012).

## **4. The United Nations and the Consolidation of Drug Control: The Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, Expansion to Psychotropics and Enforcement Mechanisms**

The United Nations became the central body for international drug control after World War II. The efforts of United Nations bears a fruit when in 1961 it was successful in signing Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs at Manhattan, New York, consolidated previous treaties and established a comprehensive framework for regulating narcotics worldwide (United Nations, 1961). Subsequent treaties, such as the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances and the 1988 Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, extended controls to new substances and strengthened enforcement mechanisms (Bewley-Taylor, 2012).

## **5. Unintended Consequences and the Evolution of Policy: The Rise of Illicit Markets, Organized Crime and Calls for Reform**

Prohibitionist policies often had unintended consequences, including the expansion of illicit drug markets, the growth and rise of powerful criminal organizations, widespread social harms such as mass incarceration and public health crises (Courtwright, 2001; UNODC, 2023). In recent decades, these challenges have prompted calls for reform, with some countries experimenting with decriminalization, harm reduction, and regulated markets (Global Commission on Drug Policy, 2018). The growing awareness of the social and health consequences of drug use led to calls for regulation and prohibition in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The temperance movement in the United States, for example, campaigned against alcohol and other intoxicants, linking them to crime, poverty, and moral decline.

Prohibition, however, had unintended consequences. Rather than eradicating drug use, it drove the trade underground, creating lucrative opportunities for structured misdemeanour. The uprise of powerful drug cartels in Latin America, Asia, and elsewhere can be traced to the prohibition era. To escape law enforcement agencies these drug Cartels used violence, corruption, and various forms of sophisticated smuggling techniques to carry out their operations.

### **Ongoing Challenges for the International Community**

Today, the global drug trade remains a persistent and evolving challenge. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the market of illicit drug is worth hundreds of billions of dollars annually, with millions of people involved in production, trafficking, and consumption (UNODC, 2023).

Transnational criminal organizations have become increasingly adept at adapting to law enforcement efforts. They exploit new trafficking routes, use technology to evade detection, and diversify their operations into other forms of crime, such as human trafficking and money laundering. The proliferation of synthetic drugs, such as fentanyl and methamphetamine, has further complicated efforts to control the trade, as these substances can be produced in small, clandestine labs and are often more potent and dangerous than traditional drugs.

The “war on drugs,” launched by the United States of America and adopted by many nations across globe has led to considerable social and economic costs. Mass incarceration,

particularly of marginalized communities, has strained criminal justice systems and fuelled social unrest. In countries like Mexico and Colombia, drug-related violence has claimed tens of thousands of lives and undermined state institutions.

In response, some countries have begun to experiment with alternative approaches, such as decriminalization, harm reduction, and regulated markets. Portugal's decriminalization of all drugs in 2001, for example, has been credited with reducing overdose deaths and improving public health outcomes (Global Commission on Drug Policy, 2018). However, worldwide consensus on drug policy remains elusive, with many governments continuing to prioritize punitive measures over public health.

### **Conclusion**

The global drug trade is a complex phenomenon shaped by historical, economic, and political forces. Colonialism expanded drug markets, prohibition sought to control them, and today's international community continues to grapple with the consequences. Addressing the challenges of the drug trade requires a nuanced understanding of its history and a willingness to explore new policy approaches. Today, the international community faces complex and evolving challenges, requiring innovative and evidence-based approaches to reduce harm and promote public health.

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