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Destroyers of Human Life

Illicit commerce employs millions of people worldwide on both a full- and part-time basis. This chapter addresses not only the foot soldiers of the illicit economy—the drug mules, the petty sellers, and the dock personnel who unload the items of dark commerce—but the diverse range of actors who make this vast trade function. The multibillion-dollar commerce harming human life involves many more players than just the organized criminals and terrorists closely associated with the drug trade. Many perpetrators are part of these diverse and dispersed networks.

As our historical analysis revealed, governments and their top officials have been major participants in this illicit commerce. This vast trade intersects with and is facilitated by legitimate businesses in many different countries and relies on professionals from many specialties. In some cases, the facilitation is unwitting, but the profits are so high that some transport, tech companies, and bankers deliberately participate, some stopping only after being named, shamed, and penalized.

Unfortunately, these illicit actors are all around us; their global supply chains connect the most diverse regions of the world. The illicit traders are not only trafficking human beings and causing

others to become addicted, but also marketing counterfeit medicines and agricultural products, smuggled cigarettes, and the water people need to survive. Through their sales they are undermining food security and health.

The Vulnerable Illicit Trader

Meet a foot soldier of the illicit economy. At the Museum of Immigration in Paris, headsets are available to visitors so they can listen to immigrants recount their life stories. One especially moving story is told by an illegal North African migrant who lives in southern France on the margins of society. His voyage out of Africa started on a precarious boat that crossed the Mediterranean several years before the mass transports of today. He arrived in impoverished southern Italy, where he found no work. He made his way farther north in Italy, still finding no employment. Then he crossed into France and made his way to Paris. There, he explains, he found no better prospects to make money. He moved south, this time settling in Marseille. He ends his tale by reporting that he found a way to survive—selling cigarettes.

What the immigrant does not mention is that most street cigarette vendors in Marseille, a city with some of the poorest neighborhoods in Europe, are selling illicit cigarettes.¹ One form of illegality lies within another—irregular migrants, lacking the right to work, sell smuggled cigarettes. Like many recent illegal immigrants in different regions of the world, this man is vulnerable to exploitation and arrest and has no legal way to participate in the legitimate economy.

DRUG AND HUMAN TRAFFICKERS

In our historical survey of chapter 2, the diverse range of participants in the trade in drugs and humans were identified. They included states, trading companies, high- and low-level officials, and facilitators from shipping companies to dockworkers. All these actors still participate in this illicit trade today. The global criminalization of the narcotics trade and the trade in people has added to the mix new categories

of participants—criminal groups, insurgents, and terrorists. Human smuggling and drug trafficking function as businesses in the sense that not only do the criminals operate according to business models, but legitimate commerce gains from this trade. Technology companies have become as critical to contemporary trafficking in people as the East India Company was to the slave and drug trades.

DRUG TRAFFICKERS

Drug trafficking, a multibillion-dollar transnational crime business, has diverse perpetrators involved in different segments of the market. As in the past, some countries engage in the drug trade to benefit the state. A key contemporary example is North Korea. Under sanctions, North Korea earns much-needed hard currency through the state production of methamphetamines, which its diplomats, often exploiting their diplomatic immunity, distribute overseas.²

Diverse facilitators from both the private and public sectors, such as transporters, bankers, and mail services, as well as their employees, participate both wittingly and unwittingly. Illustrative of this is the stewardess whose carry-on bag contained seventy pounds of cocaine—a more educated mule of the drug economy.³

CORRUPTION

Corruption facilitates every sector of the drug trade, from the movement of the product to the laundering of the proceeds. In many countries, individuals pay significantly to obtain positions in law enforcement, customs agencies, and the military that allow them to profit from the drug trade.⁴ Drug traffickers infiltrate not only state administrative institutions but also the political process, where they influence or block the passage of legislation and undermine the implementation of counter-money laundering policies.⁵

Officials' facilitation of the drug trade may also be coerced. The Latin American expression *plata o plomo* ("silver or lead," meaning money or a bullet) refers to a method for compelling obedience, not just from community members but even from national leaders in

the Caribbean and high-level officials in Mexico, Central America, and South America.⁶

THE TOP OF THE CHAIN

The drug trade has enriched heads of state, their families, and top officials. President Manuel Noriega of Panama was tried and imprisoned for his role in narcotics trafficking.⁷ Ahmed Karzai, the brother of President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan, was a major heroin dealer, and the Afghan president, according to a leaked US government cable, actively intervened on behalf of drug traffickers.⁸ The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), an amalgamation of some of the top investigative journalists in the world, decided to create an award that is a dark take-off on *Time* magazine's Person of the Year Award. The OCCRP Person of Year Award, given annually to the political figure who has done the most to facilitate organized crime and corruption, was presented to Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro in 2016 for his role in facilitating and profiting from drug trafficking. His nephews were indicted in American courts for trying to use the presidential hangar at an airport to smuggle eight hundred kilos of cocaine into the United States.⁹

Top officials in Guinea-Bissau have allowed large amounts of cocaine to pass through their territory for a facilitation fee.¹⁰ The high-level corruption in this West African country provides Latin American drug traffickers with an important transit route to European markets.

In Myanmar, a broader elite benefits rather than just a single individual and his family.¹¹ The Burmese army still runs the highly profitable drug trade, as it did two decades ago, hosting jungle labs for syndicates to refine drugs and, more recently, protecting producers of synthetic drugs.¹²

Nonstate Actors in the Drug Trade

CRIMINALS AND TERRORISTS

No one criminal, terrorist, or insurgent group monopolizes the narcotics trade. But these groups are key to this thriving trade in every

region of the world. Asian groups, such as the Chinese triads and the Japanese *Yakuza*, were involved in narcotics before it became such a global phenomenon, and these groups only grew as the trade expanded.¹³

In Latin America, the Cali and Medellín cartels developed and expanded on the basis of the drug trade.¹⁴ Subsequently, Mexican crime organizations exploited their strategic geographic location—between the cocaine production of Colombia and the markets of the United States—to become large and powerful enough to challenge the authority of the Mexican state.¹⁵ Often glorified by some citizens for their exploits and the services they provide, drug traffickers are the subject of a popular new musical genre—*narcocorridos* (ballads), which are sung to honor them.

The charismatic and ruthless Pablo Escobar, an early leader in the Colombian cocaine economy, viewed himself as an entrepreneur and drew analogies between himself and Henry Ford, the founder of the modern automobile industry. Working with skillful teams of logistic and transport specialists and money launderers, he and other successful Colombia drug traffickers were able to make the business grow enormously in a short period.¹⁶ Colombian crime and terrorist groups forced the Colombian state into retreat, but in a dramatic reversal since the early 2000s, the state has reasserted authority over much of its territory and dramatically reduced the level of violence.

Unfortunately, Mexican crime groups benefited and exploited the decline of Colombian transnational crime. Building on the long years of smuggling across the US-Mexican border, crime groups in Mexico took advantage of the availability of arms in the United States, which contributed to the lethality of these criminal organizations.¹⁷ Fifteen million weapons are in circulation in Mexico, of which 85 percent were estimated in 2012 to be illegal. Approximately 250,000 are purchased annually in the United States, for illegal transport to Mexico, providing significant revenues to gun sellers in the United States.¹⁸ American sellers do not face the inconvenient truth about their buyers because the weapons sales help their bottom line.¹⁹

Mexican drug dealers have diversified for long-term survival. Now no longer as reliant on drugs, they engage in extortion, stealing oil, smuggling migrants, and extracting and selling coal.²⁰ Organized

crime has transformed the Mexican political system and made daily life more precarious. Unfortunately, this phenomenon is not confined to Mexico.²¹ Drug traffickers' increasing economic power and influence over politics has had a very corrosive impact on governance, the rule of law, and the quality of human life in many countries and regions of the world.²²

In Italy, the Mafia had traditionally eschewed participation in the drug trade, but in the competitive post–World War II environment, they became more significant in European and global drug markets, along with other increasingly important crime groups in southern Italy.²³ Nigerian crime groups that emerged after the country's civil war became the most important drug traffickers on the African continent, effectively developing international links with criminal organizations on other continents.²⁴

Turkish drug trafficking organizations, building on historic smuggling routes, worked with crime groups in the Balkans to move heroin to Europe.²⁵ Russian-speaking organized crime groups, which initially profited from the privatization of state economies, moved significantly into the drug trade as a northern route developed to ship heroin out of Afghanistan.²⁶ Pakistani-based groups, such as D-company (whose origins lie in India), expanded Karachi's historic role as a drug trans-shipment point and built a powerful transnational crime organization, in part, out of drug proceeds.²⁷ D-company, like the Mexican drug organization, has diversified and now traffics weapons and counterfeit DVDs and provides financial services through its extensive system of *hawala* operators (a system of underground banking present in South Asia and the Middle East).²⁸

Leaders of some of the most successful drug organizations have become very rich.²⁹ In 1987, *Fortune* included several Colombian cocaine tycoons in its first list of the world's billionaires. Included were Pablo Escobar and the Ochoa brothers—Jorge Luis Ochoa Vasquez and his brothers Fabio and Juan David.³⁰

Terrorists are the other important category of nonstate actors who benefit from drug trafficking. The term *narco-terrorism* was coined in Peru in the early 1980s in reference to the Peruvian group Sendero Luminoso, a Maoist terrorist organization that was significantly funded by drugs and sought to overthrow the Peruvian government.³¹

The UN Security Council has repeatedly recognized the relationship between drugs and terrorism.³² In 2008, the chief of operations at the US Drug Enforcement Agency, Michael Braun, indicated that of forty-three designated terrorist groups, nineteen profited from the drug trade.³³ The US Department of Justice reported in fiscal year 2010 that twenty-nine of the top sixty-three international drug syndicates were associated with terrorist groups.³⁴ Almost all of these designated terrorist organizations are based in the developing world. Among the terrorist groups involved in the global drug trade are FARC, the Taliban, Hezbollah, and the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party).³⁵ Many other terrorist groups are active in the drug trade at regional levels, such as ISIS affiliates, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in North Africa.³⁶ ISIS itself has been involved in the narcotics trade, particularly the trade in the psychostimulant Captagon.³⁷

Drug sales in the cyberworld have earned successful marketers significant revenues in a short time period. Organized, but rarely members of organized crime, the online drug seller has a different profile. One Chinese manufacturer, Zhang Lei—named a “drug kingpin” by the United States and arrested by the Chinese government—sent thousands of kilos of synthetic drugs to the United States and other countries, including Australia, Austria, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Italy. Profits from US sales for his company CEC Limited, which produced the products that he sold online, were estimated at over \$30 million.³⁸

The cyberworld has also facilitated the entry of formerly law-abiding citizens, like Ross Ulbricht of Silk Road (discussed in chapter 3), into the heights of the narcotics trade.³⁹ The absence of real-life interactions in the cyberworld facilitates heinous acts that individuals like Ulbricht might not commit outside the virtual world. Ulbricht is a harbinger of the drug traders of the future.

CORPORATIONS

Since 1979, the exponential rise in deaths from the American opioid epidemic has been a consequence, in part, of the marketing strategies of a few pharmaceutical companies. The most notorious of these is

Purdue Pharma. In 2007, Purdue, a privately held company that produces oxycontin, the drug at the heart of the epidemic, paid \$635 million in fines after pleading guilty to false marketing charges brought by the US Department of Justice. Top-level corporate officials were criminally charged and convicted.⁴⁰ In September 2017, forty-one state attorney generals in the United States launched investigations into Purdue Pharma, as well as several lesser manufacturers of opioids, as the epidemic raged and the deaths continued to escalate.⁴¹

PROFESSIONALS AND FACILITATORS

Professionals also play a key role in the drug trade. Doctors have contributed to the US opioid epidemic by too freely prescribing painkillers, and accountants, lawyers, and financial institutions have collaborated with drug trafficking organizations.⁴² Banks such as Wachovia, HSBC, and Citibank paid billions in fines for laundering money for Mexican drug cartels. HSBC alone paid \$1.9 billion.⁴³ Public prosecutions may have made the role of banks in money laundering more widely known, but even religious groups have been sanctioned for their efforts to fund their institutions through the laundering of drug proceeds.⁴⁴

The postal service and delivery companies are also important facilitators of illegal drug shipments. The large volume of packages sent through mail and delivery services makes it hard to detect those containing drugs and other illicit commodities, which are often sent to customers in small packages, frequently from India and China.⁴⁵ A yearlong investigation in the United States revealed that 500 drug purchases, with a total value of \$766 million, were shipped through the mails, with some resulting in the death of the purchasers.⁴⁶

Human Traffickers and Smugglers

Human traffickers and smugglers differ from their counterparts in the drug trade. Outside of Asia, fewer are connected to large criminal organizations; instead, smaller networks of traffickers and smugglers rely on personal relations to recruit people. In the absence of

kingpins, profits are more dispersed, and often the facilitators of this illicit trade are less professional than those associated with the drug trade.

Human trafficking is one of the top revenue generators for illicit traders. Many associate this crime only with criminals, but as in the past, government officials and companies are deeply implicated in this illegal activity. When there was a legal slave trade, officials served the powerful trading companies that often ran the slave trade with government licenses. Today many officials continue to facilitate human smuggling and trafficking, but primarily for personal gain rather than in the interests of the state. The great growth in human trafficking and its increasing profitability have been fueled by corporations that facilitate advertisements and payment systems for the sale of sex trafficking victims and the online distribution of child pornography. The rise of the internet, the Dark Web, and social media has fundamentally changed human trafficking as these platforms have also transformed the accessibility and anonymity of drug markets.

Human trafficking includes more than sexual exploitation; labor exploitation, forced marriage, and illegal organ transplantation are all considered elements of this crime. All involve elements of coercion, fraud, and deception but do not require movement, as individuals can be trafficked for marriage or sex within their immediate community. In contrast, smuggled individuals also agree to be transported across borders.⁴⁷ In human trafficking, the individual is the victim, whereas smuggling victimizes the state by violating its borders and sovereignty.

OFFICIALS AND TRAFFICKING

Both human smugglers and traffickers need corrupt officials, including border guards, law enforcement, judicial personnel, military, customs officials, consular officers, and other diplomatic personnel.⁴⁸

In Mexico, officials extort bribes and sexual services from child sex trafficking victims to facilitate cross-border movement, and they fail to pursue cases against traffickers.⁴⁹ Particularly serious

misconduct has been identified in Veracruz and San Fernando in the state of Tamaulipas, where mass graves of suspected trafficking victims were discovered.⁵⁰ Similar patterns have been identified in Asia and Africa. In Thailand, mass graves were discovered of many Rohingya, Muslims who fled repression in Myanmar after paying smugglers to expedite their passage. Many of the deceased had been held for ransom before their death to extract more money en route, a pattern also observed with Mexican smuggling. In the summer of 2017, many Thai officials went on trial for facilitating these deaths, and a Thai general and twenty-one other government officials were sentenced.⁵¹

Trafficking, like the drug trade, benefits both states and high-level officials. North Korea traffics its citizens into labor exploitation overseas—for example, in the Russian Far East.⁵² Government officials in Thailand, according to the US State Department's *Trafficking in Persons Report 2016*, “profit from bribes and direct involvement in the extortion of migrants and their sale to brokers. . . . Credible reports indicate some corrupt officials protect brothels and other commercial sex venues from raids and inspections and collude with traffickers.”⁵³ Thailand is not alone. In nearby Vietnam, according to the same report, local officials facilitate trafficking, exploit victims by accepting bribes from traffickers, and profit from reuniting victims with their families.⁵⁴ In Uzbekistan, in a labor-trafficking tradition that has endured from the Soviet era, adults are forced to labor during the annual cotton harvest.⁵⁵

CRIMINAL AND TERRORIST SMUGGLERS AND TRAFFICKERS

In Asia, the triads in China and the *Yakuza* in Japan have long been deeply involved in human smuggling, and the *Yakuza* are also active in the sex trafficking industry, which is tied into the bars and night-clubs they control.⁵⁶ Outside of Asia, large criminal organizations are not deeply engaged in human trafficking and smuggling. Nigerian and Balkan groups have trafficked people along with drugs.⁵⁷ Until recently, Latin American drug organizations were not active in human trafficking and smuggling, but as previously mentioned,

with diversification, they as well as Central American gangs profit from this business.⁵⁸

Much of human trafficking is not tied to larger criminal networks but is carried out by smaller groups, often family and friends of the victim. Compounding the psychological harm to the victim in these cases is the violation of a trust relationship.⁵⁹

Europol data on human trafficking suggest the presence of numerous networks rather than larger, consolidated criminal organizations. In 2013–2014, Europol received reports on six thousand organized groups involved in human trafficking. The vast majority, 90 percent, were involved in sexual exploitation; 5.6 percent were cases of labor exploitation, 1.9 percent were for forced sham marriages, and 0.3 percent concerned forced criminality and begging. These data may represent citizen concerns more than they reflect the actual distribution of victims.⁶⁰ About 70 percent of European citizens suspected to be involved in human trafficking are citizens of the Balkans. Non-European networks often have participants of Chinese or Nigerian origin. The Chinese are known to be proficient in the production of fake documents, and the Nigerians specialize in the black market for stolen identifications.⁶¹

In recent years, human smuggling in Europe has escalated faster than the drug trade. Ninety percent of those smuggled are helped by professional facilitators. Millions have attempted to reach Europe from North Africa, the Middle East, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and East Asia. Those behind this smuggling are community members, not just members of criminal organizations.⁶² Chinese spent \$600 million on smugglers to reach Europe, and the comparable figure for Vietnamese is \$300 million.⁶³ This is hardly surprising, as human smuggling has been a longtime activity of Chinese organized crime groups and professional networks.⁶⁴ The sums derived from Far East Asian smuggling are dwarfed by the multibillion-dollar business precipitated by the Syrian conflict, the chaos in North Africa, and the drought in the Sahel, all of which have made many people desperate to reach Europe.

Social media and cell phones are more responsible for the growth in smuggling than the internet. Individuals learn of smuggling

services through social media such as Facebook, where connections are made and smugglers' services are retained.⁶⁵ With marketing available through the new technology, the number of smugglers has increased rapidly. Europol has identified participants in human smuggling from over one hundred countries, with an estimated fifty thousand criminals involved. Therefore, these networks are more diverse than for human trafficking. Smugglers originate from eastern Europe and the Balkans, as well as from North Africa (Egypt, Tunisia, Libya), the Middle East (Turkey and Syria), and Pakistan.⁶⁶

In contrast with trafficking, many more participants in smuggling networks are non-Europeans: 44 percent of the networks comprise non-EU nationals, and 26 percent include both Europeans and non-EU citizens. Fewer than one-third are composed solely of Europeans. This reveals the transnational nature of smuggling.⁶⁷ Network analysis reveals multinational collaborations.⁶⁸ Criminal groups—especially Chinese, Nigerian, and Romanian groups—work with diaspora communities overseas to limit detection. Balkan trafficking routes of the Ottoman era have been revived, often staffed by smugglers from extended family networks.⁶⁹

Smugglers, selling their transport services, give little thought to the survival of those with whom they contract, as future business is not dependent on previous customers. High fatality rates have resulted. In 2016, the director of the International Organization for Migration wrote that, for recent years, “we have calculated 18,501 deaths and migrants missing, most of them drowned in the Mediterranean and other deadly spots.”⁷⁰ The Mediterranean situation is not unique. Between 2014 and 2016, approximately 17 men, women, and children perished every day en route to a new country, for a total of 7,500 people. On average, there were more than 20 fatalities daily in 2016.⁷¹

Smuggling on the US-Mexican border was long dominated by so-called coyotes, who knew where it was easiest to move people.⁷² Enhanced controls on the US-Mexican border have made smugglers more professional and reinforced their links to the drug organizations that built and maintain the tunnels on that border. Mexican drug organizations extort smugglers moving migrants across

territory they control. Typically, transnational smuggling networks may build safe houses only with the permission of the criminal organizations that control key segments of the US-Mexican border.⁷³

Human smuggling is also very present between Central and North America, where violent gangs, particularly from Honduras and El Salvador, move people into Mexico and then on to the United States. Increasing numbers try only to reach the relative safety of Mexico. In transit, those smuggled are robbed, kidnapped, and subject to sexual violence by members of crime groups and law enforcement officials who use pellet guns and electric shock devices against the migrants.⁷⁴ Smugglers threaten those they move in order to extort money from family members who are paying for their relatives' movement north.⁷⁵

As I discussed in my earlier book *Human Trafficking: A Global Perspective*, human traffickers from different regions of the world operate differently. Their trafficking business models reflect historical patterns of trade and commerce. Therefore, Russian human trafficking is not an integrated business like that of the Chinese, who have been traders for centuries. Russia sells off women like a natural resource, whereas the Chinese model sees human trafficking and smuggling as yet another form of trade that generates revenues.⁷⁶

Women are more active in human trafficking than other areas of transnational crime.⁷⁷ Trafficked women recruit other women to gain their freedom or to progress up the occupational hierarchy and become traffickers and brothel managers themselves. Women have assumed an important role in human smuggling networks in Asia. One of the most famous, Sister Ping, had a highly successful smuggling business until a ship transporting 286 of her clients ran aground off the coast of New York. Ten people drowned trying to get to shore, and Sister Ping was subsequently prosecuted by the US government.⁷⁸

Terrorists related to the Al-Qaeda network are involved in human trafficking less as a revenue source and more as a form of intimidation and retaliation. The trafficking of Yazidi women by ISIS, as well as women and girls by Boko Haram, the West African affiliate, has been heavily publicized.⁷⁹ But there are historical precedents: the

PKK in Turkey has profited from human trafficking and smuggling, and children in Africa have been trafficked by terrorist groups, such as Al-Shabaab, to serve as child soldiers.⁸⁰

Terrorist groups such as Al-Nusra are involved in the kidney trade today.⁸¹ Purchasers enter chat rooms on the Dark Net to find suppliers of kidneys and doctors ready to perform the necessary surgery.⁸² Wealthy buyers travel to access kidneys “sold” by desperate individuals in the Middle East, including refugees. Buyers may pay up to \$80,000 to secure a kidney outside the legitimate market, a demand that is filled by purchasing or coercing the most vulnerable, for very limited compensation, to surrender a kidney.⁸³ In the absence of decent postoperative medical care, this sale may place the seller’s life in jeopardy, but the proceeds of a kidney sale may pay the smuggling fees to Europe for family members.⁸⁴

CORPORATIONS

The increasing prominence of human trafficking and smuggling within illicit trade is due in large part to the asymmetric advantage afforded these illicit actors by the anonymity of the internet and by encrypted social media such as WhatsApp (used by over one billion people in 180 countries), WeChat (a Chinese-based service with almost one billion users monthly), and Viber. Traffickers can communicate in complete privacy using these free communications technologies, and the companies offering them do not have to maintain records of calls or text content. Apple and Google have engineered their smartphones to block law enforcement access to this information even with a court order. Communications concerning trade in people can proceed with impunity.⁸⁵

Unfortunately, the internet and the numerous platforms it provides for online sales have also contributed to the phenomenal growth in human sexual exploitation internationally. Between 2010 and 2015, the National Missing and Exploited Children Center reported an 846 percent rise in reports of suspected child sex trafficking—an increase found to be “directly correlated to the increased use of the Internet to sell children for sex.”⁸⁶ The adult advertisements on Craigslist and

Backpage, as previously discussed, reveal the large financial gains made in the licit economy from human exploitation.

When DARPA, the agency that developed the internet, analyzed the temporary sexual advertisements and peer-to-peer connections within the Deep Web, it found that “over a two-year time frame traffickers spent about \$250 million to post more than 60 million advertisements.” This large advertising budget suggests the large number of victims and the high profits to be made to justify the extensive advertising budget. Although the research was conducted in the United States, this analysis revealed the global expanse of the traffickers.⁸⁷ The DARPA analysis recalls the high profit margins of slavers in past centuries, but now the money is made in cyberspace rather than on the high seas and the auction blocks.

Many nontech corporations profit from or facilitate human trafficking and smuggling. Some corporations unwittingly—but in some cases deliberately—hire trafficked individuals to increase profits and obtain more docile employees. Men may be trafficked into dangerous work on fishing boats and at logging, mining, and construction sites, as discussed further in the next chapter. Hotels as well as apparel factories may retain trafficked women. Supporting such exploitation are many professional facilitators, including recruiters, transporters, and travel agencies. Financial institutions rarely intentionally benefit from human trafficking—as they do from the massive proceeds of the drug trade—but not enough has been done to detect the proceeds of human trafficking within their financial transactions.⁸⁸

The Illicit Cigarette Trade

The trade in counterfeit, diverted, and illicit white cigarettes resembles the trade in drugs and humans, with which it often intersects. Ignored by many law enforcers, this trade provides an ideal funding source for states, corrupt officials, criminals, and terrorists. Its foot soldiers, as we saw in Marseille, are often from the most vulnerable populations. Many leaders of illicit trade are rich and powerful politicians who escape sanctions, whereas the street sellers—usually immigrants, displaced peoples, and refugees—are

the ones targeted by law enforcement, and they suffer disproportionately. But the huge profits from this trade benefit more powerful and often malicious actors.

STATES AND HIGH-LEVEL OFFICIALS

North Korea once again figures as a country profiteering from this lucrative form of illicit commerce as an exporter of its counterfeit cigarettes.⁸⁹ North Korean diplomats distribute this product internationally, just as they do with drugs. Following the trail of the illicit cigarette trade led US investigators to many diverse and extremely serious forms of illicit trade, including illicit ivory trade and WMD financing.⁹⁰

State leaders also benefit from this trade. The highly competitive OCCRP Man of the Year Award was presented in 2015—the year before it was awarded to President Maduro—to Milo Djukanović, the continuously serving president or prime minister of Montenegro from 1991 to 2016, elected president again in 2018.⁹¹ Among the many cited crimes that merited this distinction was his major role in cigarette smuggling, for which he was particularly singled out in the award statement. The distinguished OCCRP jury concluded:

Djukanovic and his close associates engaged in extensive cigarette smuggling with the Italian Sacra Corona Unita and Camorra crime families. He was indicted in Bari and freely admitted the trade, but said his country needed money. He invoked diplomatic immunity to get the charges dropped.

According to OCCRP, his smuggling did not stop with the indictment but continued through a surrogate, Djukanović’s head of security, “who was three times indicted but never convicted of cigarette smuggling related activities.”⁹²

The forensic evidence for this award was strong—the Italian courts presented wiretap-derived evidence and hundreds of thousands of documents to show that Djukanović and the Montenegrin government were making \$700 million annually from this illicit trade in the 1990s. Their collaborators, Italian organized crime

groups, laundered \$1 billion from this trade through Swiss banks based in Lugano.⁹³

Turning from Europe, in Paraguay the head of state helped facilitate another form of illicit cigarette trade—the trade in illicit whites. In 2016, President Horacio Cartes spoke at New York University in a talk entitled “Introducing Paraguay: A Land of Opportunity.” His remarks were preceded by a warm welcome by the university president, who described President Cartes as “a remarkable man.” “I love the diversity of your business acumen . . . ranging from beverages to tobacco to soccer.”⁹⁴ This introduction reminds us of the tolerance that Western countries too often show for the misdeeds of corrupt foreign leaders, and even for behavior harmful to human life.

Examining President Cartes’s family tobacco production (of which he is a key shareholder) raises multiple red flags. Paraguay, with a small domestic consumer market, produces a significant share of the world’s illicit whites—an estimated 65 billion cigarettes annually—and is responsible for 11 percent of the world’s contraband cigarettes.⁹⁵ The prime target of Paraguay’s smuggled cigarettes is Brazil, where one-third of all purchased cigarettes are illegal, costing the government an estimated tax loss of \$1.2 billion annually.⁹⁶ This large-scale smuggling funds powerful crime groups in Latin America, such as Los Zetas and the Sinaloa cartel, by helping them launder their money.⁹⁷ These cigarettes are also sold in France and elsewhere in Europe.⁹⁸

CRIMINAL AND TERRORIST INVOLVEMENT

Criminal involvement in the tobacco trade, as our historical discussions illustrate, has persisted for centuries. Our analysis has revealed that the illicit cigarette trade is not confined to any single region but intersects with the rhino trade in South Africa and the Czech Republic, flourishes on Native American reservations in New York, and thrives in France, which is the “European champion of illicit cigarette sales.”⁹⁹ This is a hard-won distinction, as the leading Italian organized crime groups also participate in this trade.¹⁰⁰ One-third of France’s contraband cigarettes are smuggled from Algeria, and

one-quarter arrive from Spain, where tax rates are lower.¹⁰¹ Barcelona is a key transit hub where the *trabendo*, or smugglers, operating out of Algeria link with the Spaniards who have been involved for many years in the contraband trade.¹⁰²

Marseille is the French hot spot for illicit cigarette sales—approximately 40 percent of all sales are of illegal imports.¹⁰³ This port city has long been a center of illicit trade. Think of *The French Connection*, a film in which drugs arrive from Turkey to be shipped to the United States via Canada.¹⁰⁴ The police in Marseille allocate few resources against petty cigarette traders. This inattention is not a result of corruption, as the sellers lack the funds and the contacts to corrupt French officials.¹⁰⁵

Avoiding taxation, sellers of smuggled cigarettes can offer them in open-air markets at substantially lower prices than legitimate retail products. In France, cigarettes on the street sell for about five euros a pack for diverted products, and illicit whites or counterfeited products can be found at four euros. In the shops, the prices for legitimate products, at around seven euros, are much higher. The difference in price results in massive tax losses to the state—approximately 4 billion euros annually for the French economy.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, the state may subsequently incur greater health costs: unregulated cigarettes are often produced under unregulated conditions and contain components that are more carcinogenic.

Illicit cigarette trade has been particularly attractive to terrorist groups because it is low-risk and high-profit. One of the two Kouachi brothers who killed the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoonists in Paris in 2015 made money by selling cigarettes.¹⁰⁷ Higher levels of the illicit cigarette chain support terrorism in more significant ways. AQIM, a branch of Al-Qaeda in North Africa, and other jihadists in the region have relied on this trade.¹⁰⁸

Other terrorist groups also profit from this trade. Hezbollah and Hamas have been identified in multiple cigarette cases.¹⁰⁹ ISIS manipulated the cigarette trade for its benefit on territory it controlled in Iraq and Syria, even though cigarettes are banned under the strict version of Islam propagated by ISIS. Reports out of Mosul reveal that “Daesh made an agreement with oil truck drivers and allowed them

to smuggle 50 cartons in a compartment inside the truck in return for intelligence about the petty and main sellers.” Then ISIS would arrest and flog the sellers and make significant profits for ISIS.¹¹⁰

The triborder area of Paraguay, Brazil, and Argentina remains a major center of threat finance. “Illicit whites” produced in Paraguay are a major currency of terrorist funding not only in that country but in Colombia, where the trade provides funds for FARC.¹¹¹

Older terrorist groups, like the IRA (Irish Republican Army), also profited from the illegal cigarette trade over an extended period.¹¹² A major illicit cigarette smuggling operation was revealed under most unusual circumstances. In 2013, after Al-Qaeda operatives successfully launched two rockets at a container passing through the Suez Canal in Egypt in transit to Ireland, the subsequent investigation of the damaged ship revealed a \$55 million shipment of smuggled cigarettes destined for a well-known Irishman with long-standing ties to the IRA.¹¹³

FACILITATORS

The sale of almost nine billion illegal cigarettes in France annually points to a large group of facilitators between the source and the street markets.¹¹⁴ This movement of product is not done by “ants” carrying a few cartons of cigarettes at a time. It requires the complicity of factory workers, shippers, and vendors in Algeria, as well as high-level officials and workers at French and Spanish ports. Individuals must load the trucks from the ships.

Drivers, both knowingly and unknowingly, move large quantities of illicit cigarettes overland from Spain to France. Many claim innocence in regard to their clandestine cargo, but an examination of social media provides evidence of a different reality. Despite complaints to Facebook by those trying to arrest this illicit trade, posts on this social medium continue to advise truck drivers and distributors where to pick up contraband cigarette shipments.¹¹⁵ The problem has been identified in France, but the trade there is just the tip of the iceberg.¹¹⁶ In the United Kingdom, Imperial Tobacco has targeted Facebook as a key facilitator of the illicit trade in cigarettes.¹¹⁷ The

new media, as we see throughout this book, is a force multiplier for the growth of illicit trade, as it lies largely outside of regulation.

Truckers can collude with companies to help move large quantities of goods, thereby evading taxes. For example, United Parcel Service (UPS) in the United States was fined \$247 million by a federal court in the spring of 2017 for shipping cigarettes without payment of taxes from smoke shops on a New York Indian reservation where cigarettes are allowed to be sold to tribal members only. A similar case is now under way against Federal Express. The judge in the UPS case found that since 2010 more than 683,000 cartons of untaxed “contraband” cigarettes were shipped to unlicensed wholesalers, retailers, and residences. According to the court, UPS was cognizant of its participation and showed a consistent unwillingness to acknowledge its facilitating role.¹¹⁸

Illicit Trade in Food and Beverages That Undermine Life

As the first chapter of our historical survey showed, counterfeit food products have been with us since ancient times. Today counterfeit food and beverages sales are a multibillion-dollar business, growing with the increasing value of desired food products and drink and the expanding middle class, particularly in Asia. Illicit trade in food and drink functions on such an industrial scale that its perpetrators can only be companies or significant transnational crime groups, as our analyses of China and Italy will show. Yet the perpetrators of these crimes rarely receive the punishments or the social stigma accorded others who severely harm human life. Therefore, this form of illicit commerce can be expected to grow in the future.

Many sicken and die annually from the lack of food and alcohol security, a result not just of poor hygiene or inadequate refrigeration but of harmful ingredients in food and drink.¹¹⁹ Food grown in areas where the soil has been contaminated by dangerous pesticides or the disposal of hazardous waste also is harmful to consumers.

The problem is of a scale not often known by consumers, but it has commanded much law enforcement attention. In the three months between November 2015 and February 2016, more than

10,000 metric tons (or over 22 million pounds) and one million liters (over 264,000 gallons) of fake food and drink were confiscated in a coordinated law enforcement operation in fifty-seven countries. British authorities seized enough illicit alcohol to fill 12,000 bathtubs. In other locales, counterfeit non-alcoholic beverages intended for export to children in Africa were found and removed from circulation.¹²⁰ Authorities in Italy detected and withdrew from markets at least 85 tons of olives painted with copper sulphate—a potentially toxic substance whose ingestion may result in vomiting—to enhance their color. Monkey meat was seized in Belgium, peanuts repackaged and disguised as pine nuts were confiscated by police in Australia, and in Togo 24 tons of tilapia unfit for consumption was located before going on sale. This dispersion of fake and dangerous comestibles clearly illustrates the callous and despicable indifference shown by producers toward the health and well-being of consumers. Instead, the traders' concern is exclusively profit.¹²¹

The environment is also harmed by the illicit trade in mezcal, a potent alcohol produced in Mexico. Over time this trade is eliminating the slow-growing cactus plants from which the drink is derived. Farmers lose their future livelihoods, while large profits accrue to middlemen who export mezcal without permission, thereby avoiding taxes, and then sell it for high prices in bars and restaurants in the United States. These middlemen cover their misdeeds by suggesting that they are assisting a “poor farmer.”¹²²

Even in two cultures that pride themselves on their cuisines, Chinese and Italian, devotion to food and a willingness to spend to enjoy it do not ensure the security of food supplies. Both China and Italy have repeatedly been the focus of massive food scandals involving counterfeit food that placed consumers’ lives in jeopardy both at home and even abroad, as the two countries are major food exporters.¹²³ In Italy, this particular form of criminality even has a name, *agromafie* (agricultural mafia).¹²⁴ Careful research by Italian think tanks experienced in calculating the economic impact of organized crime estimated that illicit food trade totaled 16 billion euros in Italy in 2015, as illicit production has expanded beyond the traditional Mafia stronghold of the South.¹²⁵ The roots of the Mafia in

Sicily and of 'Ndrangheta in Campania are in rural areas; therefore, the involvement of crime groups in agricultural production is hardly surprising.

The business-savvy Camorra counterfeit mozzarella and the very pricey ham of the northern city of Parma to profit from the desire for these fine food items, which are regulated by the government for quality and provenance.¹²⁶ In southern Italy, the home of the Camorra, some food is poisoned with heavy metals as a result of being cultivated at the site of toxic waste dumps in the rural areas around Naples.¹²⁷ Despite controls, foods cultivated there are sometimes sold.

Organized crime groups from southern Italy have invested heavily in land in North Africa. Tomatoes and other produce grown there at lower costs and outside European Union market controls are subsequently brought to Italy and then purposely mislabeled as "produced in Europe."¹²⁸ Online food sales of products that are not vetted compound the problem.¹²⁹

In Myanmar, counterfeit baby formula, produced without adequate protein, prevents babies from developing. In a Myanmar hospital, a Johns Hopkins public health professor observed a one-year-old child who had been fed counterfeit milk and was the size of a guinea pig.¹³⁰

In China in 2008, 300,000 babies became ill after drinking baby formula adulterated with a toxic industrial compound called melamine, and six died.¹³¹ In the investigation that followed, the Sanlu dairy company, one of the largest Chinese food companies, was held responsible. Other companies were also implicated after an American manufacturer alerted Chinese authorities. A dozen people were tried in the spring of 2017 for selling counterfeit baby formula.¹³²

Those who jeopardize human life by placing profits over infant health do this for personal gain but also on behalf of the companies where they are employed.¹³³ In another Chinese case, rat meat was disguised and sold widely to the public in 2013 as coveted lamb.¹³⁴ In the same year, over 1,700 workshops were closed down in China owing to their illicit food production.¹³⁵ In 2015, Chinese customs officials seized 100,000 metric tons of frozen chicken, beef, and pork, valued at \$483 million. Some of the meat smuggled by the fourteen

gangs was over forty years old. Because the smugglers used non-refrigerated trucks to reduce transport costs, the meat had been frozen and refrozen during transit. Consequently, there were serious health risks associated with the product.¹³⁶

In Russia, illicitly produced alcohol has resulted in many deaths. According to official statistics, 14,250 people died in 2015 alone. A case of “illicit entrepreneurship” in late 2016 in the Siberian city of Irkutsk resulted in the death of 72 people. Criminal entrepreneurs deliberately mislabeled the “bath lotion” they produced in their atelier, stating that it contained 94 percent ethyl alcohol when instead it was made with poisonous methyl alcohol. In parts of Russia, surrogate products such as the misrepresented bath lotion intersect with the legitimate supply chain where they can be found for sale in vending machines.¹³⁷

“Water mafias” are suppliers of needed but overpriced water to urban dwellers in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan and in Central and South America.¹³⁸ But providers are not only traditional organized crime figures but individuals from different sectors of society, including city officials, farmers, and real estate agents. One report from Delhi declared:

Everything about this business is illegal: the boreholes dug without permission, the trucks operating without permits, the water sold without testing or treatment. . . . Bosses arrange buyers, labor fills tankers, the police look the other way, and the muscle makes sure that no one says nothing to nobody.¹³⁹

The water mafia, in relying on corruption, organized crime, and the complicity of ordinary citizens, is a business so dispersed that it cannot be eliminated by arresting a few top criminals.

Doctors and Pharmacists: When the Patient Must Be Vigilant

Unfortunately, the business of substandard, spurious, falsely labeled, falsified, and counterfeit (SSFFC) medicine and vaccines, as well as diverted medicine, is now a significant problem in both

the developed and the developing world, as part of this trade includes the importation of pharmaceuticals that are a danger to public health.¹⁴⁰ The scale of this trade is large: Interpol estimates that in 2010 profits from diverted and substandard pharmaceuticals as well as parallel trade reached \$75 billion globally, having grown 90 percent between 2005 and 2010.¹⁴¹

The suppliers range from “small-scale criminal entrepreneurs to large-scale manufacturers.”¹⁴² Distributors in the United Kingdom and the United States, often affluent and educated individuals, have played a key role in the expansion of this criminal activity as counterfeits are sold online and even penetrate legal supply chains. In the United States, the total number of reported incidents grew over 50 percent in the five years from 2011 to 2016, reaching 3,147.¹⁴³

This growth is explained in part by the monopolies of pharmaceutical companies, which keep prices high, combined with citizens’ lack of insurance. As a result, a large number of patients are driven into unregulated and illicit markets to purchase treatments. Much of this growth is occurring in the market for expensive antiretrovirals to treat HIV/AIDS, anti-cancer medications, and diabetes treatments. Often these drugs lack the ingredients or the potency they should have. Counterfeits and harmful products bought by American buyers have had life-threatening effects that require visits to emergency rooms.¹⁴⁴

In Europe, it is estimated that over 9 percent of consumed drugs are counterfeit.¹⁴⁵ With more universal medical coverage than in the United States, the majority of counterfeited pharmaceuticals are lifestyle drugs, such as treatments for erectile dysfunction, slimming pills, and arthritis medication.¹⁴⁶

The problem of counterfeit drugs is worse in regions with poor control over supply chains.¹⁴⁷ The World Health Organization estimates that as much as 30 percent of the medicine sold in parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America is counterfeit.¹⁴⁸

Doctors and pharmacists facilitating illicit pharmaceutical trade in Africa is a problem so widespread that it is even portrayed in popular contemporary fiction. Alexander McCall Smith’s famous Botswana woman detective investigates a doctor who overcharges

for drugs by substituting a generic for the branded product.¹⁴⁹ This practice is hardly unusual.

Illustrating the scale of the problem is a 2015 Interpol operation attacking production of counterfeit medicine in seven countries in southern Africa—Angola, Malawi, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Investigators arrested 550 people and shut down three illicit manufacturing facilities that produced counterfeit antibiotics, painkillers, erectile dysfunction medicines, contraceptives, and antimalarial medication. A broad network distributed the illicit pharmaceutical products. Overall, 2,100 police, customs officials, and health regulatory officers confiscated more than 150 tons of counterfeit and illicit medicines at markets, shops, warehouses, pharmacies, clinics, and ports in more than fifty cities.¹⁵⁰

In Tanzania in East Africa, a leading health official received large shipments of donated malaria drugs to redistribute to needy Africans on the continent; instead, he appropriated them for private sale to benefit him and his subordinates.¹⁵¹ Once diverted, the drugs were not kept under needed temperature controls before consumption and therefore lost potency. Use of this compromised drug contributed to the development of microbial-resistant malaria and prevented the elimination of the disease—the original intent of the costly and massive drug distribution.

In Russia, failure to control the quality of medicine contributes to the poor health of the population and the declining life expectancy of Russians.¹⁵² False medicines enter Russia from China and India as a result of improper customs controls. Russian authorities devote little effort to investigating the distribution of counterfeit medicines, contributing to its growth as a crime of choice for criminals. Of the fifty cases detected and investigated annually, only fifteen to twenty are submitted to a court.¹⁵³ This caseload represents the tip of the iceberg: a diverse array of perpetrators remain unprosecuted, including criminal suppliers, distributors, pharmacists, and corrupt customs officials.

The problem of illicit trade in pharmaceuticals is not confined to the developing and transitional world. In Italy, many medicines are stolen from hospitals and subsequently marketed to eastern

Europe.¹⁵⁴ Approximately 10 percent of Italian hospitals are victimized annually, each theft worth about 250,000 euros, with a total loss of 22 million euros. For drugs that need to be kept under controlled temperatures, this stolen medicine may not cure purchasers and may even prove harmful.

Because platforms fail to vet their sellers, online pharmaceuticals sites can sell substandard medicines that harm purchasers or deny them the remedial effects of the drugs they seek.¹⁵⁵ For example, a 2009 US case against online seller Kevin Xu, a Chinese citizen, was initiated after he sold counterfeit medicines that included contaminants and lacked the requisite doses for such serious illnesses as cancer, mental illness, and blood clots. Because these counterfeits were produced in state-owned Chinese facilities, the defendant, fearing for his family, was not cooperative with investigators.¹⁵⁶

Preventing online sales is hard, as large numbers of small shipments arrive through the mail, making it difficult for the US Postal Service and private delivery companies such as UPS and FedEx to identify problematic packages. Thus, the latter are unwilling facilitators of this trade.¹⁵⁷ Another facilitator is Twitter. Analysis of communications on this social media platform reveals that a small percentage of tweets facilitate the illegal sale of prescription opioids.¹⁵⁸

Xu's arrest set off a chain of linked investigations in both the United States and the United Kingdom that saved lives. Peter Gillespie, a high-living British chartered accountant and pharmaceutical distributor who imported 72,000 packets of counterfeit medicines—in other words, more than two million doses—was arrested after bringing counterfeit prostate cancer medicine into the United Kingdom that contained only 70 percent of the components needed to treat the disease.¹⁵⁹ Fortunately, the medicine was seized just before entering into the National Health Service (NHS).¹⁶⁰ Gillespie was fully conscious of his deceptive practices: he not only imported drugs but employed equipment to print misleading labels as to the provenance of the medicine.¹⁶¹ Gillespie's four-year prison sentence was only a temporary deterrent. When he emerged from confinement, he obtained a license to import medicine, as there are limited EU controls on distributors.

Gillespie is unfortunately not a unique example. UK investigators tipped off US law enforcement, who found an unapproved oncology drug sent from a Pakistani company to San Diego. Other frauds with cancer drugs were identified in southern California, Pittsburgh, Iowa, and New York.¹⁶² The importers buying these unapproved and misbranded oncology drugs sold them to doctors in the United States at substantially discounted prices.¹⁶³ These cases reveal the different types of actors complicit in dangerous pharmaceutical crime. Many commercial producers in China, India, Pakistan, and Turkey are more concerned with profits than with health.¹⁶⁴ They ship drugs to the United States, where they are not authorized to sell their commodities. Professionals are also complicit, as highlighted by an oncology treatment center in southern California that bought bargain-priced anticancer drugs fully aware that they were not approved by the FDA for distribution, and then injected them into patients.¹⁶⁵

Doctors are also active participants in the illicit kidney trade, soliciting customers and, at times, interacting with criminal organizations and terrorist groups who seek their slice of this profitable trade. The highly popular Italian detective series *Inspector Montalbano* has an episode devoted to a Sicilian doctor who prospers by performing unauthorized kidney transplants, an operation that can be conducted only with the cooperation of the Mafia.¹⁶⁶ Researchers analyzing this phenomenon have interviewed kidney transplant doctors who confirm their unsavory relationships.¹⁶⁷

Conclusion

The threats against mankind from illicit trade are grave, and the present state of the response seems dismal. But the human situation must be examined in historical perspective. For millennia, human beings have enslaved other humans. As chapter 2 revealed, only in the last two hundred years have there been laws to end the cross-national slave trade, reflecting a major change in human and legal consciousness. Today incomplete and flawed data suggest that 40 million people may still be enslaved.¹⁶⁸ The number is high, but on

a percentage basis, many more human beings today are free than at any time in history. This is the good news.

Human slavery assumed an important economic role throughout history, and abuse of human life continues in other ways today because it brings important financial benefits to those involved. But unlike in the past, this abuse is not officially supported by the state, and when states or government officials engage in labor trafficking, the drug trade, or the selling of illicit cigarettes, they may be subject to opprobrium and, at times, even criminal sanctions.

Those who destroy human life are not just officials who engage in this trade but also professionals, companies and their employees, and pernicious nonstate actors, particularly organized criminals and terrorists. Professionals such as doctors and pharmacists help facilitate the dispersion of harmful pharmaceuticals by prescribing excessive quantities, illegally procuring medicines outside established supply chains—often through the internet—and selling counterfeit or diverted medicines that are not kept under proper temperature controls.

Technology has transformed and expanded the possible ways to harm human life. Online service providers such as Craigslist and Backpage have fostered human trafficking, a high-value revenue stream, through their advertisements. After law enforcement intervention against Craigslist, the problem merely migrated to Backpage, and actions against Backpage have moved payment to less reputable financial processors. Social media enables illicit deliveries, as highly profitable corporations fail to spend the resources needed to curb harmful content.

Global and state resources are disproportionately focused on traffickers in narcotics and only more recently on human trafficking and smuggling. In contrast, insufficient attention is focused on the widespread trade in counterfeit medicines, foods, and alcohol, which has escalated, in part, as a result of sales on the internet and through social media.¹⁶⁹ This activity is more often identified as a violation of intellectual property than as behavior that can kill people.

The combined trade in such harmful commodities as drugs, cigarettes, people, and counterfeit products for consumption transfers

hundreds of billions of dollars to corrupt officials, companies, and nonstate actors. This transfer of wealth simultaneously undermines state capacity, both through revenue losses to the state and through the corruption and complicity of the officials who are essential to this trade. Therefore, the destruction of human life hurts not only individuals but also human security and the state.