



THE ROOTS OF THE POPPY

Withdrawal Symptoms in the Golden Triangle: A Drugs Market in Disarray. Transnational Institute (TNI) Report. Amsterdam, January 2009. <http://www.tni.org/drugs>; Martin Jelsma, Tom Kramer and Pietje Vervest, eds. **Trouble in the Triangle: Opium and Conflict in Burma (Bangkok: Silkworm Books, 2005), 231 pp.;** Yekaterina Stepanova. **The Role of the Drugs Trade in the Political Economy of Conflicts and Terrorism (Moscow: Ves Mir, 2005), 312 pp.;** Yekaterina Stepanova. **Addressing Drugs and Conflicts in Myanmar: Who Will Support Alternative Development? SIPRI Policy Brief (SIPRI, June 2009), 8 pp.**

Reviewed by Vladimir Orlov

Uproot (verb):

—to pull up by or as if by the roots

—to displace (a person or persons) from native or habitual surroundings

—to remove or destroy utterly¹

In late January and early February, crimson and snow-white blooms spring up on the primeval meadows among the forested mountain slopes of northern Laos. The flowers, some of the most beautiful in Southeast Asia, are known as *Papaver Somniferum*—or simply as the poppy. The plant, which has been used in traditional Chinese medicine for ages, has brought this region the dubious fame of the opium capital of the world.

Once again I come to the Golden Triangle, at the junction of the borders between Burma, China, Laos, and Thailand. The catchy moniker was coined by a middle-ranking U.S. diplomat in 1971, when opium production here reached its peak, with the backing of the CIA. The drugs money was used to arm the local tribes who fought the Communists.

My first coming here coincided with a momentous event for the local drug lords and those who fought them. It was November 2007. Tidings came from the Burmese capital, Rangoon, that the opium king of the Golden Triangle, Khun Sa, had died in the comfort of his own home, where he was kept under house arrest. Was that the end of an era for the Golden Triangle?

Press reports in recent years have trumpeted a sharp drop in opium production in Burma and the Triangle as a whole—by as much as 80 percent. The top spot in the world ranking of heroin exporters now firmly belongs to Afghanistan.

What I came here to find out was whether the Triangle had really become the first—and so far the only—success story in the international war on drugs, exactly 100 years after the introduction in 1909 of international controls over narcotic substances.

I have covered hundreds of miles driving and cycling along the roads and tracks in the Burmese, Lao, and Thai parts of the Triangle. I have left behind me more miles by boat along the Mekong and its tributaries. And, during my travels, I kept reading books, articles, and reports on the *subject matter*, making notes and writing down my own impressions from what I saw along the way.

PAPAVER SOMNIFERUM: A USER'S GUIDE

The best place to grow the opium poppy plant is high on the mountain slopes, where the temperatures and the soil are just right for it. The seeds are planted shortly before the end of the wet season, in late September—early October. It is better to plant the seeds on fields previously used to grow maize, because maize crowds out all the weeds and can be used as fodder. Poppy seeds are planted right between the dry maize stalks.



Three months later, just after the poppy plants drop their petals, the women and children of the Mona, Lakhu, Lisu, and other mountain tribes of the Triangle go out to harvest the crops. They make vertical cuts on the poppy capsules, and let the sap that oozes out dry up in the sun. Making the cuts is a form of art, and requires a firm hand. The cuts are made using special instruments that look like little sickles, with two or three blades screwed tightly together. If the cut is made too deep, all the sap will spill out onto the ground. If it is too shallow, the sap will go dry inside the capsule. If it is made just right, the resulting resinous opium gum, which turns dark amber in color, is collected the next day, rolled into little balls and folded into banana leaves. That is how it is then sold to the intermediaries.

The mountain tribes believe that the poppy plant is an ideal crop. The money even a small amount of opium gum brings is good, the produce does not go bad over time, and the intermediaries come to the villages themselves to collect it, so the tribes do not even have to worry about taking their crops to the market—which is especially important as there aren't any proper roads around. And there is one other advantage the mountain tribes have over the farmers in the valleys: the poppy does not grow very well in the lowlands—it does not like the soil and the climate there.

But the money paid for opium gum is loose change compared with the prices at the later stages of processing and transportation. In the early 1990s, the price of 1kg of heroin produced from opium gum in Burma itself was about \$1,200–\$1,400. That figure doubled as soon as the heroin reached the first large transit node (such as the town of Chiengrai in Thailand), tripled in the Thai capital Bangkok, and reached \$60,000 at its final destination, such as New York, rising up to 50-fold along the way.²

SEARCHING FOR THE ROOTS OF EVIL

I am in the Opium Hall in the far north of Thailand. From here, I can see Burma and Laos. I am studying a wide selection of opium pipes and scales with the little weights shaped in the form of elephants . . .

This is just a museum—one of the most unusual museums I have ever been to. Built using the latest multimedia technology under the patronage of the royal family itself, this museum does not just tell its visitors about the woes of drug addiction. It also tells them about the roots of this evil.

The displays will show you how the evil came from the West. Since the seventh century, when the Arab tribes brought opium to China, it had been used there for medicinal purposes. Initially, the opium poppy plant was grown in what is now the Chinese provinces of Sichuan, Yunnan, and Gansu. Only later did the mountain tribes bring it to what is now the Golden Triangle during their migration to the south. The poppy was not cultivated on a large scale in the region, and its consumption was not widespread.

Everything changed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when opium smoking spread across the whole region thanks to the Dutch. And in the nineteenth century, British traders turned opium into one of the most profitable commercial crops. The British East India Company, which held a monopoly on opium production in Bengal, sold much of it in China, where the number of users in the first quarter of the nineteenth century had reached more than 15 million people. (To put that figure into perspective, today the world number of users of opiates, such as opium, morphine, and heroin, is also estimated at 15 million.)³ Then came the two Opium Wars with the British Empire, which China lost.

The Opium Hall gently prods the visitor to the same conclusion that Yekaterina Stepanova (who, unlike me, has not been to that remarkable museum, but thinks along the same lines as its curators) makes in her book: the drug trade was used by European powers as an instrument of their colonial policy.⁴

These powers are paying the price now, but they keep blaming us for it, the curators of the museum in the Golden Triangle seem to suggest—without any gloating of course, but full of confidence in the accuracy of their historical analysis.

Researchers in the Netherlands, meanwhile, also seem to be ashamed of the policies of their forebears: "A hundred years ago, when European colonial powers encouraged opium production everywhere they could, the world output of that drug was at least triple the current figure."⁵

THE BIG O INDEX

The Golden Triangle now accounts for less than 1 percent of heroin exports to Europe and North America.

In the Thai sector, opium—known in the streets of Western cities as the Big O—has been displaced by maize, tobacco, and tea. Its production here has plummeted by 96 percent over the past 30 years.

In Burma, the output of opium gum has also fallen substantially, but the situation here is quite different. Widespread and abject poverty among the farmers in provinces such as Shan and Kachin makes it hard for them to switch from the poppy to other crops. According to one farmer, 25 kg of opium gum would fetch him \$1,500 in the nearest market town—enough to sustain a small family for a whole year. To make the same amount of money on corn, he would need to bring fifteen hundred 50kg sacks of it to the market. A local farmer cannot even grow that much, let alone take it to the market: a family that owns at least one mule is considered wealthy here, and the roads are passable only during the dry season.

THE METHODS

In the far north of Thailand, in Chiang Rai province, Thaksin is revered regardless of any turmoil in Bangkok.

Thaksin Shinawatra is one of Southeast Asia's most controversial politicians. A business tycoon and former prime minister, he is being persecuted (for corruption or possibly for political motives, or maybe both) but has a good chance of becoming the Thai leader once again. A typical Thai oligarch, Thaksin is. But the farmers of Chiang Rai are falling over themselves telling me how much he had done for them when he was in power: "He had built schools, and he had booted out the drug lords as well." I ask them whether his methods were, at the very least, controversial. More than 2,000 people suspected of links with the drug lords were killed in 2003 without any trial: the government said they had been shot in "gang-on-gang violence". Another 80,000 were arrested. Western rights activists describe that episode as the *dark pages* of Thailand's history.⁶ But the farmers I talk to disagree: "Our lives have improved, there is less violence now." True enough, all I see on the mountain slopes in front of me at the height of the poppy season is picturesque tea plantations. They used to grow the best opium in the region here not so long ago. Lyrics from that song by *Leningrad* come to mind, but I make myself focus on the serious things. The local farmers have their fair share of problems too. The previous day, the authorities had unexpectedly released one of the village chiefs of the Lisu tribe, who was probably one of the late Khun Sa's key lieutenants in the drug trade. The farmers fear that the drug lords will try to claw their power back.

"Thaksin fought against drugs because it was a personal vendetta for him. His son was an addict, he got hooked on methamphetamines, on ecstasy. So his war on drugs was for real," one farmer tells me. The villagers here know all the latest—everyone follows the news from the capital.

LAOS

Northern Laos is a sleepy kingdom of rivers, jungles, and caves. Another few years, and it will surely become thronged with tourists—its rare natural beauty cannot stay unnoticed for long. But the crimson banners with the golden hammer-and-sickle sigil—the flags of the revolutionary armed forces—serve as a gentle reminder that this is a socialist country with a one-party system, so the locals will be happy to chat with you about anything but politics.

The poppy plantations seem to be shrinking here as well, and the opium business is wilting. What a difference a few decades can make!

The huge unexploded bombs with "Made in U.S.A." stamped on their sides, put on display here and there throughout the whole country, are quite incongruous with the general feel of this peaceful and pacified country. More bombs have been dropped on its people, per capita, than on any other nation in the world. Children and farmers are still dying after treading on unexploded munitions. Just as incongruous in these surroundings is the report I read about the history of Lao



drug trafficking, one of the most controversial papers on this subject written 15 years ago. It has largely been taken over by events, but still remains an interesting historical document.

PULP FICTION

“The Golden Crescent and the Golden Triangle became the leaders in opium production in the 1960–80s thanks to the policies of the West, primarily America’s CIA, which was cooperating with international organized crime syndicates,” the report reads:

During the Cold War, such cooperation became their usual practice Back in the 1960–70s, during the war in Indochina, the U.S. government was not only turning a blind eye to drug trafficking by its allies in the “fight against Communism,” such as the chief of the Lao rebels from the Meo tribe, General Vang Pao, and corrupt bureaucrats of the military regimes in Saigon or Bangkok—it was also turning its back on the complicity in this *business* of many CIA, Navy and Air Force officers. That gave birth to the Indochina–U.S.A drug smuggling route.⁷

But then the war ended. The Cold War, which served as a breeding ground for the drug trade in Afghanistan and Southeast Asia, came to an end as well, some time later. Laos remained standing—but now it stood alone. It found itself forced to adjust to the new reality and the new players.

I continue reading the report, diving in deeper and deeper into the atmosphere of the 1990s:

In the autumn of 1991 or thereabouts, a number of former (Russian) security officers . . . set up . . . the so-called *Moscow drug ring*, which is still active and has branches not only in Moscow or Chechnya, but also in Mazar-e-Sharif (Afghanistan), Louangphapang (Laos), London and the Cayman Islands (in the Caribbean) The Afghan and Lao branches are involved in smuggling raw materials (opium gum and morphine) for the heroin *industry*. They are making use of the Moscow drug traders’ old contacts dating back to when they served in the 1970s and 1980s as advisors and specialists in Indochina and Afghanistan. Starting from 1991, the Chechen mafia and the Moscow drug ring have been working on raw materials supplies for heroin production with some agents of the National Security Service of Uzbekistan, a number of field commanders in Afghanistan and, since the winter of 1992–93, with some rebel leaders in the Burmese Shan province, with the mediation and direct participation of representatives of law-enforcement agencies in Laos and Cambodia, several North Koreans and, until recently, several officials in Yemen.⁸

I pause and catch my breath here, to assimilate the geographic scale of the operation. When one drifts down the Mekong, it is easy to forget about the whole wide world outside.

I continue reading:

Experts believe the criminal ties between the Moscow drug ring and the separatists in Burma’s Shan state were established in late 1992. Among the mediators and direct participants of this criminal business were representatives of law-enforcement agencies in Laos and Cambodia, North Korean citizens, and corrupt Yemeni civilian and military officials. This cooperation became possible thanks to previous contacts between the above participants, North Korea’s strong influence in Cambodia, as well as the former KGB officers’ contacts in the region dating back to the 1950–80s Approximately in 1990, another group of Soviet citizens in Laos, who worked in cooperation with the locals, received a very lucrative offer from morphine producers in Shan, who said they could supply large batches of the drug on a regular basis. The large criminal group that sprung up some time later consisted of Soviet citizens and operated in Laos, Cam Ranh, Moscow and Vienna. The business was organized in the following way. The Shan people would bring morphine across the Mekong to Laos. It would then be taken by Lao planes to Cam Ranh. Here it would be handed over to the personnel of the base who took part in the drugs ring, who would then get it to Saigon (Ho Chi Minh city). In Saigon, it would be received by a Vietnamese gang who had the necessary production facilities to process large quantities of morphine into high-quality heroin. The heroin would then be smuggled into Central Russia, disguised as various produce of the wood-processing industry. In Central Russia, the drug was taken out of the containers and somehow shipped to Vienna, where it was bought in large batches by the Sicilian Mafia.⁹

As I reach the bit about the Mafia, I take a break for a minute to look at cows grazing on the banks of the Mekong. Not a lot of cows, just a couple. There aren’t any cowherds here at all. There aren’t any crowds, either: just a lonely fisherman, a shepherd or a gold-digger here and there. By the way, the Lao do not milk their cows. They get by without cow’s milk.

I return to my reading:

... The Lao drug dealers did not want to lose their huge profits. Using their old connections, they approached the Moscow drug ring and became its branch. The smuggling resumed, but the destination changed. New partners joined the business: North Koreans and the Khmer. The new partnership was based on a clear division of labor. The Shan people retained the function of buying up opium gum from the mountain farmers in the rebel-infested areas, processing it into morphine in underground laboratories on Burmese territory near the Lao and Thai border, and smuggling it across the Mekong into Laos. The Lao, together with the newly formed local branch of the Moscow drug ring, assumed the task of providing air transit from the Huei Sai airfield....¹⁰

Not 15 minutes ago our boat passed Huei Sai, something between a small town and a big village. I made a stopover there, took a walk along its dusty alleys. Alas, I found no airfield in or around the town. Maybe the Moscow drug ring had wiped it from the face of the earth back in those strange 1990s, trying to cover up its tracks.

... to Savannakhet airfield, storing it there and smuggling it out to Khmer territory on board Cambodian military transports. At the same time, the Lao used the Huei Sai and Louangphabang airfields to take delivery of arms and ammunition from Cambodia for the Shan rebels—that was part of the payment for the drugs—and turned a blind eye to the smuggling of those arms across the Lao border into Burma. The Cambodian and the North Korean partners in the business (led by the North Koreans, who acted as general managers and direct partners of the Moscow drug ring at “high level talks”) took care of delivering the drugs from Laos to the Kampong Saom airfield on board Cambodian Air Force transports. At the same time, the Kmer and the Koreans were supplying weapons and ammunition to the Shan rebels in payment for the drugs.¹¹

LOUANGPHABANG

Was there ever a Luan Prabang drug ring? Was there a Lao branch? Or was it just a myth? Some 15 years on, as I sit in a cozy cafe on a terrace overlooking the Han river and drink excellent local coffee grown on the mountain plateaus, all this really sounds like an ancient myth, a legend with diverse geography.

The land here is very conducive to flights of fantasy.

Louangphabang is famed for its temples and its Golden Buddha—Phra Bang, which has been guarding this town from evil since time immemorial. This Buddha is special, and the neighboring countries once claimed it as their own. But the Golden Buddha, the guardian of the royal capital without a king (the last one was killed by a revolutionary mob 30 years ago as he was returning to his capital from the far north by the same route I am taking now; his remains were never found) is his own master. “He flies quite a lot,” my young guide tells me. “He flew to Thailand recently, but now he has come back home.”

My other guide, an elderly man, shakes his head: “This is not the real Phra Bang. This is just a copy. The real Phra Bang, our real guardian, has been pent up in some vault in Moscow for many years.”

The Moscow drug ring, it seems, has left its trace here after all.

“THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE DRUG MARKETS ARE UNDERGOING A DEEP TRANSFORMATION”

The quote above was taken from a recent (January 2009) report by the Amsterdam Transnational Institution (TNI), which has long been tracking the situation in Southeast Asia and other drug markets.

The traditional opium production in the Golden Triangle is being displaced by synthetic drugs—methamphetamines. Burma is becoming a leading exporter of meth to other countries of Southeast Asia, China, India, Australia, and Japan. It exports about 700 million tablets (every year), including the Yaba tablets and the so-called *crazy pills*. They are produced mainly in the inaccessible eastern and northern mountains of Shan state.

The traditional smuggling channels from Burma into Thailand, via the border towns of Tachileik and Mae Sai, have been replaced by more tortuous routes, mainly via Lao territory, where experts say crossing the border along the Mekong is not a problem at all.



I actually had a chance to see for myself how easy it is. Under the cover of darkness and the famous local fogs, dozens of fast local boats start crisscrossing the river. Some are going to the Burmese casinos hidden among the marshes, others are delivering goods to the opposite side of the river. . . . Even North Korean refugees manage to reach this place in the middle of nowhere with relative ease, via China and downriver along the Mekong. The drug traffickers have well-established smuggling routes here. The border guards patrol the banks well enough, but I have not seen a single patrol boat during several hours on the river.

Meanwhile, the methamphetamines are on the offensive.

In Thailand, at least five percent of the population are regular users. In China, the number of addicts is estimated at 3.5 million. There is stable demand for drugs.

“The assumption that cutting the production of opium gum will reduce drugs consumption across the board has turned out to be false,”¹² say Dutch researchers Martin Jelsma and Tom Kramer.

They and many others are worried that the retreat of the poppy plantations in the Triangle has resulted in heroin shortages on the regional markets, leading to rising prices and the falling quality of the drug. They believe that the drug addicts in Southeast Asia are facing a choice of either quitting altogether, or using more accessible drugs instead of heroin. Alas, quitting has not been the addicts’ first preference. Some have moved to Yaba, others are experimenting with opioid and benzodiazepine-based medications.

Researchers believe that because almost every government in Southeast Asia is cracking down on drug users, the addicts simply go underground and graduate to harder drugs. Instead of smoking opium, they start injecting heroin and various pharmaceutical substances, and users of meth pills start dissolving them to inject intravenously instead of swallowing them. The numbers of new HIV infections are spiraling in northern Burma and southern Chinese provinces.

THE BALLOON EFFECT

What we are seeing now as a result of the self-proclaimed *victory* over opium in the Golden Triangle can be described as the balloon effect. The hot air balloon flies where the wind takes it. It has been blown away from opium, so now it is slowly moving towards other drugs. “In order to overcome this effect, one needs to study and understand the way the market reacts to policy interventions in the production and consumption of drugs,”¹³ the Dutch researchers argue.

Their Russian colleague Yekaterina Stepanova, in her brilliant book *The Role of the Drugs Trade in the Political Economy of Conflicts and Terrorism*, which has already become a classic, arrives at the same conclusion: opium has been displaced by methamphetamines in the region. In her assessment, meth has certain advantages to offer the drug lords, despite the fact that heroin prices are much higher and its production would therefore appear more profitable. Thanks to the lower prices and better availability of methamphetamines, their consumption is becoming increasingly widespread. Stepanova believes that, unlike heroin, whose main markets lie far away from the Triangle and therefore require a costly and extensive transit system, meth is bought in large quantities on the domestic markets of the region, reducing transportation costs. And since it is also usually sold in large batches, the return on investment comes so much quicker.¹⁴

The bottom line is, opium is on its way out, but its place is being taken by poor-quality synthetic drugs.

Meanwhile, the illegal drug trade in Southeast Asia remains one of the most stable and resilient sectors of the region’s economy.¹⁵

BURMA

I am crossing the bridge from Thailand to arrive in the Burmese border town of Tachileik. Ten years ago, it sat astride a river of opium from Burma into Thailand. The drug lords were in charge here. Even the Queen of Thailand’s motorcade once fell foul of them. Today, the Queen can be completely at her ease here. The border is secure.

All experts agree that, over the past decade, opium production in Burma has plummeted. According to the U.S. Department of State, it fell by 81 percent over the seven years between 1996 and 2003, while the acreage under poppy plantations shrank by two-thirds.¹⁶

Stepanova believes that several factors had contributed to the reduction in the Burmese share of the world production of opiates.

The first is the opium boom in Afghanistan, which began in the 1990s and continues to this day. Afghan heroin has seized almost the entire European market. (In the United States, almost 80 percent of the drug comes from Colombia; Southeast Asia's share is no more than seven percent, and Burma's probably less than one percent.)

The second is the changing structure of the international and regional drugs market, with the ongoing shift from natural to synthetic drugs I have already mentioned.

And the third—and here I put an exclamation mark in the margins of the book by Stepanova—in her opinion, a major role in the falling production of drugs in Burma has been played by the central government's course towards a comprehensive solution of the opium problem, which is not limited to the use of police and security agencies in the war on drugs.¹⁷ “That course was aimed at finding a fundamental solution to the problem of drugs, which is closely intertwined with the problem of peaceful settlement,” Stepanova writes:

That latter problem was given the priority at the initial stages. Under the terms of the truce with the opposition ethnic groups, the Burmese government for a time abandoned attempts to intervene with their economic activity, including drugs. That strategy was based on the notion that only peaceful settlement will over time allow the government's writ to be strong enough to expand central administration and policing into the tribal areas, and create the economic, social and political climate that would bring an end to opium production by former rebel groups.¹⁸

Stepanova is inclined to believe that the ruling Burmese junta is not itself actively involved in the drugs trade; “there is no evidence to equate the Burmese regime to a narcodictatorship,” she believes. On the contrary, there is plenty of evidence that the Burmese authorities are actively waging a war on drugs.¹⁹ This war appears to be making use of a combination of persuasion in dealing with the ethnic rebel groups and an authoritarian style of central government:

In the case of Burma, it is impossible to ignore the facts which Western experts refuse to recognize, based primarily on the ideological imperative of *spreading democracy* and *opposing dictatorship* by any means available. The fact is that in Burma, only the tough and authoritarian nature of the ruling regime (which wields both political and military power) has allowed the government to force the rebel drug lords to abide by the terms of the truce, and to take many drug-producing parts of the country under at least partial government control.²⁰

And here Stepanova makes her final conclusion, which the reader has already been prepared for: “In the long-term struggle against production and illegal turnover of drugs, no amount of international assistance can replace a strong or even hard-line national government.”²¹ That is a dig primarily at the Karzai government in Afghanistan.²²

CASINO MEKONG

Many were surprised when the late *Opium King* of the Golden Triangle, Hmong army commander Khun Sa, who fought for the independence of the Shan state, gave himself up to the authorities in 1996. He then proceeded to live in comfort in Rangoon, having invested tens of millions of dollars—mainly drugs money—in legitimate businesses inside the country. For the junta, he became “a walking encyclopedia on everything drugs-related,” in the words of the generals themselves. He must have retained control over some part of his drugs industry.²³ The government not only failed to prevent, but actually encouraged the legalization of Khun Sa himself and his millions, in an effort to make sure the drugs money is invested in the country's economy.²⁴

I can see this money. I can really see it. I am sitting in a Burmese casino close to the Mekong, on the crossroads of the main routes of the Golden Triangle. There aren't many European faces here. There are a lot of Thais, a few rich Burmese, but the majority here are Chinese, who come quite a long way from the north along the river to gamble in Burmese casinos.

Gradually, even imperceptibly, the Chinese are becoming the dominant economic force in the Triangle. They are taking over the retail trade. They have started buying up small Lao islets on the



Mekong to build their own casinos. They are even looking at larger tracts of land in northern Laos, hoping to buy them up via front men.

At the same time, the Chinese are becoming the main consumers of drugs from Burma, and from the Triangle as a whole. The drug traders from Hong Kong, Macao and Shenzhen have established contacts with their counterparts in Burma's Shan state. Over the seven years from 1995 to 2002, the number of registered heroin addicts in China rose by 520,000 to reach 900,000. The real figure is thought to be four times as high.

China has found itself on the receiving end of two mighty rivers of drugs: one from the West, from Afghanistan via Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan; and the other from the south, mainly from Burma. The Burmese drug lords are ramping up the exports of methamphetamine pills to China. It is believed that large synthetic drug labs are also located in China itself, in its southern Yunnan province.²⁵

It is difficult to quantify the scale of the problem of drugs production and consumption in China. But as for the key supplier of drugs to China from the south, Burma, researchers are unequivocal: "Considering the explosive growth of methamphetamines and ecstasy, the situation with drugs in Burma is no better than it was in the previous decade; it may have actually got worse . . . There is little doubt that drugs from the Burmese sector of the Golden Triangle will continue flooding . . . the world."²⁶

Pervasive corruption among the bureaucracy, police, and customs services across the Triangle make such an outcome all the more likely.

But here I start to lose the thread of the narrative. What about strong and authoritarian government then? What about all the achievements they told me about in Thailand and Laos? What about the successes hailed in UN reports? Or is it just the balloon effect? Will it just go on forever? Will this Hydra spring new heads as quickly as we are able to lop off the old ones? Will the drug trade always come out on top, in a new guise and with a new selection of poison to offer?

UPROOT! UPROOT WHAT?

In order to collect my thoughts somehow, I need to move from the cigarette-smoke-filled Burmese casino into the airy Opium Hall of the Museum of Opium. I walk past the screens showing a documentary about Khun Sa: that is how eminent drug lords become museum relics. I enter the Hall of Reflection. It has been cleared of government proclamations and boastful reports of successes. This hall, unlike the serious books I have read, is not about "states," or the "international community," or its "efforts" and "role" in the fight for a world without drugs.


The Hall of Reflection is about man.

We can describe man as an object. We can describe man as a consumer.

In this hall, which is as spacious as the rest of the museum, there are several plaques. The inscription on the first is a Buddhist proverb about the true nature of victory: "The greatest victory is not over a thousand warriors, but over oneself."

The plaque beside it is a Cortazar quote, which you don't really expect to see in the middle of the Thai jungle. A century and a half after Pushkin's "A habit is a gift from above," he responded with his own verdict: "The evolution from happiness to habit is one of the most powerful instruments of death."

And here is our answer. That is the instrument that must be uprooted. The ball of opium gum, the Yaba pill—these are merely its products. But how to uproot it? Humankind has not yet come up with a way, and probably never will. And that means there will always be synthetic happiness, which blunts the horror of sliding down the path towards habit, towards an addiction to false bliss contained in a pill or a syringe.

It will never go away, even if we uproot all the crimson poppy flowers of the Golden Triangle. 

NOTES

¹ Collins English Dictionary.

² Yekaterina Stepanova, *The Role of the Drugs Trade in the Political Economy of Conflicts and Terrorism* (Moscow: Ves Mir, 2005), pp. 166–167.

³ Martin Jelsma, Tom Kramer and Pietje Vervest, eds., *Trouble in the Triangle: Opium and Conflict in Burma* (Bangkok: Silkworm Books, 2005), p. 151.

⁴ Yekaterina Stepanova, *The Role of the Drugs Trade in the Political Economy* . . . , p. 163.

⁵ Martin Jelsma, Tom Kramer and Pietje Vervest, eds., *Trouble in the Triangle* . . . , p. 151.

⁶ See: “Withdrawal Symptoms in the Golden Triangle: A Drugs Market in Disarray,” Transnational Institute (TNI) Report (Amsterdam: January 2009), <http://www.tni.org/drugs> (last accessed February 2, 2009).

⁷ Ivan Ivanov, *International Drugs Smuggling and the Former U.S.S.R* (Moscow: Felix Research Group, 1995). I am referencing this report as stated in the publisher’s imprint, although I know the real name of the author (unlike the names of most of his sources).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² “Withdrawal Symptoms in the Golden Triangle . . .”

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Yekaterina Stepanova, *The Role of the Drugs Trade in the Political Economy* . . . , 168.

¹⁵ Ibid., 170.

¹⁶ Martin Jelsma, Tom Kramer and Pietje Vervest, eds., *Trouble in the Triangle* . . . , 148.

¹⁷ Yekaterina Stepanova, *The Role of the Drugs Trade in the Political Economy* . . . , 180.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 185, 195 on the implementation of government plans on the war against drugs—the *New Destiny* plan and the *Great Fight against Opium* plan, which the government devised together with the leadership of the United Army of Va Country. The plan involved the relocation of up to 50,000 Va farmers from the drugs-producing regions to more fertile lands in the south of the country.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 195.

²¹ Ibid.

²² The book has separate chapters on Afghanistan and on Columbia.

²³ “Khun Sa was a kind, open and sincere man,” our reader Valery Kovalev wrote to me after finding out from the News section of the PIR Center Website that I was planning a piece on Burma and drugs. Like me, Mr Kovalev had traveled the region and wanted to warn me against demonizing Khun Sa. I have not had the opportunity to meet Khun Sa, so I am not prepared to comment on his personal character.

²⁴ Yekaterina Stepanova, *The Role of the Drugs Trade in the Political Economy* . . . , pp. 184–185.

²⁵ Martin Jelsma, Tom Kramer and Pietje Vervest, eds., *Trouble in the Triangle* . . . , pp. 133–134.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 123–124.

