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**Matthew R. Pembleton. "Imagining a Global Sovereignty: U.S. Counternarcotic Operations in Istanbul during the Early Cold War and the Origins of the Foreign 'War on Drugs.'" *Journal of Cold War Studies* 16:2 (Spring 2016): 28-63. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1162/JCWS\\_a\\_00637](https://doi.org/10.1162/JCWS_a_00637).**

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Review by **Helena Barop**, University of Freiburg, Germany

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In his article "Imagining a Global Sovereignty: U.S. Counternarcotics Operations in Istanbul during the Early Cold War and the Origins of the Foreign War on Drugs" Matthew R. Pembleton describes and analyzes an intriguing part of the history of international drug control. After briefly but concisely summarizing the belief system of the first American institution for the enforcement of anti-drug laws, the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (FBN), Pembleton contextualizes his argument within the history of U.S. drug politics during the first half of the twentieth century. Using this as background, the author then reconstructs the history of the FBN's first attempts to curb international drug traffic by sending narcotics agents to the so-called 'source countries,' where they were supposed to build cases, arrest traffickers and thus 'root out the drug evil at its source,' as the FBN liked to put it. A close reading of FBN and State Department Records that date from 1948 to 1952 enables him to draw a vivid picture of the daily routines and obstacles of narcotic agents working cases in Turkey during the 1950s.

Counternarcotics operations in Europe and the Middle East, especially in Turkey, were supposed to solve the drug problem on the poppy-growing ground and thus were a new approach to international drug policy in the late 1940s. Domestic measures and diplomatic action had so far been the most important elements of the United States' attempt to prevent narcotic drugs from entering the country and from being bought and consumed by U.S. citizens. Some of the first narcotic agents to arrive in District 17, covering Europe and the Middle East, were George H. White, Garland Williams, Martin Pera and Charles Siragusa. Even before establishing the first foreign office of the FBN in Rome, they were involved in a number of narcotics cases, some of which Pembleton describes in all their exciting and crime fiction-like details. His vivid descriptions give the reader an impression of this kind of unusual police work while at the same time showing how complicated the cooperation with local police forces was and what practical obstacles the agents had to deal with on a day to day basis. Not only does Pembleton tell an interesting story, he also shows how and why counternarcotic strategies abroad sometimes did, but most times did not, work. With precision and a

sensitivity for good punch lines, he manages to turn the narratives of the supposedly heroic doings of the agents into absurd comedies.<sup>1</sup>

An analysis of this kind has to deal with a central problem of drug enforcement historiography: there are very few sources and it is hard to know what parts of the existing case files and progress reports are accurate. Usually the agents themselves drew their assumptions from a thin information base when they were writing those reports. Also it is easy to imagine plenty of reasons why they would have exaggerated their few successes while concealing less glorious parts of their work. Pembleton deals with this problem in a very pragmatic and plausible way. Instead of following a narrow question and then building his answer on a thin layer of existing source material, he chooses to analyze that part of the history of narcotic agents abroad that is documented by the best source base and then develops his questions inductively from this material. A close reading of the FBN material is supplemented by sources from the State Department that sometimes juxtapose the report writer's narratives and help to balance the author's interpretation of what was going on. At some points, however, he could have been even more careful and critical with what the agents abroad wanted their bosses in Washington to believe. For example, when he recounts a heroin bust made by Agent George H. White in 1948, he neglects to mention that the sole source is what an agent wrote in his report, and that we do not have a second perspective to verify what happened.<sup>2</sup> Except for minor imprecisions like this (that make the article easier to read), this strategy overall enables the author to capture a rare glimpse at the elusive world of narcotic agents and their difficult work abroad.

The second important accomplishment of the text is its concise analysis of the complex entanglements in which the narcotic agents' work was caught up. While tracing and arresting drug traffickers is not an easy task in itself, it was even more of a challenge in foreign countries where the agents had limited rights to do police work, where they depended heavily on the cooperation of unwilling local police forces, and where corruption was an inherent element of the political and administrative structure. Analytically disentangling those obstacles to international drug law enforcement with regard to one particular setting gives Pembleton the opportunity to pin down some of the more general claims that are frequently made in order to explain the failures of source control politics, and that are more often than not claimed without being backed by solid evidence. For example, he can show that the policy of source control was an appealing strategy for the FBN, but at the same time the agents abroad faced obstacles that made efficient work and real success impossible. Proving this discrepancy between what the FBN claimed to be doing and what it really did accomplish is an impressive way of identifying some of the core deficiencies of U.S. source control politics.

A third valuable quality of the text is the careful contextualization of the main story line (i.e. the adventures of the narcotic agents abroad) within the complex political situations in the countries they were assigned to. Though a close reading of sources *from* those countries, in this case especially Turkey, was not possible because of language barriers, the author does include translations of Turkish newspaper reports. He also takes into consideration the specific political and bureaucratic circumstances that shaped the situation from the Turkish point of view, thus providing us with a balanced analysis of the described setting that goes a long way in explaining some of its basic inner dynamics.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, page 47.

<sup>2</sup> For White's Heroin bust, see page 46.

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The text might have accomplished these qualities even more, had the author chosen to pose and pursue his research questions a little more systematically and perhaps narrow his focus. In his introduction, he poses a whole cluster of interrelated and not-so-interrelated questions. They do all in their way connect with the research, and they are all interesting and worth pursuing. It would have helped, however, to present them in a more organized and prioritized fashion. Also, they could have been more explicitly referred to within the main narrative. The stories about the narcotic agents (32-62) do answer most of the questions, but they do so implicitly and the work of understanding the connection between question and answer is often left to the reader.

Overall, the article helps to explain the mechanics of international drug control in the late forties and early fifties. By focusing on the work of the narcotic agents abroad, it closes a gap and presents new material. It addresses many of the questions that are discussed within the research field of new drug history. It presents answers that are helpful to understanding how narcotic agents depend on cooperation, how their work could be complicated or even hindered when local police forces were reluctant to cooperate, how the abilities of single agents could be decisive for the success of an operation, and how unrelated factors such as the local administrative structures or political considerations could determine the outcome of a counternarcotics operation. Pembleton shows how inductive research methods can provide us with multifaceted results, and how those results can be connected with more abstract and general questions. Researchers of drug history will find this article helpful, interesting and exciting to read, while also historians of diplomacy, international relations and Turkish history will learn things about their fields that would hardly have crossed their desks otherwise.

**Helena Barop** (University of Freiburg) currently works on her dissertation on the history of U.S. narcotics control interventions in the 1960s and 1970s. In the field of drug history, she has published an article about the International Opium Commission of Shanghai (Helena Barop. "Building the 'Opium-Evil' Consensus: The International Opium Commission of Shanghai." *Journal of Modern European History* 13:1 (2015): 115-137.) In addition to her drug history research, she has worked on the cultural history of the pacific island Sakhalin and its integration into the Soviet empire after 1945. (Helena Barop. "Identität aus Waschbeton? Identitätspolitik und Modernisierung im Stadtbild von Južno-Sachalinsk." in: Sören Urbansky, ed., „*Unsere Insel*“: *Sowjetische Identitätspolitik auf Sachalin nach 1945*. Berlin 2013: 92-114.). She occasionally publishes articles in the German weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*.