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Opium's Long Shadow

From Asian Revolt to Global Drug Control

Steffen Rimmer

"In a work of great brilliance and erudition, Steffen Rimmer shows himself to be a complete historian: polyglot and a master of a vast range of sources, a teller of stories and an acute analyst of power and culture. Never has global opium received a more nuanced treatment."

—Jürgen Osterhammel, author of *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century*

The League of Nations Advisory Committee on the Traffic in Opium and Other Dangerous Drugs, created in 1920, culminated almost eight decades of political turmoil over opium trafficking, which was by far the largest state-backed drug trade in the age of empire. Opponents of opium had long struggled to rein in the profitable drug. *Opium's Long Shadow* shows how diverse local protests crossed imperial, national, and colonial boundaries to gain traction globally and harness public opinion as a moral deterrent in international politics after World War I.

Steffen Rimmer traces the far-flung itineraries and trenchant arguments of reformers—significantly, feminists and journalists—who viewed opium addiction as a root cause of poverty, famine, “white slavery,” and moral degradation. These activists targeted the international reputation of drug-trading governments, first and foremost Great Britain, British India, and Japan, becoming pioneers of the global political tactic we today call naming and shaming. But rather than taking sole responsibility for their own behavior, states in turn appropriated anti-drug criticism to shame fellow sovereigns around the globe. Consequently, participation in drug control became a prerequisite for membership in the twentieth-century international community. Rimmer relates how an aggressive embrace of anti-drug politics earned China and other Asian states new influence on the world stage.

The link between drug control and international legitimacy has endured. Amid fierce contemporary debate over the wisdom of narcotics policies, the 100-year-old moral consensus Rimmer describes remains a backbone of the international order.

Steffen Rimmer is Assistant Professor of the History of International Relations at Utrecht University in the Netherlands. He has taught at Harvard University and Columbia University and held affiliations at Yale University, the University of Oxford, Waseda University, and the University of Tokyo (Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia).