



*Killer High: A History of War in Six Drugs* by Peter Andreas.

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As countless observers have noted, warfare is among the most potent drugs ever conceived. Its chemical rush and emotional thrill, and the explosive mental and physical stimulation of battle provide uniquely dramatic moments in our personal histories. In *Killer High*, political scientist Peter Andreas (Brown Univ.) says exactly that, but too briefly and too late. Instead, he concentrates on the ancillary drugs that amplify and accelerate war. He identifies the historically most effective of these stimulants as alcohol, nicotine, caffeine, opium, amphetamines, and especially cocaine, heroin, and cannabis, and the internecine wars the latter three have spawned in Southeast Asia and Latin America. The others feel like obligatory and cursory additions to a long essay on contemporary drug-drenched conflicts.

To put it more bluntly, the farther back in time Andreas goes, the less surefooted and original is his narrative; only the last sixty pages go beyond derivative synthesis or distillation of already available surveys. The chapter on alcohol, the oldest and most universal of his target drugs, is typical. At fifty-two pages, it is the book's longest chapter; well over a third of its 271 endnotes (and many of the quotations and anecdotes in the text proper) cite just three secondary surveys, and barely five draw on primary sources. The chapter on cocaine, however, is a notable exception. For readers, the general impression is of a skillful but unsatisfying encyclopedia-like text that skates in and out of memory. And the prefatory framework is not much help either.

Andreas's introduction grandly claims there are "key questions about both war and drugs that we cannot adequately answer without understanding their relationship" (2), but he offers no discernible scaffolding or rigorous method for clarifying that relationship. Sometimes he treats a given drug merely as an atmospheric for war, as in the case of coffee (breaks) or nicotine (time-outs); sometimes a drug is simply a potent pretext for war, like tea, for example, in the American Revolution. He comes closest to a drug (amphetamines) affecting the character or shape of war when he discusses the Nazi blitzkrieg tactics, incorporated into later wars. In fact such common inventions as radios and night goggles, or aspirin and penicillin, had much more to do with the evolution of modern warfare than any sexy drug.

Andreas ignores the antithesis of his argument—the uses of his chosen drugs in *antiwar* contexts. Cannabis, alcohol, and opium were as often escape hatches as facilitators of combat. His eclectic approach to each drug yields a succession of disjointed chapters despite the book title's implication that drugs form a single bright line linking one war to another.

*Killer High*, in the end, offers more color than substance. Nonetheless, Andreas insists that his history has a serious scholarly intention—to "make sense of why we are where we are and even where we might be headed" (251). The latter being, seemingly, the sort of "militarized drug wars" of Latin America, where commercial networks or cartels wage informal, protracted, flexible, and intermittently savage combat. But nothing preceding the book's final chapter points in that direction. Moreover, at this late juncture in the book, Andreas abandons any conventional definition of war as entailing the pursuit of a stable coercive government apparatus within sovereign borders

by an organized and bureaucratic state (e.g., Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, the Caliphate) in favor of a metaphorical notion of belligerence. The “drug wars” he describes are criminal enterprises dedicated to reaping huge profits, constantly shifting in their fortunes with no clear endgame. Lacking any disciplined focus, Andreas confuses terrorists with insurgents, war with violence, armies with gangs, El Chapo with Osama bin Laden.

These criticisms aside, *Killer High* is easy reading and its unusual and ambitious panorama of drugs on modern battlefields will enlighten interested lay readers. Consider it, if you will, a primer of sorts for the likely biological and chemical atrocities of the future.