JIED Journal of Illicit Economies and Development

COLLECTION: WHY THE DRUG WAR ENDURES: LOCAL AND TRANSNATIONAL LINKAGES IN THE NORTH AND CENTRAL AMERICA DRUG TRADES

RESEARCH

LSE Press

A History of Opium Commodity Chains in Mexico, 1900–1950

JUAN ANTONIO FERNÁNDEZ VELÁZQUEZ

BENJAMIN T. SMITH

*Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article

ABSTRACT

Classic treatments of both the opium industry and the international drug trade tend to leave out Mexico's opium production. Yet the industry, which emerged in the 1920s, both fulfilled U.S. demands and shaped the Mexican narcotics trade.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Benjamin T. Smith

University of Warwick, GB

b.smith.1@warwick.ac.uk

KEYWORDS:

opium; Latin America; Mexico; heroin; morphine

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Fernández Velázquez, JA and Smith, BT. 2022. A History of Opium Commodity Chains in Mexico, 1900–1950. *Journal of Illicit Economies and Development*, 4(2), pp. 113–127. DOI: https://doi.org/10.31389/jied.113

Journal of Illicit Economies and Development
DOI: 10.31389/jied.113

INTRODUCTION

It was August 1947 and the Mexican secret service agent, Inspector X, was in Sinaloa. He clearly didn't like the state. Officially he was there to look into the kidnapping of a young girl, but during his investigations he had also come across what he termed 'many more immoralities'. There were the local authorities who charged illegal taxes on the poorer tomato and chickpea producers. There were the vast landowners, who had co-opted the local farmers union and were squeezing out the small producers. There were the wannabe politicians, who fought bitterly to keep control of the party apparatus. And there were the drugs. A lot of drugs. He claimed, 'great quantities of opium were leaving from its breast to sate the demand of the most important centers of vice, not only in our country, but in the United States'. In fact, drug production was now so prevalent he estimated that Sinaloa was 'the major growing center of opium in the Americas'; the heroin and morphine labs based in Mazatlán, Culiacán and Hermosillo fed addicts throughout the continent.[1]

No doubt the mysterious Inspector X was in Sinaloa during a particular peak in drug production. But he also put his finger on a trend. Throughout much of the twentieth century, and all of the twenty-first, Mexico has been an important source of the United States' opiates, either in the form of smoking opium or morphine or heroin. Throughout the century, it proved the source for between 10 and 20 per cent of US opiates and gradually it became the main font for heroin users in the southern United States, including the growing drug hub of Los Angeles.[2] Furthermore in times of dearth, when the United States was cut off from European or Asian suppliers (as in the 1940s and 1970s), it provided up to 90 per cent of its northern neighbor's supplies.[3] Yet Mexico is rarely mentioned in discussions of either the regional – and far less the global – opium trade.

MEXICAN OPIUM: HISTORIOGRAPHY AND METHODOLOGY

Works on the long history of opium stick to production in the Middle East or South East Asia (Booth 1999; Dormandy 2012; Inglis 2019). General histories of narcotics ignore the country or focus exclusively on its production of marijuana and its trafficking of cocaine (Davenport-Hines 2002; Porter & Teich 1995). And even the plethora of works on US drug use skirt around opium manufacture south of the border (Courtwright 2001; Jonnes 1996; Musto 2010; Schneider 2011).

There are multiple reasons for this. Some are quite general. They include limited Spanish language usage among Western academics, the weight and import of some very good works on twentieth-century Asian opium production (in particular, Bradford 2020; Gingeras 2014; McCoy 1972; Trocki 2005), and the ongoing orientalist presumptions linking opiate use and the east. Others are more specific. They include Mexico's relatively effective campaign to keep down international coverage of its opium industry, US Federal Bureau of Narcotics [FBN] head Harry Anslinger's pragmatic (some might say cynical) focus on opium production in other (mostly communist) countries (Kinder 1981; Pembleton 2018) and Mexico's own negligible heroin market (Bucardo et al. 2005). They also include the (perhaps understandable) focus of Mexican scholars on very prominent issues of political corruption (Astorga 2016 edn; Flores Pérez 2013) and the (less helpful and often journalistic) emphasis on vast, hierarchically organized cartels.

Yet the evidence we have been able to access clearly shows that Mexico has been an important source of US opium for over a century. This article was based principally on archival research in US and Mexican archives. The principal archives employed were the Archivo General de la Nación, the Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Salubridad y Asistencia, the Archivo del Tribunal Superior de Justicia, and the National Archives and Records Administration. However, outside these large, national archives we were also the first scholars to really employ the judicial records of Mexico's Casas de la Cultura Júridica in Ciudad Juárez and Mazatlán, as well as interviews with Sinaloans witness to or involved in the drug trade (many of whose details we have had to anonymise or at least disguise, for obvious security reasons).

1 Archivo General de la Nación (AGN), Dirección General de Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales (DGIPS), Caja 794, Inspector X to Jefe del Departamento, 25 Aug. 1947.

2 Eric Schneider, *Smack, Heroin and the American City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), pp. 76–89.

3 We do not have exact figures for the 1940s, but this was the figure given for the 1970s. J. Carter Presidential Library, Special Assistant to the President-Bourne, Mexico 1/27/77–5/9/77, Box 40, DEA Statistical Summary 1977.

Based on this novel mix of archival and oral sources, we argue that Inspector X was completely correct when he noted that Mexico's opium industry has long fed drug users from Tijuana to Montreal and everywhere in between. And it is this industry, rather than the marijuana, cocaine or amphetamine trades, that has done most to shape the Mexican narcotics business. Furthermore, it was between the years 1900 and 1950 that patterns of opium production, commerce, and sale became established and normalized in certain regions. To examine the country's opium trade, we have analysed our data in line with the methods central to what Isaac Campos and Paul Gootenberg term the 'new drug history of Latin America' (Campos & Gootenberg 2015). In particular, we have tried to reconstruct the 'commodity chains' of the business (Gootenberg 2008; Topik, Marichal & Frank 2006). In the first half of the twentieth century, there were three major chains that we know about. The first dealt in processed heroin and morphine, was dominated by European pharmacists, and ran from Veracruz, through Mexico City, Torreón, and up to Ciudad Juárez. The second focused on smoking opium, was dominated by Chinese merchants, provided for the opium dens of northwest Mexico, and used opium grown on fields in northern Sonora. The third, which emerged in the 1940s, was dominated by Sinaloa merchants, used opium grown in the Sierra Madre Occidental, and provided for America's wartime opiate market (Farfán and Porter 2020; Farfán and Porter 2022). By the middle of the decade, some of these traffickers had also started to process the raw opium into morphine and heroin, which could be sold at a higher price on the US market. The location and profile of this industry would, in turn, shape the Mexican drug trade for the next seventy years.

By piecing together this narrative, one particular element of the illicit economy becomes clear. Even before the era of globalization changes in the illicit economy paralleled (and perhaps even pre-empted) those in the licit economy. Pushed to improvise and shift strategies rapidly, drug traffickers were (and still are) at the center of broader economic changes. Deviant capitalism was always at the cutting edge (Gilman et al. 2011).

MORPHINE, HEROIN AND THE EUROPEAN CONNECTION

During the 1800s the opium derivative morphine was used heavily as a pain medicine. After 1898, so was the rather stronger opiate heroin. Most of these drugs were produced in Europe in the factories of the major pharmaceutical companies like Bayer and Merck. In the United States, during the first years of the twentieth century, a group of younger, poorer, often immigrant drug users joined the mostly middle-class women who had been prescribed the drug. In what would become a tediously predictable pattern, the US authorities gradually clamped down on the selling of the narcotics. In doing so they created a black market in the substances (Courtwright 2001). A lot of the drugs were now smuggled in by boat to the big ports of the east coast (Jonnes 1996). But by the 1920s substantial quantities of drugs also arrived in Mexico's Caribbean ports.

The most important entry point was Veracruz. In November 1924 an informant explained to a Mexican secret service agent how the drugs came in. Most were imported on German and Dutch passenger ships, often by boat employees such as barbers and cooks. Traffickers would pay the workers to move the drugs off the docks, taking them in small packets of four or five kilos. They would then deliver the narcotics to local pharmacists. In 1924 the most prominent of these was the Spaniard, Arturo Arrieta. He had strong contacts in Germany (so strong, in fact, that the US authorities believed him a German spy) and used these to acquire the drugs. He would package and relabel the narcotics as patent medicines before sending them by train to Mexico City.[4] Seven years later, a Mexican health inspector discovered a similar, if rather larger, network of Veracruz traffickers. They included pharmacists (such as the owner of La Económica who imported heroin from Italian steamers), bar owners such as the proprietors of the *Piza* and *Ancors* cantinas, and a growing group of traffickers who seemed to specialize in the trade, such as the mysterious Sara, the equally mysterious El Monomico, and a Spanish churro seller called Jaime.[5]

The involvement of pharmacists in the incipient narcotics industry is unsurprising. Just like in the United States, they dominated the early narcotics trade (Spillane 2002). They had the

4 AGN, DGIPS, Caja 46, Exp. 5, Report of Agent 15, 14 Nov. 1924 and 17 Nov. 1924.

5 Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Salubridad y Asistencia (AHSSA) Fondo salubridad pública, Sección Servicio Jurídico, Caja 28, Exp. 9, Requeña to Rafael Silva, Memorandum, 24 Feb 1931.

contacts among the European pharmaceutical companies; they knew the small local market of drug users; and due to the growth of the pharmaceutical profession meant that they had a network of contacts in towns throughout the country and up to the border with the United States. Just a few years earlier they had sold all three products as vital medicines. Now they simply continued to import the products without filling in the necessary paperwork. In 1927 the Mexican health department attempted to clamp down on these pharmacists. They sent agents throughout the republic to investigate if they were keeping records correctly. Many were not. They were importing heroin, morphine and cocaine either without a license or in much larger amounts than the license claimed. In the end they gave out over a hundred fines.[6]

Importing large quantities of narcotics into Mexico's Caribbean ports also had an unexpected side effect. While most drugs were moved on, some stayed in the ports to serve small markets of local users. Veracruz's *cronista* remembers that throughout the 1920s you could buy:

> Cocaine chloride and German morphine from the Merck company or French stuff from the Pulene Brothers as no one bothered with a register of narcotics. In many pharmacies drugs were sold without fear and there were silversmiths who sold little silver boxes perfect to carry them in.... It was common to give 3 pesos to any street urchin, send him to a pharmacy, and get a gram of magnificent Merck cocaine. No one got scared, people knew about the traffic and everyone knew who liked snow and who injected themselves with morphine and heroin (Pérez Montfort, 2014).

The health inspector who arrived in the port in 1931 found the same thing. Drugs were still easy to buy. You could purchase small amounts in bars, from barbers, or from street dealers. Employing a rather more disapproving tone than the local writer, he declared that the 'traffic in drugs in the port is not only shameful, it is completely open. Many trading houses now trade in narcotics and there is not a street in Veracruz where you don't find one or two or four dealers and dozens of addicts'.[7] To the north, the port of Tampico was also a crucial entry point. Like Veracruz it also had a small-scale local market in hard drugs, which was provided for at cantinas such as *El Pobre Pescador* and *Mi Pelota* and pharmacies and general drug stores such as *Botica Méndez*.[8]

After the drugs arrived in the ports, they were shipped inland mostly by train. Those that came to Veracruz were moved to Mexico City, where they were delivered to another network of pharmacists. The most prominent were again Spaniards – two brothers called Felix and Othón Sánchez Rubio. Felix was a chemist and pharmacist and owner of *Botica de San Pedro* in the center of the capital. But he also had a laboratory farther south in the *Coyoacán* neighbourhood where he cut and processed the narcotics for the street users. Othón was the intermediary and trafficker. Every day he would meet his brother at a cantina. They would swap cars and Othón would drive off with kilos of processed narcotics to deliver over the city.[9] Though the Sánchez brothers were the most prominent traffickers, they were not alone. And during the 1920s the Mexican authorities busted dozens of Mexico City pharmacists flogging imported narcotics without a license. There was the owner [of] the Farmacia Roma, who was a friend of the Veracruz customs inspector, and who used to sell on decommissioned drugs. And there was Jacob Markensen, a Russian pharmacist, who in 1929 teamed up with a US doctor to import morphine and sell it to drug users.[10]

Just as in Veracruz, moving narcotics through Mexico City also generated its own small, local market of morphine and heroin users. Initially, most were relatively well-to-do individuals who had got hooked on morphine or heroin after being prescribed it by their doctors. During the late 1910s, the capital's newspapers were warning of a rapid upsurge in morphine and heroin use among 'young people of the middle class'. These embraced the 'fashionable snobbery' of 'injecting heroin, cocaine and other substances'.[11] In fact, the same secret service agent

6 AHSSA, Fondo salubridad pública, Sección Servicio Jurídico, Caja 6, Exp. 1.

7 AHSSA, Fondo salubridad pública, Sección Servicio Jurídico, Caja 28, Exp. 9, Requeña to Rafael Silva, Memorandum, 24 Feb 1931.

8 AGN, DGIPS, Caja 46, Exp. 5, Report of Agent 15, 8 Dec. 1924.

9 AGN, DGIPS, Caja 46, Exp. 5, Report of Agent 15, 15 Aug, 1 Nov., 8 Nov. 1924.

10 AHSSA, Fondo salubridad pública, Sección Servicio Jurídico, Caja 17, Exp. 5, Memorandum, 13 Sept. 1929.

11 *Farmacia,* May 1923; *Farmacia,* Oct. 1923.

DOI: 10.31389/jied.113

who investigated the Veracruz racket in 1924 heard rumors of a particularly exclusive shooting gallery on Calle Hamburgo 126 called Casa Olga. This could only be entered though use of a special code and provided drugs for the very highest status clients including (allegedly) President Obregón (who presumably had acquired a taste for morphine after losing his arm in battle).[12]

But increasingly the capital's morphine and heroin users were drawn from the city's very poor. In what appears like a very modern piece of drug marketing, a handful of entrepreneurial prisoners started to introduce cut versions of the narcotics to the imposing new Lecumberri jail during the early 1920s. Dr. Juan Peón del Valle, the jail's addictive illness specialist remembers narcotics gradually entering the space.

> At first the traffickers didn't have an important market in this penitentiary. But little by little it grew to become one of the biggest subjects of commerce.... Soon we realized that around Cell Block F there were drug traffickers. First it was hidden in a milk bottle with a false bottom, then a few morphine capsules lodged in the nasal passages of a woman wearing a veil, then in the hollow of a wooden leg, then behind the photo of a girlfriend, then stuck behind the stamp of a letter, until at last there were innumerable ways that it was entering. Later we realized that inside that cell block there was an entire market established as the family members of the addicts brought in clothes, money, food, and even the drug itself and that there was not enough money in the world to establish an incorruptible vigilance on the trade.[13]

When the drug-using prisoners were finally released, they took their habits onto the streets. Here, they syphoned off a small amount of the narcotics going through the city, stored it in stash houses, and then either sold it straight out the door or gave it to small-scale street dealers to sell (Renero 1925). The two principal wholesalers were former members of the famed Grey Automobile Gang, Bernabé Hernández and Luis Lara. During the Revolution, the gang had posed as policemen or soldiers and preyed on the city's elites, robbing their houses of money, jewelry, and valuable possessions. Most were eventually executed by the authorities (and filmed for posterity) (Piccato 2001: 187–188).[14] But those that survived went into the narcotics business, acquiring the narcotics off the Spanish Sánchez brothers. Then they either sold it out of their bases in the *San Lázaro* and *Tepito* neighborhoods or handed it to a network of trusted friends, market vendors, or female family members to sell on the streets.[15]

After Mexico City, the pharmacists sent what remained of the European narcotics north by train. Again, transport infrastructure shaped the geography of the trade. The drugs went to the big agricultural center of Torreón, where they mixed with other narcotics also brought by train direct from the port of Tampico. In Torreón, a key trafficker was the grocery wholesaler and bar and restaurant owner, Antonio Wong Yin. His wife or one of his associates would pick up the narcotics at the train station's postal office often using an assumed name. They would then cut them, take a little for Torreón's (very small) addict market, repackage the rest, and send it north by train to Ciudad Juárez.[16]

By the 1920s Ciudad Juárez had become a border vice center. Americans crossed the border to drink, eat, gamble, visit brothels, and shoot up heroin and morphine (Ruiz 2010: 44–45). The Fernández brothers, Enrique, Antonio, and Simón, were among the city's principal drug wholesalers and received their narcotics supplies from Torreón. The brothers were former alcohol smugglers turned respectable businessmen. By the end of the decade, Enrique ran the city's predominant casino, its most upmarket bar, and various clothes shops. He had also bought up land to the south in the Chihuahua mountains and now presented himself as a mining prospector. The brothers sent a lot of the drugs over the border together with the illegal booze, often in return for stolen cars. But some remained in Ciudad Juárez. Here Simón, who

12 AGN, DGIPS, Caja 46, Exp. 5, Report of Agent 15, 6 Nov. 1924.

13 AHSSA, Fondo salubridad pública, Sección Servicio Jurídico, caja 55, Exp. 29, Report of Dr. Juan Peón del Valle, nd (1932).

14 The archival footage was spliced into Mexico's most famous silent movie which was based on an investigation into the gang.

15 AGN, DGIPS, Caja 46, Exp. 5, Agent 15 reports, 13 Aug. 1924, 28 Sept. 1924.

16 AHSSA, Fondo salubridad pública, Sección Servicio Jurídico, Caja 14, Exp. 29, Dr. J. Farrill to jefe del departamento, 27 Nov. 1929; *Siglo de Torreón*, 9 April 1925, 10 April 1925, 11 April 1925, 13 June 1925, 24 July 1934, 9 July 1930.

seems to have had a heroin habit himself, divided up the drugs and then sold it on to smaller dealers – many of whom were taxi drivers – all over the city. These dealers in turn provided for a local market of American and Mexican users.[17]

Though the Fernández brothers seemed to have dominated the border city's trade, other traffickers soon started their own version of the Veracruz-Mexico City-Torreón-Ciudad Juárez network. In 1931, for example, the police rounded up the members of Ignacia 'La Nacha' Jasso's gang. Previously her husband Pablo 'El Pablote' González had acquired narcotics from the Fernández brothers. But now La Nacha sourced heroin and morphine from pharmacists in Mexico City. A railway employee, Zeferino García, brought the drugs up by train. He often stopped off in Torreón, where he would sell small amounts to another local dealer called Ricardo Hickman Mier. In Ciudad Juárez, La Nacha also developed a new, alternative market. Rather than relying on taxi drivers or cross-border smuggling, like the peddlers in Mexico City, she got her agents to smuggle the narcotics into the Ciudad Juárez prison.[18]

SMOKING OPIUM, THE CHINESE CONNECTION, AND THE START OF OPIUM POPPY GROWING

The other principal manner of consuming opiates was in the form of smoking opium. A traditional mode of consumption in parts of Asia for centuries, this practice had become particularly widespread in China in the nineteenth century, when, helped by cheap British imports, it had percolated down from Chinese elites to the rest of society. Some became dependent on the drug. But others smoked opium as a means to socialize, unwind, or relieve pain (Dikotter, Xun & Laamann 2016). At the same time, thousands of Chinese immigrants came to settle either in the United States or (when immigration there was prohibited in 1882) in Mexico. In the United States, they formed communities throughout the west coast, in San Francisco and Los Angeles, but also along the railways heading back east. In Mexico, they found jobs on the railways of the northwest, around the Cananea mine, in the cotton fields around Mexicali (Chao Romero 2011) and in small retail and commercial operations dotted throughout Mexico's principal towns and ports (González 2017; Schiavone Camacho 2012). Some of the immigrants brought with them their taste for smoking opium. They gradually developed a Mexico-based smoking opium network of their own.

During the 1910s, most of the smoking opium was imported into the small Pacific port of Ensenada by an alliance of Chinese, American, and Mexican businessmen. It was then split up. Some went north by horse and cart to the border cities of Mexicali and Tijuana. The rest was often shipped up to San Francisco.[19]

However, by the following decade, some Chinese immigrants, who knew how to grow poppies, harvest the gum and process the gum into smoking opium, had started to employ their knowledge in Mexico. At first, they grew the poppies wherever they could get permission to work the land. They started, it seems, in Baja California near the west coast markets. But the land was too dry and unforgiving. The opium it produced too was of poor quality. So soon they moved south and west to Sonora (the epicenter of the Mexican Chinese population) Sinaloa and Nayarit. In July 1923, for example, the health inspector from Topolobampo, Rafael Muñoz, was involved in a train crash on the Nayarit coast. After the train derailed, some of the passengers got off and started to collect flowers from the fields around. When Muñoz examined the flowers, he noticed that they were opium poppies and started to investigate. The local authorities in the coastal town of San Blas said they had rented the lands to a group of Chinese farmers.[20] Two years later, the municipal authorities of nearby Acaponeta found a similar, small plantation of the flowers planted along a stream by a 'Manuel Chang'.[21]

17 N. Mottier, "Drug Gangs and Politics in Ciudad Juárez: 1928–1936," *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 25, no. 1 (2009), pp. 19–46; AGN DGIPS Caja 11, Exp. 19, June 1928, Informe sobre Trafico de Drogas; AGN, DGIPS, Caja 280, Exp. 12, various letters; AGN, Presidentes, Obregón-Calles, 812-A 13, various letters.

18 Archivo de la Casa de la Cultura Júridica (ACCJ), Ciudad Juárez, Delitos contra la Salud, 1930, Caja 129, Exp. 104, Case against Ignacia Jasso et al. AHSSA, Caja 28, Exp. 6, Report of Juan N. Requeña, 20 Jul. 1931.

19 National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Record Group (RG) 59, 1910–1929, 812.114, Evans to Collector of Customs, 12 Oct. 1916.

20 *El Democrata*, 25 July 1923.

21 AHSSA, Fondo salubridad pública, Sección Servicio Jurídico, Caja 3, Exp. 4, Ramón R. Nuño to Departamento de Salubridad, 27 Mar. 1925.

But increasingly these Chinese drug growers started to team up with entrepreneurial farmers around the well-irrigated Sonora farm towns of Arizpe, Altar, Ures, and Magdalena (Porchas Peñuelas 2012). Here, farmers now added opium poppies to their crops of corn, wheat, chickpeas, limes, and oranges. As early as 1923, an informant for the US customs service reported that a Chinese cook and a Chinese vegetable farmer were both growing poppy plantations on river-fed lands east of Altar. But the locals were also getting curious about the big returns. And in the same year the same informant claimed that a farmer, Alfonso Urice, was planting a small test crop. If this was a success, he would move on to more extensive production.[22] It seems that it was. By 1927, many Mexicans had started to join the Chinese producers. Now local Mexican growers outnumbered the Chinese four to one. Due to a handful of police raids, most of the farmers had now reduced their crops to less than an acre, which they hid in the center of larger wheat or corn plantations. Yet it was still a profitable business. According to the US consul in Nogales, farmers in the region now grew 200 to 300 acres of poppies. It had become a major regional crop and produced around 600 pounds of opium worth 300,000 pesos.[23]

The Chinese immigrants of Sonora were not only pioneering the growing of opium poppies, but also its processing into more valuable smoking opium. The job of harvesting and refining the raw opium gum was not particularly technically tough. Unlike making morphine or heroin, the process took no knowledge of chemistry. But it was hard work and – to do it well – it took a degree of artisan care. In 1936 a US Customs inspector, with a rare anthropological eye for the details of opium processing sent a report on the subject to his superiors. As the report made clear, he had stumbled onto an interesting mid-stage in opium's development, from an imported Chinese narcotic to something grown, harvested, and processed in Mexico.

According to the inspector, the planting of opium was done in October. Harvesting was done in March. The farmers now no longer used the traditional Chinese curved blades, but safety razor blades often impressed into a stick. The harvest was 'a tedious and delicate process'. The Chinese maintained that the pods should be scored in the late afternoon. 'The following morning the scraping or collecting of the accumulated sap should be finished early before the sun gets too high'. Previously the Chinese farmers had rolled the sap into balls and wrapped them in leaves. Now they poured out the sap and let it cure into quarter to a half inch slabs. When the sap had dried and was no longer sticky, it was packed into bags 'like bark' and carried by horse or car to where it would be processed.

Cooking down the dried opium gum into smoking opium was still often done by Chinese immigrants who had escaped the deportation campaigns waged against their communities. They treated it as 'an art, handed down' which 'must be done just so'. They took the slabs of opium, broke them with a hammer and placed them in copper bottles. They then added water and heated the mixture slowly, making sure not to scorch it. When the liquid was cooked, it was then strained through linen to cool in a copper container. At this point, the cooks occasionally added brandy or flowers for flavor. Or, as they were living on the west coast of Mexico near some of the country's major sugar plantations, they sometimes added raw sugar. At this point, this high-grade smoking opium could be packaged and sold. As it was Mexico and local users didn't demand the highest-grade stuff, they often added adulterants, boiled it, and strained it another two times to make a weaker but more voluminous product. At this point the cooks favored storing the drug in specially made copper cans. But again, as these were limited, they usually made do with bakers' cocoa containers.[24]

THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE AND MEXICO'S WARTIME DRUG BOOM

During the late 1920s and early 1930s, politicians throughout the northwest of Mexico harnessed economic nationalism to existing Sinophobia. In Sonora, Sinaloa and to a lesser extent in Chihuahua and Baja California, this led to the expulsion of large swathes of the Chinese community. In 1926, there were over 24,000 Chinese immigrants in Mexico. By 1940, there were less than 5,000 (González 2017). The campaign blew a hole in the nascent smoking opium market. As demand dropped, so did incentives for growing opium. And between 1932

22 NARA, RG59, 1910–1929, 812.114, Smith to Nutt, 22 Dec. 1924.

23 NARA, RG59, 1910–1929, 812.114, WE Dresser to Ralph Reed, 15 Sept 1927.

24 NARA, RG170, Box 22, Folder 1, Ralph Lane to Gleason, 9 Nov. 1936.

and 1935, the US Customs officer and part time anthropologist claimed that 'very little was produced'.[25]

However, starting in 1936 things changed. Increasing conflicts in Asia cut off the west coast of the United States from traditional sources of raw and smoking opium. And by 1939, war in Europe had even interrupted the traditional pharmaceutical supplies of heroin and morphine. Drug users across the United States started to get desperate. Some got so fraught they started to heat up, liquefy, and inject pure, unprocessed opium.[26] Others took to raiding the morphine supplies of local pharmacies.[27] But most started to look south to Mexico to satisfy their needs. The twin demands for smoking opium and processed morphine or heroin ushered in the third iteration of Mexico's opium commodity chain. This version would outlast immediate demand, get reinforced with the expansion of counterculture drug use from the late 1950s, and go on to shape the Mexican drug trade for the next seventy years.

At first, this third version of the commodity chain looked very much like the second. It was centered slightly south of the former growing fields of Altar, on the fertile lands of the Mayo River Valley around Huatabampo or of the Yaqui River Valley around Buenavista.[28] But policemen and soldiers could easily spot the poppies fields on flat, well-irrigated lands. So, traffickers increasingly looked to growing the crop in more remote fields in the Sierra Madre Occidental. By the end of the decade, poppy growing was concentrated in the ten municipalities of Tepehuanes, Tamazula, and Topia (Durango), Guadalupe y Calvo and Parral (Chihuahua), and Badiraguato, Mocorito, Cosalá, Sinaloa de Leyva, and Culiacán (Sinaloa). The space would become known as Mexico's Golden Triangle.[29]

The Golden Triangle had some distinct advantages for growing drugs. It was a rugged, mountainous area crisscrossed by narrow, low-lying river-fed valleys where poppies would grow. It was dotted by jagged peaks which made discovering such valleys extremely difficult. By the late 1930s a regional mining boom, which had attracted many of the inhabitants, was winding down (Osuña Felix 2014). Poor, unemployed miners were looking for new sources of capital.[30] Finally, despite the region's isolation, transporting the drugs up to the United States was not difficult. To the west of the mountains lay Sinaloa's coastal flatlands. Here roads and railways ran down to Guadalajara and up to the border at Nogales. By 1938, they extended the railway west to Tijuana. At the same time the ports at Mazatlán and Topolobampo could deliver merchandise to California in a week.

Those that planted the poppies, weeded the crop, and harvested the sap were the region's miners and peasants (who were often one and the same, depending on the season). The pick-up was gradual. According to a reliable local informant on such matters, 'At first it was grown in the garden in flowerpots, then by the side of the roads to produce two or three or five kilos. Then there were those that got the knack and started to sow much larger areas and contract people.'[31] The Sierra's peasants soon realized that the crop could be extremely profitable. A full hectare of poppies produced around 15 kilos of gum. Prices per kilo varied: 100 pesos if you were under contract and needed to sell it back to the intermediary who had given you the seeds, the blades, and the instructions; 300 pesos if you sold it on the rural open market; 500 pesos if you risked going into the city and selling it to the major wholesalers.[32] All this meant that if you were one of the poorest peasants, with a scrap of land and a contract with a local boss, the crop could still make you 750 pesos a year. With a bit more land, a bit more knowledge, or a bit more nerve you could pull in ten times that amount. In comparison the average wage for a rural laborer was less than a peso a day.[33]

25 NARA, RG170, Box 22, Folder 1, Ralph Lane to Gleason, 9 Nov. 1936.

26 NARA, RG170, Box 22, Folder 1, Ralph Lane to Gleason, 9 Nov. 1936.

27 AGN, Presidentes Manuel Avila Camacho (MAC), 564. 3/62, Excerpt of Federal Bureau of Narcotics Report, 1942; New York Times, 9 April 1942.

28 NARA, RG59, 1930–1939, 812.114, Report of H.S. Creighton, 22 Mar. 1938.

29 See multiple letters contained in NARA, RG170, Box 22.

30 Fidel Carrillo, one of the leading opium intermediaries of the era and the uncle of Ernesto 'Don Neto' Fonseca Carrillo, for example, was a miner according to the 1930 Census.

31 Interview with Miguel Ángel Peñuelas, Pericos, Mocorito, Sinaloa, 26 Feb. 2014.

32 NARA, RG170, Box 22, Pena to Commissioner of Customs, 31 Jan. 1942; J.E. Hoover to Secretary of Treasury, 13 Sept. 1944; Peña to Commissioner of Customs, 15 June 1944.

33 NARA, RG170, Box 22, Salvador Peña to Commissioner of Customs, 31 May 1944.

Such were the incentives that by the end of the decade growing opium in the region had become relatively generalized. Small patches of red dotted the Sierra. In 1948 the Mexican government reported that it had discovered 162 small plots of opium poppies in the municipality of Sinaloa de Leyva, 110 in Badiraguato, and 15 in Mocorito. Most were little more than 20 or 30 rows of plants. But some were larger including a plot of 1.6 hectares in Mocorito and one of 1.5 hectares in Badiraguato.[34]

Cooperation marked these early peasant forays into the drug business. At the most basic level there was the cooperation at the level of the family. While men usually sowed the seeds, set up the rustic irrigation systems and went down to the lowlands to sell the gum, women and children were charged with weeding the crop and harvesting the gum. But there was also cooperation among larger groups of villagers. Peasants linked by friendship, family, and *compadrazgo* would club together to service the demands of the expanding market. One Badiraguato native remembered, 'On one occasion I had to supply a request of "goma" for Natividad Paez from the Bubunica ranch in Badiraguato about two hours from here. It was twenty kilos and he needed it in two weeks. I asked a compadre from La Lapara ranch to help me gather 10 kilos. He sold each kilo to me at 100 pesos and I got some profit out if it'.[35] These off-the-cuff alliances soon hardened into networks of opium producers. Another Badiraguato man reminisced, 'We had good clients, among them "Nacho" Landell from the La Lapara ranch or a man they called "El Indio" from La Soledad. They bought only from the people of Badiraguato. They used to give the opportunity to sell all the harvest that we brought together. We used to come to an agreement to gather together everything we harvested in October.'[36]

Those that bought up the crop in the mountains and delivered to production or transport hubs in the coastal lowlands were the intermediaries. These also handed out seeds and taught highland peasants how to care for the poppies and harvest the gum. The vast majority of these early intermediaries were merchants, who simply added opium gum to the standard products that they bought up from their peasant clients. Perhaps the most conspicuous was Melesio Cuen, Badiraguato's longtime cacique and three-time mayor. He had investments in real estate and mining, ran a doctor's surgery and a funeral parlor, and was owner of the town's biggest general store (Aguilar Alvarado & Ibarra Escobar 2013). When a health department inspector visited the region in November 1938, he found that Cuen also presided over a network of opium growers.[37] But even in Badiraguato there were others. They included Ignacio 'Nacho' Landell from Santiago de los Caballeros, and Alejo Castro, who ran a shop in the small village of Rincón de los Monzón.[38]

Similar networks of intermediaries existed in Sinaloa's other highland municipalities. In Mocorito the principal opium buyer was Roberto Méndez, who owned a small shop in the mining village of El Magistral. In March 1947 an FBN agent posing as a Chinese American buyer went to visit him. Méndez explained that he was the *cacique* or the 'leader of the people of this village'. He had not purchased any opium yet as the harvest was late. Like any savvy businessman he was waiting for the prices to settle. But he offered to take the agent up to hills to review the crops which were planted three hours by horse-ride in the hills outside the village.[39]

Above the intermediaries were the opium wholesalers. These came, at least initially, from a different social class to the highlanders. They were wealthier, better educated and more urban; many even spoke English. Most were based in lowland towns and cities, with good links to transport routes to the border. They would buy up the gum in bulk from the mountain intermediaries and then organize its smuggling over to the United States. During the 1940s, the most prominent of these wholesalers was Roberto Dominguez Macias. He had arrived in Culiacán at the beginning of the decade, possibly from the United States (he certainly spoke English) or possibly from the border. At first, he worked with the few remaining Chinese opium buyers. In January 1943 the police arrested his original Chinese partner, Luis Ley. In the glove compartment of his car they found a small flask with three grams of smoking opium. Ley

34 NARA, RG59, 1945–1949, Box 5059, Report to UN, May 1948.

35 Interview with Ramón Leyva, Culiacán, Sinaloa, 6 Feb. 2014.

36 Interview with David Laija Serrano, La Lapara, Badiraguato, 9 May 2014.

37 AGN, DGIPS, Caja 128, Exp. 17, Roberto Atwood to Jefe de Salubridad, 25 Nov. 1938.

38 AGN, MAC, 422.2, Jose Iribe to President, 8 Feb. 1942.

39 NARA, RG170, Box 22, YWC to Terry Talent, 16 Mar. 1947.

admitted that he and Dominguez had been growing opium poppies for two years. The following day Dominguez was pulled in and questioned; he denied everything. He claimed he was a merchant from Ensenada currently living at the Hotel Sinaloa. He owned an interest in a brick-making factory and an export license for guano.[40] Dominguez was quickly released and went on to make more links with other members of the Culiacán elite. They included Ramón Bohn, another guano merchant, who helped hide the opium in train cars for its journey north. They also included tomato merchants, who stacked the gum underneath the fresh produce. By the end of the decade the Americans claimed that he moved around a ton of opium gum north each year. The trade had made him a millionaire. He owned four hotels in Culiacán including the upscale Hotel El Mayo and was in the midst of starting a tourism development in Mazatlán.[41]

During the 1940s Dominguez was the most notorious of the Culiacán wholesalers. Indeed, an Italian architect who was working on his hotels became increasingly annoyed that locals would shout 'gomero, gomero' at him in the street.[42] But there were many other wealthy locals who dabbled in the wholesale drug business from time to time. They were seldom caught. But when they were, they offered an insight into this sporadic involvement in the trade. In March 1947, for example federal police (PJF per its Spanish acroynm) agents in Culiacán intercepted a letter between 25-year-old, local building contractor, Alfonso Gutíerrez Benítez and 36-year-old Mocorito-born irrigation engineer, Gustavo Cañedo Aviles. The letter, written in Mexicali, explained that Gutierrez and another man called 'Ramiro' had decided to send the 'maize' up to San Francisco. They were to receive payment, partly in cash, and partly in the form of a Mercury 8 convertible, which they would send down to Cañedo to either keep or sell. 'Maize', it transpired, was the code for opium. Cañedo, the wealthy engineer sourced the gum in Culiacán. He handed it to Gutierrez who would take it to the border. Gutierrez would then hand it over to Ramiro, who would sell it for money and stolen US cars. Cañedo would then sell the cars on to his brother, who ran a second-hand car shop.[43]

Outside Culiacán, the other big wholesalers were the Chinese opium merchants based in Los Mochis. These had arrived in the country to work on the sugar estate of the big plantation owner, Benjamin F. Johnston. They had survived the anti-Chinese campaigns of the early 1930s, and after Johnston died and the plantation was divvied up among the peasants, they increasingly turned to the opium trade (Cordova 2011). In many ways they pre-empted (and perhaps informed) the career trajectories and working practices of many of Mexico's drug traffickers. Like many of those who would get involved in the trade, they flitted in and out of dealing in illicit products depending on a weighing up of risk and reward.[44] They worked together, rather than in competition with one another. (Fernández Velázquez n.d.). And like the Mexican traffickers who migrated to the United States from the 1940s onwards, they used their existing networks to dominate the trade in their new homes (Morris 2022).

The most notorious – or at least the most frequently busted – was Enrique Ley. Born in Canton in 1901, Ley came over to Mexico as a child, and was among the last wave of Chinese immigrants. He moved to Los Mochis in the early 1920s and teamed up with other Chinese merchants to buy local coffee, sugar, and vegetable crops in bulk and then send them to the Chinatowns of northern Mexico and the southern United States. By the late 1930s, he was also sending packages of prepared opium paste to Chinese customers throughout Mexico. The scheme led to his first arrest in 1939. In July that year, the authorities in the southern city of Puebla captured two Chinese businessmen as they picked up five kilos of raw opium from the local post office. The businessmen confessed that they intended to sell the opium to various drug stores with predominantly Chinese clienteles. The sender, they claimed, was Ley. He was arrested and jailed for a year.[45]

When he came out in late 1940, Ley moved up the chain. He took advantage of the increase in opium production to start buying up serious weight; he started to process the raw gum into much more profitable smoking opium, and he started moving the finished product up to the United States.

40 ACCJ, Mazatlán, 1943 Exp 2, Roberto Dominguez Macias and Luis Ley.

41 NARA, RG170, Anonymous source to Treasury representative, 27 Aug. 1946.

42 ACCJ, Mazatlán, 1948, Exp. 3, Caesar Lavagnino Ferro.

43 ACCJ, Mazatlán, 1948, Exp. 33, Alfonso Gutiérrez Benítez.

44 Dominguez – mentioned above – was one such businessman. But even today such career paths are common. Anabel Hernandez mentions many Sinaloa businessmen dabble in drugs to fund orthodox business. Anabel Hernández, *El traidor: El diario secreto del hijo del Mayo* (Mexico City: Penguin Random House, 2020).

45 Archivo del Tribuna Superior de Justicia (ATSJ), Amparos, 1939, Enrique Ley.

By 1943 the U.S. authorities were describing Los Mochis as the 'biggest narcotics depot' in Mexico. They claimed that Ley had persuaded a fishing captain to take 500 kilos of smoking opium up the Pacific coast to Los Angeles. The voyage would have netted Ley 600,000 pesos in just one trip.[46]

Opium, though, was an unreliable business. The following year Ley was busted yet again. In May 1944 two Mexican agents based on the border took the train south to the railway town of Guamuchil. They were working on a tip that a Chinese hotelier had 75 kilos of opium to sell. When they arrived, they were disappointed. He had already sold the opium to an enterprising general. A month later, however, their luck picked up. The Chinese hotelier phoned them to say that Ley had more opium to buy in Los Mochis. The agents rushed down again. They met Ley on his farm just outside the city and negotiated to purchase 48 cans of smoking opium and eight kilos of raw gum. As soon he produced the goods, they arrested him.[47] Two years later Ley was out of jail. He had flipped the tables and claimed that the two agents had framed him out of revenge as he had refused to buy opium from them. And in 1947 the Chinese American agent reported that the Los Mochis opium industry was back in full swing. He claimed that seven Chinese merchants were now involved. Some were longtime residents. Others had come up especially from Guadalajara to buy up the harvest. Just like they did in licit commerce, they worked as a syndicate or what was known locally as a 'combina'. Again, as in the highlands, cooperation trumped competition. And by bargaining together, they bought the product at a reduced price before divvying it up and sending it off to their respective buyers.[48]

While he was in Los Mochis, the agent tracked down each of the merchants and talked over the business in depth. Their unguarded conversations give us some idea what happened when the old Chinese traders met the new Mexican incarnation of the trade. According to the Los Mochis buyers, opium was more plentiful than ever. But quantity didn't mean quality, and much of the gum that appeared on the market was either mistakenly or purposefully adulterated. Some was completely fake. There were no standards commission for dope and no formal training for planters. Negotiations between the groups were also tough. The Chinese expected to pay a regular charge of around 1,000 pesos per kilo; they had done so for years. The Mexicans were keen to ride the opium bonanza and were holding out for nearly double the price. There was also increasing competition. Mexican traffickers, allegedly linked to the state governor of Sinaloa, were trying to pre-empt the Chinese buyers, and so were mafia-run heroin labs in Guadalajara.[49]

The Los Mochis buyers also revealed the continuing scope and reach of the Chinese trade. In 1947 they expected to fill 9,000 five-ounce cans. This amounted to over a ton of smoking opium and was worth over 1.5 million pesos. The smuggling routes were varied. Most went up via train or boat to Mexicali where it was either consumed by the resident Chinese or shifted over the border by the brother of one of the merchants, a millionaire Mexicali trafficker called Benjamin Ungson. Another popular supply route was Ciudad Juárez where another Chinese smuggler, Enrique Wong, was good for at least 1,800 cans. According to the same source, however, increasing US Customs attention had also brought new routes into play. Many cans were now driven up to the tiny border town of Naco on the Arizona border by the taxi-driving son of one of the merchants. He then handed it over to US smugglers who took it the rest of the way.[50]

THE BIRTH OF MEXICO'S HOMEGROWN HEROIN INDUSTRY

The Los Mochis buyers clearly had the knowledge and capability to transform the raw opium into more profitable smoking opium. At the beginning of the 1940s, there was no similar techniques for morphine or heroin. There had been attempts, particularly by Mexican doctors, but they 'found it a rather difficult process' according to one US Customs officer.[51] You needed

46 NARA, RG170, TS Thompson to Commissioner of Customs, 4 Jul. 1944.

47 ACCJ, Mazatlán, 1944, Exp. 38, Enrique Ley; NARA, RG170, Peña to Comissioner of Customs 21 Dec 1943.

48 NARA, RG170, Box 22, YWC to Terry Talent, 16 Mar. 1947.

49 NARA, RG170, Box 22, YWC to Terry Talent, 16 Mar. 1947.

50 NARA, RG170, Box 22, YWC to Terry Talent, 16 Mar. 1947.

51 NARA, RG170, Box 22, Folder 1, Ralph Lane to Gleason, 9 Nov. 1936.

chemicals, including ammonium chloride, anhydrous acid, hydrochloric acid, and acetone. You also needed access to basic laboratory equipment. At first, Golden Triangle wholesalers such as Dominguez had to move the raw opium up to the United States, where it was transformed into usable product. However, by 1944, US officials reported that they were seizing both morphine and heroin on the Mexican border. The drugs, they reported were 'definitely of Mexican origin'. 'Clearly there are a few laboratories where heroin and morphine are produced.'[52] Three years later, when FBN head Harry Anslinger stood up in front of the United Nations to complain about Mexico's drug industry, he claimed that there were at least 12 laboratories in the country.[53] Where Anslinger got this information is unclear; he was certainly not above making up figures to give the illusion of omniscience. But there were certainly three laboratories operating south of the border by the middle of the decade.

The first establishment was based to the south of the growing zone in the city of Guadalajara. It was run by a Spanish emigré José García Cantín and his Mexican partner María Álvarez García. García and Alvarez had a two-stage process for producing drugs for the American market. García used his Guadalajara lab to transform the gum into morphine before sending product to Alvarez's Mexico City lab. Here she reduced it into good quality heroin. It seems Alvarez was the mastermind of the operation, described by the FBN as 'a capable chemist with an extraordinary knowledge of processing of heroin'. Both labs were impressive establishments. When the two were eventually arrested in December 1947, the papers claimed that the equipment in the Guadalajara was worth over 200,000 pesos.[54] Such sophistication suggested wealthy backers and there were rumors that US mafia members, including Max Cossman, had set up the laboratory and transported the finished product by plane up to Bugsy Siegel's operation in Los Angeles.[55]

There was another laboratory to the north of the poppy-growing region in the Sonoran capital, Hermosillo. According to a 1948 US investigation into a Los Angeles smuggling ring led by José Ramiro Sánchez Cazares (probably the Ramiro mentioned above), this laboratory was run by an employee of the Mexican Department of Civil Aeronautics, called Francisco Lavat Varestegui. Lavat had learned to process opium into heroin from a Swiss chemist in the early 1940s. He now ran a small laboratory. He used an airline pilot to take the heroin from Hermosillo up to Nogales. Then the airplane pilot's American brother-in-law would take it to Los Angeles or San Francisco. Here it was either paid for with cash, with cars, or increasingly with guns and ammunition. Lavat would sell these to his cousin, who also happened to be head of the Mexican Department of Civil Aeronautics.[56] Again, like most of the early networks, the organization was a blend of jobbing amateurs and organized criminals linked by friendship and family.

The third laboratory (or group of laboratories) was based in Culiacán. We know much less about these because neither the United States nor the Mexican authorities ever got near them. The closest they got was a raid on a small, mobile rural lab, run by Miguel Urias Uriarte in 1947. But it was unclear whether this particular lab did anything more than boil down the raw opium gum.[57] Despite this, both US agents and Sinaloa locals acknowledged that there were heroin laboratories in Culiacán by the mid-1940s. Certain entrepreneurial intermediaries and wholesalers had realized that they could make much greater profits by processing the opium into heroin. To do so, they started to buy up the necessary chemicals from local drugstores and pharmacies.

> The first laboratories in Culiacán appeared almost at the same time as the necessary drugs for making heroin started to arrive at the drugstores. Before one simply dedicated oneself to sowing, harvesting and selling the product, one didn't dedicate oneself to processing it. But then there were people who had this vision to get ahead and got into the chemistry.[58]

52 NARA, RG170, Box 22, Annual Reports, 1940–1947. Report from 1944.

53 AGN, Presidentes Miguel Alemán Valdés (MAV), 606.3/67, Declaration of H. Anslinger.

54 ATSJ, Amparos, 1951, Exp. 3622, José García Cantín; NARA, RG170, Peña to Comissioner of Customs, 25 Sept. 1945; Delagrave to Comissioner of Customs, 9 Jan. 1948, *El Informador,* 26 Jan. 1947.

55 NARA, RG170, Box 23, H. Anslinger report, 8 June 1949.

56 University of Stanford, Special Collections, George White Papers, Box 1.

57 NARA, RG59, 1945–1949, Box 5059, Report to UN, May 1948.

58 Interview with Enedina Araujo, in La Lapara Badiraguato, Sinaloa, 3 April 2015.

The most important of these early Mexican heroin chemists was Eduardo 'Lalo' Fernández. Over the years he would go on to become one of the country's most notorious drug traffickers. But at the time he was simply another rural immigrant to the city (albeit one with good connections: his uncle Fermín Fernández was a former revolutionary and now an important Badiraguato politician.) In the early 1940s he got a job in the *Botica del Refugio* on the Calle Angel Flores (Rodríguez Benítez & Islas Flores 2013). Soon he was put in charge of buying up chemicals and medicines for the pharmacy at the border in Nogales. It was here that he started to purchase the chemicals necessary to transform opium into low-grade heroin. Whether he worked out the recipe himself or had help from a local doctor, the owner of the Botica (the local dignitary, Veneranda Batíz), or a member of the American mafia (like Max Cossman), is unclear. But by the middle of the decade, a Sinaloa laboratory was producing homegrown, Mexican heroin: what would become known by the 1960s as 'Mexican brown.'

CONCLUSIONS

Between 1900 and 1950 Mexico became a substantial source of the opiates consumed in the United States. The means of that supply changed over time. At first Mexico simply acted as a transit point for heroin and morphine that had been processed in Europe. But by the 1920s, a handful of entrepreneurial Chinese immigrants and Mexican farmers were also growing opium poppies in Baja California and Sonora. They were also processing this raw gum into smoking opium. From the late 1930s onwards traditional supplies of US narcotics were gradually shut off. So, farmers from the Golden Triangle started to grow opium poppies in bulk. At first, they simply harvested the gum, sold it to bigger wholesalers, who transported it in its raw state over the border. But by the middle of the decade, they had also started to process the raw gum into morphine and heroin.

This story also demonstrates the tight links between developments in the licit and illicit economies. Drug trafficking in the 1920s and early 1930s was based on a Porfirian economic model, with its stress on manufactured imports, the expansion of farmlands (often at the expense of indigenous groups) and immigration. Early morphine and heroin were imported and piggybacked transatlantic trade. Early opium growing relied on the opening up of irrigated fields along the rivers of northern Sonora. Early Chinese opium entrepreneurs used migrant networks, like their Mexican successors in the United States, to build up commercial dominance. And the shift from producing opium to producing heroin ran alongside a new official emphasis on producing manufactured goods rather than raw materials. By the 1940s the Mexican government had started to reduce its reliance on the export of primary materials and emphasize the production of manufactured goods. It suggests that even more than half a century ago drug traffickers were at the forefront of (or even pre-empting) economic changes

This narrative of shifting trafficking routes also suggests why the Mexican authorities have found it so hard to stamp out the narcotics business. Lying to the south of the biggest global market for drugs simply makes it impossible. Even when Mexico was not directly producing the drugs, it provided the easiest transshipment route for traffickers. In the 1920s it was European morphine and heroin. In the 1950s and 1960s it was French Connection smack. In the 1980s and 1990s it was Thai stick and tons of cocaine. Now it is fentanyl and other synthetics. (Le Cour Grandmaison, Morris & Smith 2019) Furthermore, whenever these sources were cut off or dried up, Mexican opium growing always provided a cheap and ready supply for American users. In the early 1940s, it took less than a couple of years for Golden Triangle growers to start to supply New York drug users. By the early 1970s, it took barely six months for Mexican suppliers to take over the market left by the closing down of the French Connection heroin factories.[59] Within months of heavier regulation of medical opioids in the United States, dealers in Mexican black tar heroin appeared outside pain-relief clinics from California to Kentucky (Quinones 2015). Mexico has, in short, always been America's emergency heroin supplier.

Finally, the establishment of the Golden Triangle's 'farm-to-arm' heroin networks suggests why the region has such a persistent history of drug production. In the highlands, poppy growing thrived in an isolated region with limited access and rain-fed valleys, and amongst a population with limited economic opportunities and traditions of communal cooperation. In the lowlands the trade piggybacked on existing networks of merchants and entrepreneurs with access to

59 G. R. Ford Presidential Library, Richard Parsons Files, Box 22, Parsons, Cannon to Parsons, 2/2/1976; U.S. embassy in Mexico to Parsons, January 1976 telegram.

good infrastructure, and already-established trade links to the United States. By the mid-1940s a few combined these advantages with the knowledge of how to produce homemade heroin.

FUNDING INFORMATION

We would like to thank the British Academic Newton Award for the funding that made this article possible.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Juan Fernández Velázquez
Universidad Autónoma Intercultural de Sinaloa, MX

Benjamin Smith
University of Warwick, GB

REFERENCES

Aguilar Alvarado, M and **Ibarra Escobar, W.** 2013. *Desarrollo Empresarial y Liderazgo Político de Melesio Cuen Cázarez: Empresario y Líder de Badiraguato*. Culiacán: UAS.

Astorga, L. 2016 edn. *El siglo de las drogas : del Porfiriato al nuevo milenio*. Mexicco City: Delbolsillo.

Booth, M. 1999. *Opium: A History*. New York: Macmillan.

Bradford, JT. 2020. *Poppies, politics, and power: Afghanistan and the global history of drugs and diplomacy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.7591/cornell/9781501738333.001.0001

Bucardo, J. et al. 2005. "Historical trends in the production and consumption of illicit drugs in Mexico: Implications for the prevention of blood borne infections." *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, Sep 01; 79(3): 281–93. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2005.02.003

Campos, I and **Gootenberg, P.** (2015). "The new drug history of the Americas." *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 95(1): 1–32. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1215/00182168-2836796

Chao Romero, R. 2011. *The Chinese in Mexico, 1882–1940*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/00927678.2012.649640

Córdova, N. 2011. *La narcocultura: simbología de la transgresión, el poder y la muerte, Sinaloa y la leyenda negra*. Culiacán: Universidad Autónoma de Sinaloa.

Courtwright, DT. 2001. *Dark Paradise: A History of Opiate Addiction in America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674029910

Davenport-Hines, R. 2002. *The Pursuit of Oblivion: A Social History of Drugs*. London: Orion.

Dikotter, F, Xun, Z and **Laamann, L.** 2016. *Narcotic Culture: A History of Drugs in China*. London: Hurst & Co.

Dormandy, T. 2012. *Opium: Reality's Dark Dream*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Gilman, N, Goldhammer, J and **Weber, S.** 2011. *Deviant Globalization: Black Market Economy in the 21st Century*. London: Bloomsbury.

Farfán-Méndez, C and **Porter, J.** 2020. Setting the Table: The Licit Beginnings of Sinaloa's Illicit Export Economy, December 2020. Available at: https://noria-research.com/the-licit-beginnings-of-sinaloas-illicit-export-economy/ [Last accessed 10 February 2022].

Fafán-Méndez, C and **Porter, J.** 2022. "Milagro agrícola y prohibicionismo: el despegue de Sinaloa en el mercado de drogas ilícitas" with Jayson M. Porter in Alvarez, I et al. La Amapola en Crisis. Auge y Decadencia del Opio Mexicano. México: El Colegio de México.

Fernández Velázquez, Juan Antonio. *Rayando la bola y cortando la rama*: *The production of opium and marijuana in Sinaloa* (1940– ca. 1975) (manuscript, n.d.).

Flores Pérez, C. 2013, *Historias de polvo y sangre: génesis y evolución del tráfico de drogas en el estado de Tamaulipas*. Mexico City: CIDE

Gingeras, R. 2014. *Heroin, organized crime, and the making of modern Turkey*. Oxford: OUP. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198716020.001.0001

Gonzalez, F. 2017. *Paisanos Chinos: Transpacific Politics Among Chinese Immigrants in Mexico*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Gootenberg, P. 2008. *Andean cocaine: the making of a global drug*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Hernández, A. 2020. *El traidor: El diario secreto del hijo del Mayo*. Mexico City: Penguin Random House.

Inglis, L. 2019. *Milk of Paradise: A Social History of Opium*. New York: Pegasus Books. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520290198.001.0001

Jonnes, J. 1996. *Hep-Cats, Narcs, and Pipe Dreams: A History of America's Romance with Illegal Drugs.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Kinder, DC. 1981. "Bureaucratic Cold Warrior: Harry J. Anslinger and Illicit Narcotics Traffic." *Pacific Historical Review*, 50(2): 169–91. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/3638725

Le Cour Grandmaison, R, Morris, N and **Smith, BT.** 2019. "The Last Harvest? From the US Fentanyl Boom to the Mexican Opium Crisis." *Journal of Illicit Economies and Development*, 1(3): 312–329. DOI: https://doi.org/10.31389/jied.45

McCoy, A. 1972. *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia*. New York: Harper & Row.

Morris, N. 2022. "Heroin, the Herreras and the Chicago Connection: The Rise and Fall of a Durango Drug Dynasty." In Pansters, W. and Smith, BT (eds.), *Regional Histories of Drug Trafficking in Twentieth Century Mexico*. Santa Fe: University of New Mexico Press.

Musto, DF. 2010. *The American Disease: Origins of Narcotic Control*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Osuña Félix, Francisco Javier. 2014. Crecimiento y Crisis de la Mineria en Sinaloa (1907–1950), Unpubl. MA thesis, UAS.

Pembleton, MR. 2018. *Containing Addiction: The Federal Bureau of Narcotics and the Origins of America's Global Drug War*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv346vg7

Perez Montfort, R. 2014. "Las Drogas en el Mexico posrecoluionario, 1920–1930, El Escenario Popular y el Vacilon" Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru, *Espacios en la historia: Invención y transformación de los espacios sociales*. Mexico City: Colegio de México, pp. 405–31.

Piccato, P. 2001. *City of Suspects: Crime in Mexico City, 1900–1931*. Durham: Duke University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822380719

Porchas Peñuelas, Narbelh Ulises. 2012. Opio en Sonora, una practica ilegal, 1920–1926, Tesis, Licenciado en Historia, Universidad de Sonora.

Porter, R and **Teich, M.** 1995. *Drugs and Narcotics in History*. Cambridge: CUP). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511599675

Quinones, S. 2015. *Dreamland: The True Tale of America's Opiate Epidemic*. London: Bloomsbury.

Renero, M. 1925. Ligeros Apuntes Sobre la Toxicomania de las Drogas Heroicas en la Capital de la Republica, Universidad Nacional, Facultad de Medicina, Tesis.

Rodríguez Benítez, R and **Islas Flores, MC.** 2013. *Veneranda Bátiz Paredes: Primera Farmacéutica Del Colegio Rosales*. Culiacán: Universidad Autónoma de Sinaloa.

Ruiz, RE. 2010. *On the Rim of Mexico: Encounters of the Rich and Poor*. Berkeley: University of California.

Shavone Camacho, JM. 2012. *Chinese Mexicans: Transpacific Migration and the Search for a Homeland, 1910–1960*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5149/9780807882597_schiavone_camacho

Schneider, E. 2011. *Smack: Heroin and the American City*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Spillane, J. 2002. *Cocaine: from medical marvel to modern menace in the united states, 1884–1920*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Topik, S, Marichal, C and **Frank, Z.** 2006. *From silver to cocaine: Latin American commodity chains and the building of the world economy, 1500–2000*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Trocki, CA. 2005. *Opium, Empire, and the Global Political Economy: A Study of the Asian Opium Trade 1750–1950*. London: Routledge.

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Fernández Velázquez, JA and Smith, BT. 2022. A History of Opium Commodity Chains in Mexico, 1900–1950. *Journal of Illicit Economies and Development*, 4(2), pp. 113–127. DOI: https://doi.org/10.31389/jied.113

Submitted: 29 July 2021
Accepted: 10 May 2022
Published: 02 December 2022