"It seems that the Germans can't beat us with their fire or their asphyxiating gas, so now . . . they're using cocaine and morphine to wear us down," speculated deputy Charles Bernard in a 1916 debate.¹ Could it be, as Bernard asserted, that the Germans were pushing drugs into French cities and trenches to intoxicate the population and poison the French war effort? While anything is possible, neither I nor any other researchers have found hard evidence of such a Teutonic plot. If anything, police archives reveal quite the opposite – that the majority of the drugs that made it into criminal hands on French soil came by way of the neutral Swiss, the British, or colonies in North Africa and Indochina. Yet Bernard was not alone in hypothesizing that the Kaiser was a drug kingpin, as many deputies, senators, journalists, and even doctors who specialized in treating addicts articulated like-minded conspiracy theories throughout the World War I era.

Why? Was it simply a product of the Germanophobic atmosphere of the time? In this paper, I will show that the

links between concerns over national security and addiction were not simply a matter of timing or circumstance. Even before hostilities began in 1914, the drug problem was framed within broader concerns over the military, patriotism, and the very fate of the French nation. Thus, the theory of a German plot to poison the nation was not just another chapter in the xenophobic annals of the home front, but a logical outgrowth of the very tensions and anxieties that dominated French drug discourses of the era.

First, let us consider briefly how the "drug problem" evolved in the years leading up to World War I. While opium and hashish had been used in Western Europe as medicines for centuries, both became increasingly popular in the 1800s. Scientists managed to isolate one of the active compounds of opium – morphine – in the early 1800s, and with the invention of the hypodermic syringe in the 1850s, it soon became the painkiller of choice for both civilian and military doctors. By the mid-1870s, however, the dangers of morphine became clear, as practitioners began to notice that many patients became physically and emotionally dependent on the drug. Shortly thereafter, doctors and psychiatrists became aware of this frightening new phenomenon – termed morphinomanie, or morphine addiction. In hopes of weaning patients off the drug, many physicians turned to substitution therapies. Quickly, two of these treatments – cocaine and heroin – proved even more dangerous than morphine, exhibiting a similar, though stronger, character. Soon, the phenomenon of morphinomanie grew into a whole lexicon of addictive "manies" – for cocaine, for opium, for hashish, for heroin – which eventually became unified under the umbrella term toxicomanie or drug addiction in the early 1900s. Although these substances actually have different properties and effects, both medical and popular discourse grouped them
into the same addictive category, endowing them all with the same dangerous character.²

By the 1880s, doctors were beginning to condemn these drugs as agents of degeneration, capable of wreaking chaos on both the individual and social bodies if allowed to spread. Both a sign and a catalyst of medical and social decay, drug abuse needed to be stopped before it, like a variety of other degenerative behaviors and conditions, spread and facilitated the physical and moral decline of the nation.

Despite the medical cries of alarm, morphine broke out of the doctor's office and took hold as a recreational drug in select Paris salons and brasseries by the late 1880s. Fearful that it would creep into the lower classes and lead to the demise of the so-called "French race," many leading doctors and psychiatrists began calling on legislators to take action imposing stricter restrictions on the drugs. Yet their calls fell upon deaf ears in Paris, as the relatively small number of drug addicts kept the problem on the legislative backburner.

Although the specter of an intoxicated urban population failed to kickstart the move towards drug prohibition, another, more dire, vision haunted the authorities and drove them to take action – that was the prospect of an addicted military. The drug of choice within the armed forces was opium, which functionaries and soldiers began using in the opium dens of Indochina and smuggled back to the naval bases on French soil. In towns like Brest and Toulon, prostitutes began to set up private opium dens where sailors, officers, and military administrators alike would gather for late-night opium-smoking sessions. By 1900, military doctors estimated that as many as half of the

Frenchmen who had served in Indochina were opium smokers, and they feared the consequences that the opium habit could have on military discipline and morale when brought back to the metropole.\(^3\) Aware of the "alarming progress" that opium had made within his ranks, the Minister of the Navy began working with local police in port cities to "figure out what measures could be taken to hinder the opium trade" on the French mainland.\(^4\) In early September 1907, the Minister even took the step of drafting a law to stop the flow of opium into France, submitting it to the Minister of the Interior in hopes of creating an effective legal arsenal to fight the opium habit in the navy.\(^5\)

Yet before the civil authorities in Paris could proceed with the legislative process, a bizarre series of events brought the opium question into the immediate spotlight. In late September 1907 the Minister of the Navy received an unsigned note whose author claimed to have copies of military secrets stolen from the French navy and threatened to sell them to a foreign power unless he received 150,000 francs in cash. In follow-up contacts, the mystery blackmailer lowered his demands to 105,000 francs, telling the Minister to have an agent place the money underneath the washroom sink of a train going from Marseille to Paris; when he received the cash, he would send the stolen information back to the proper authorities. Ignored, the thief wrote again, this time instructing the Minister to place the desired sum in a waterproof envelope and leave it for


\(^4\) Procureur Générale près la Cour d'Appel d'Aix to M le Garde des Sceaux, 5 June 1906, Archives Nationales [hereafter AN] BB\(^{18}\) 2488\(^2\), *Cour d'Appel d'Aix*.

\(^5\) Ministre de l'Intérieur to Ministre de la Justice, 11 Sept. 1907, AN BB\(^{18}\) 2488\(^2\), "Opium: Dossier de Principe."
him in the cistern of a Toulon bar's toilet. Spurned again, he wrote once more, this time telling the Minister to have an agent meet him in the gorges outside of Toulon, where he would trade the documents for cash in a face-to-face exchange. Finally, the authorities responded, sending agents to the assigned drop-off point on the night of 23 October. Though he was armed, the mysterious man was overwhelmed by the authorities, quickly arrested, and taken in for questioning.6

The failed blackmailer turned out to be Charles Benjamin Ullmo, a twenty-four-year-old naval lieutenant who also happened to be a Jew and a heavy opium user. Desperate for money to please his lover (a prostitute who doubled as his opium dealer), Ullmo had taken photographs of transponder codes from several warships in Toulon in hopes of using them to turn a quick profit. Before trying to intimidate the Minister of the Navy, he had actually contacted a German spy, and he even took a trip to Brussels to negotiate the price of the sensitive information with a foreign agent. It was only when his talks with the Germans fell through that he turned his scheme into a threat against the Minister of the Navy, hoping still to make a handsome sum off of his plot.

At his trial, there was no doubt as to Ullmo's guilt since he immediately confessed to everything when questioned. Instead of quibbling about the facts, his defense focused on the question of responsibility – was Ullmo responsible for his treason, or was the opium that he had been smoking to blame? Pointing out the absurd nature of his drop-off plans and all the holes in his plot, the defense argued that the only way Ullmo could have hatched and dared to go through with such a harebrained scheme was if he were

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under the influence of something – namely opium. Emphasizing Ullmo's unprofessionalism, his counsel dismissed his attempted treachery as a "stupid scheme, a ridiculous blackmail case . . . a ruse that came to him in the middle of the opium den. . . . Can the experts deny," his lawyers rhetorically asked, "that that opium was partially responsible for what was happening in Ullmo's brain?"7

The court appointed psychologist, however, testified that opium did not compromise Ullmo's mental capacities to the point that he could be considered clinically insane or unaware of his actions. "The intellectual faculties of the accused have not been diminished by his intoxication, not at all," he explained. "His association of ideas, his judgment, and all his physical motor functions are normal. He gives the impression of an attentive and cultivated character, capable of reflection and reserve."8 In short, even though Ullmo smoked opium, the "opium defense" put forth by his lawyers did not measure up scientifically. Ullmo was found guilty and forced to endure a humiliating military degradation in front of a large crowd in Toulon before being sentenced to a life in exile in Guyana.

The spectacular nature of the case – from the romance of Ullmo's love affair with the prostitute to the intrigue of espionage – made it a media frenzy, one that filled the pages of most of France's major newspapers from October 1907 until June 1908. Yet interestingly enough, despite the strong parallels between Ullmo and another Jew who had been accused of treason – a man by the name of Alfred Dreyfus – Ullmo's case was not framed as a follow-up to the Dreyfus Affair as we might expect. With the exception of

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7 Ibid., 220, 228, 233.
of a few pieces in extreme right-wing publications led by the likes of Edouard Drumont and Charles Maurras, neither Ullmo's Judaism nor the similarities of his case to that of Dreyfus were especially highlighted in the press coverage of the story. While his religion was briefly mentioned in most publications, Ullmo's racial and religious pedigree was not the focus of stories concerning his case. In the court of public opinion, Ullmo's Jewishness was not on trial, but his passions – specifically his love of opium – were.

Thus Ullmo became, above all, the symbol of opium for the French, as he starred in the first – and arguably the only – high profile case in which the consequences and meaning of drug use were debated in a public forum. Since opium itself was ultimately exonerated, Ullmo marked a turning point in the image of drugs in both the medico-legal framework and the popular imagination.

On one level, the case was a decisive defeat for the claim that drugs needed to be banned since they precipitated crime, as the connection between Ullmo's substance abuse and criminal impulses was ultimately dismissed. The argument that opium facilitated degeneracy – and thus could be considered a mitigating circumstance for Ullmo – fell flat in the eyes of the legal and scientific community, thus compromising the political power of the medical case for drug control.

Yet the case ushered in a critical evolution on the discursive front, as the trial established tight connections between drug use and a lack of patriotism; Ullmo was the quintessential anti-citizen, a traitor willing to sell out his country, who was identified and identified himself, above all else, as an opium user. Choosing to indulge in psychotropic fantasy and to privilege his own private interests – money for opium and women – over those of the
French nation, Ullmo represented everything that a citizen and soldier should not. Thus, especially within the context of the military, the task of fighting drugs expanded beyond protecting addicts from their own morbid passions; it became a matter of national defense against the egoistic impulses of drug users like Ullmo, who would stop at nothing to advance their own interests over their duties and responsibilities to the nation.

As one author put it, "love of the flag cannot survive" in the self-absorbed mind of the drug taker. "Interest in the nation, like all other beliefs in solidarity, which were once held together like rocks in a fortress . . . are destroyed." Largely in response to the uproar over Ullmo, the government took action in October 1908, issuing a decree that instituted strict controls on the commerce and consumption of opium. It was the first step France took to eliminate recreational drug use and would lay the groundwork for the more comprehensive drug control apparatus that would emerge during the First World War.

Given the threats to solidarity and nation that drugs came to represent, it comes as little surprise that narcotics became such a concern when hostilities began in 1914. Fears that enemy powers would encourage the decay French morale abounded, as paranoia about German spies, plots, and underhanded schemes raged. What better way to undermine French morale than with drugs, which, after Ullmo, had come to represent the antithesis of nationalistic resolve? Given that German pharmaceutical companies like Merck and Bayer were among Europe's leading producers of these substances, why would the Germans not use their

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pharmacological capacities to wage a more covert form of "chemical warfare?"

"Let's not forget that factories on the other side of the Rhine sent us . . . their morphine and cocaine," warned one Senator when asked about the French drug problem in 1916.\textsuperscript{10} Henry Rigal, a leading journalist in the anti-drug crusade, argued that there would never have been drugs in France were it not for the Germans, since "the introduction of morphine into French medicine has German roots." The reason that the Germans were shipping drugs over to France was clear enough, since according to Rigal, "the extermination of the French race by all means is the ultimate goal of the German plan."\textsuperscript{11} Even the doctors who specialized in treating addiction, like the director of the Asylum at Maison Blanche, agreed that the importation of drugs into France must have been a German "prewar maneuver," designed to compromise France's military and patriotic prowess.\textsuperscript{12} Similar theories abounded in the mainstream press. "The spread of addiction since the start of hostilities is both disturbing and mysterious," observed one editor at the \textit{Paris Journal}. "If we think about it, it's easy to see that Germany is behind this."\textsuperscript{13}

The overlapping of concerns about drugs and the war endowed the drug question with a new power and sense of urgency; the people who dealt and used drugs were not simply dangers to themselves but threats to the nation, individuals who undermined the bonds of solidarity that

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 45.  
\textsuperscript{12} Dr. Bonnet in Ibid., 15.  
were so essential to the war effort. Consciously or inadvertently doing the enemy's dirty work by contributing to the destruction of morale, those involved with drugs were not only sick and immoral, but they were enemies of the state. Thus French authorities needed to take all precautions necessary to ensure that the drug problem did not evolve into a crisis with truly national consequences.

To eliminate the potential danger that drugs could pose to the war effort, the government took a logical step: they isolated users from the war. Under an 1849 law concerning governance during a siege, the state had the right to expel anyone considered a "dangerous individual" from regions where battles were being fought or the military was staging operations. Once the war began, this policy targeted, above all, foreigners of German and Austrian descent, forcing their transfer to camps that were a cross between a displaced-persons facility and a prison camp in regions of France far from the front. Yet foreigners were not the only people forced out of Paris and the areas near the fighting. Antimilitarists were often expelled from the war zone, as were prostitutes who were either unruly or rumored to be spreading venereal disease. As Jean-Claude Farcy points out in his study of the evacuation and internment program, one of the most common reasons for Frenchmen to be removed from the war zone was if they were brought up on drug charges.

Indeed, the archives of the Minister of the Interior reveal that drug dealers were a specifically targeted "undesirable population," especially in Paris. In the first half of 1915, nineteen of the twenty-four Parisians who had been arrested on cocaine charges, whether as dealers or

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15 Ibid., 104.
users, were expelled from the city. Beginning in October 1915, the Minister of the Interior kept track of all drug arrests in Paris and in most cases called for their expulsion from the capital.

Assimilated into the pool of "suspect individuals" that featured mostly foreigners, drug dealers and users became potential enemies on par with pacifists and even Germans. The place of drugs within the French nation reached a new nadir during World War I, as their image as agents of treachery, which was established with Ullmo, manifested itself concretely through the wartime evacuations.

The links between anti-patriotism and drugs remained intact well into the postwar period. In 1922, for example, speakers at the Society for Legal Medicine observed that the "demoralizing propaganda organized during the war" by the Germans "continues to push drug use." National authorities agreed, hypothesizing as late as 1921 that "the cocaine traffic is being supported by the German authorities, who are hoping, by these means, to intoxicate a major portion of the population." Even when the immediate danger of the war was gone, the Germanophobic and nationalistic drug discourses remained intact.


The immediate exigencies of war alone cannot explain the French fear of a German plot to intoxicate the nation nor the patriotic overtones that the anti-drug crusade took on in France. This anxiety was an outgrowth of a drug discourse that had been formed years before the conflict in the Ullmo Affair. Intimately tied to concerns over the nation and national security, France's "war on drugs" was indeed more than a fight against the medical and legal complications caused by addiction. It was also a political "war" of sorts, a struggle to protect France from a potential agent of national decay and betrayal, thus preserving the solidarity of a republican nation.