M. Mandl

A brief history of war and drugs: From Vikings to Nazis

From World War II to Vietnam and Syria, drugs are often as much a part of conflict as bombs and bullets.

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BY Barbara McCarthy

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Adolf Hitler presides over the dedication of the Reich Leadership School in Bernau, Germany

Adolf Hitler was a junkie and the Nazis' narcotics intake gives new meaning to the term 'war on drugs'. But they weren't the only ones. Recent publications have revealed that narcotics are as much a part of conflict as bullets; often defining wars rather than sitting anecdotally on the sidelines of them. In his book Blitzed, German author Norman Ohler describes how the Third Reich was permeated with drugs, including cocaine, heroin and most notably crystal meth, which was used by everyone from soldiers to housewives and factory workers.

inReadinReadOriginally published in German as Der totale Rausch (The total Rush), the book details a history of abuse by Adolf Hitler and his henchmen and releases previously unpublished archived findings about Dr Theodor Morell, the personal physician who administered drugs to the German leader as well as to the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini.

"Hitler was a Fuhrer in his drug taking too. It makes sense, given his extreme personality," says Ohler, speaking from his home in Berlin.

After Ohler's book was released in Germany last year, an article in the Frankfurter Allgemeine newspaper posed the question: "Does Hitler's insanity become more understandable when you view him as a junkie?"

"Yes and no," Ohler answers.

Hitler, whose mental and physical health has been the source of much speculation, relied on daily injections of the "wonder drug" Eukodol, which puts the user in a state of euphoria - and often renders them incapable of making sound judgments - and cocaine, which he started taking regularly from 1941 onwards to combat ailments including chronic stomach spasms, high blood pressure and a ruptured ear drum.

"But we all know he did a lot of questionable things before that, so you can't blame drugs for everything," Ohler reflects. "That said, they certainly played a role in his demise."

In his book, Ohler details how, towards the end of the war, "the medication kept the supreme commander stable in his delusion".

"The world could sink into rubble and ashes around him, and his actions cost millions of people their lives, but the Fuhrer felt more justified when his artificial euphoria set in," he wrote.

But what goes up must come down and when supplies ran out towards the end of the war, Hitler endured, among other things, severe serotonin and dopamine withdrawals, paranoia, psychosis, rotting teeth, extreme shaking, kidney failure and delusion, Ohler explains.

His mental and physical deterioration during his last weeks in the Fuhrerbunker, a subterranean shelter for members of the Nazi party, can, Ohler says, be attributed to withdrawal from Eukodol rather than to Parkinson's as was previously believed.

Nazi leaders Adolf Hitler and Rudolph Hess during the Congress of National Labour in Berlin, 1935

World War II

The irony, of course, is that while the Nazis promoted an ideal of Aryan clean living, they were anything but clean themselves.

During the Weimar Republic, drugs had been readily available in the German capital, Berlin. But, after seizing power in 1933, the Nazis outlawed them.

Then, in 1937, they patented the methamphetamine-based drug Pervitin- a stimulant that could keep people awake and enhance their performance, while making them feel euphoric. They even produced a brand of chocolates, Hildebrand, that contained 13mg of the drug - much more than the normal 3mg pill.

In July 1940, more than 35 million 3mg doses of Pervitin from the Temmler factory in Berlin were shipped to the German army and Luftwaffe during the invasion of France.

"Soldiers were awake for days, marching without stopping, which wouldn't have happened if it weren't for crystal meth so yes, in this case, drugs did influence history," Ohler says.

He attributes the Nazi victory in the Battle of France to the drug. "Hitler was unprepared for war and his back was against the wall. The Wehrmacht was not as powerful as the Allies, their equipment was poor and they only had three million soldiers compared with the Allies' four million."

But armed with Pervitin, the Germans advanced through difficult terrain, going without sleep for 36 to 50 hours.

Towards the end of the war, when the Germans were losing, pharmacist Gerhard Orzechowski created a cocaine chewing gum that would allow the pilots of one-man U-boats to stay awake for days on end. Many suffered mental breakdowns as a result of taking the drug while being isolated in an enclosed space for long periods of time.

But when the Temmler factory producing Pervitin and Eukodol was bombed by the allies in 1945, it marked the end of the Nazis' - and Hitler's - drug consumption.

Of course, the Nazis weren't the only ones taking drugs. Allied bomber pilots were also given amphetamines to keep them awake and focused during long flights, and the Allies had their own drug of choice - Benzedrine.

The Laurier Military History Archives in Ontario, Canada, contain records suggesting that soldiers should ingest 5mg to 20mg of Benzedrine sulphate every five to six hours, and it is estimated that 72 million amphetamine tablets were consumed by the Allies during World War II. Paratroopers allegedly used it during the D-Day landings, while US marines relied on it for the invasion of Tarawa in 1943.

So why have historians only written about drugs anecdotally until now?

"I think a lot of people don't understand how powerful drugs are," Ohler reflects. "That might change now. I'm not the first person to write about them, but I think the success of the book means ... [that] future books and movies like Downfall might pay more heed to Hitler's rampant abuse."

German medical historian Dr Peter Steinkamp, who teaches at the university of Ulm, in Germany, believes it is coming to the fore now because "most of the involved parties are dead".

"When Das Boot, the German U-boat movie from 1981 was released, it depicted scenes of U-boat captains completely hammered drunk. It caused outrage among many war veterans who wanted to be portrayed as squeaky clean," he says. "But now that most of the people who fought in World War II are no longer with us, we may see a lot more stories of substance abuse, not just from World War II, but Iraq and Vietnam too."

Members of the SA, the paramilitary wing of the Nazi party, during a training march outside Munich

Of course, the use of drugs dates far further back than World War II.

In 1200BC, pre-Inca Chavin priests in Peru gave their subjects psychoactive drugs to gain power over them, while the Romans cultivated opium, to which Emperor Marcus Aurelius was famously addicted.

Viking "berserkers", who were named after "bear coats" in Old Norse, famously fought in a trance-like state, possibly as a result of taking agaric "magic" mushrooms and bog myrtle. Icelandic historian and poet Snorri Stuluson (AD1179 to 1241) described them "as mad as dogs or wolves, bit their shields, and were strong as bears or wild oxen".

More recently, the book Dr Feelgood: The story of the doctor who influenced history by treating and drugging prominent figures Including President Kennedy, Marilyn Monroe, and Elvis Presley, by Richard Lertzman and William Birnes, alleges that US President John F Kennedy's drug use almost caused World War III during the two-day summit with Soviet leader Nikita Krushcher in 1961.

The Vietnam War

In his book, Shooting up, Polish author Lukasz Kamienski describes how the US military plied its servicemen with speed, steroids, and painkillers to "help them handle extended combat" during the Vietnam War.

A report by the House Select Committee on Crime in 1971 found that between 1966 and 1969, the armed forces used 225 million stimulant pills.

"The administration of stimulants by the military contributed to the spread of drug habits and sometimes had tragic consequences, because amphetamine, as many veterans claimed, increased aggression as well as alertness. Some remembered that when the effect of the speed faded away, they were so irritated that they felt like shooting 'children in the streets'," Kamienski wrote in The Atlantic in April 2016.

This might explain why so many veterans of that war suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. The National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment study published in 1990 shows that 15.2 percent of male soldiers and 8.5 percent of females who experienced combat in Southeast Asia suffered from PTSD.

According to a study by JAMA Psychiatry, an international peer-reviewed journal for clinicians, scholars, and research scientists in psychiatry, mental health, behavioural science, and allied fields, 200,000 people still suffer from PTSD almost 50 years after the Vietnam War.

One of these is John Danielski. He was in the Marine Corp and spent 13 months in Vietnam between 1968 and 1970. In October, he released an autobiographical guidebook for sufferers called Johnny Come Crumbling Home: with PTSD.

"I came home from Vietnam in 1970, but I still have PTSD like a lot of other people - it never goes away. When I was in Vietnam in 1968 in the jungle, most of the guys I met smoked weed and took opiates. We also drank a lot of speed out of brown bottles," he says, speaking by telephone from his home in West Virginia.

"The army guys were getting stimulants and all sorts of pills in Saigon and Hanoi, but where we were, we just drank the speed. It came in a brown bottle. I know it made people tweaky and they would stay up for days."

"Of course, some of the men did some crazy stuff out there. It definitely had something to do with the drugs. The speed was so hardcore that when the guys were coming back from Vietnam they were having heart attacks on the plane and dying. They would be in such withdrawals - the flight would be like 13 hours without the drugs. Imagine fighting in Vietnam and then going home and dying on the way home," Danielski says.

"The amphetamine increases your heart rate and your heart explodes," he explains.

American soldiers and Vietnamese refugees returning to the town of Hue

In his Atlantic article, Kamienski wrote: "Vietnam was known as the first pharmacological war, so called because the level of consumption of psychoactive substances by military personnel was unprecedented in American history."

"When we came back there was no support for us," Danielski explains. "Everyone hated us. People accused us of being baby killers. The veteran services were a shambles. There was no addiction counselling. That's why so many people killed themselves when they came back. Over 70,000 veterans have killed themselves since Vietnam, and 58,000 died in the war. There's no memorial wall for them."

"Is there a connection between drugs and PTSD?" he asks. "Sure, but for me the hard part was the isolation I felt when I came back too. Nobody cared. I just became a heroin addict and alcoholic, and only went into recovery in 1998. Services have improved now, but ex-army men who served in Iraq and Afghanistan are still killing themselves - they have an even higher suicide rate."

The war in Syria

More recently, Middle Eastern conflicts have seen an increase in the rise of Captagon, an amphetamine that is allegedly fuelling Syria's civil war. Last November, 11 million pills were seized by Turkish officials at the Syrian-Turkish border, while this April 1.5 million were seized in Kuwait. In a BBC documentary called Syria's War Drug from September 2015, one user is quoted as saying: "There was no fear any more when I took Captagon. You can't sleep or close your eyes, forget about it."

Ramzi Haddad is a Lebanese psychiatrist and cofounder of an addiction centre called Skoun. He explains that Captagon, "which is made in Syria", has been around "for a long time - over 40 years".

"I have seen the effects the drug has on people. Here it is getting more popular in the refugee camps filled with Syrian refugees. People can buy it from drug dealers for a couple of dollars, so it's a lot cheaper than cocaine or ecstasy," Haddad says. "In the short term it makes people feel euphoric and fearless and makes them sleep less - perfect for wartime fighting, but in the long term it brings on psychosis, paranoia and cardiovascular side effects."

Calvin James, an Irishman who worked as a medic in Syria for the Kurdish Red Crescent, says that while he didn't encounter the drug, he has heard that it is popular among fighters with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant group fighters, known as ISIL or ISIS.

"You can tell by people's demeanour. On one occasion we came across a member of ISIS who was in a people carrier with five children and he was severely injured. He didn't seem to even notice and asked me for some water, he was extremely psyched up," says James. "Another guy tried to blow himself up, but it didn't work and he was still alive. Again, he didn't seem to notice the pain so much. He was treated in hospital along with everyone else."

Gerry Hickey, an Ireland-based addiction councillor and psychotherapist, isn't surprised by recent findings.

"Delusion is part of the course and opiates are extremely addictive because they make people feel calm and give them a false sense of security. So, of course, they are perfectly suited to foot soldiers, naval captains and more recently terrorists," he says.

"Cabinets like to anaesthetise their armies during wartime so that the business of killing people becomes easier, while they themselves take drugs in order to keep their grandiose narcissism, megalomania and delusion in check."

"It wouldn't surprise me if suicide bombers are drugged up to the gills," he adds.

"The thing about drugs is, that people not only lose their minds after a while, but also their physical health deteriorates after long-term use, especially as soon as addicts hit their 40s."

If Hitler was in a state of withdrawal during those final weeks of the war, it wouldn't be unusual for him to be shaking and cold, he explains. "People in withdrawal go into a massive shock and often die. They need to have other medication in that time. It takes three weeks of readjustment."

"I always get a little dubious when people ask, 'I wonder where they get the energy,'" he reflects. "Well look no further."