

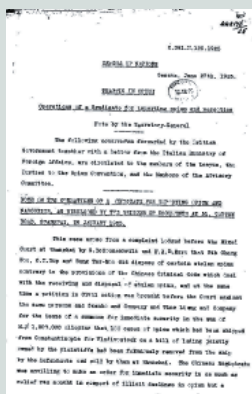
# STORIES FROM THE PAST - SERIES IV

## Lost in the Past : Early 1900s at the League of Nations

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**LEAGUE OF NATIONS**, Geneva, June 27th, 1925, Note by the Secretary-General, C.381.M.125.1925, "NOTE ON THE OPERATIONS OF A SYNDICATE FOR IMPORTING OPIUM AND NARCOTICS, AS DISCLOSED BY THE SEIZURE OF DOCUMENTS AT 51 CANTON ROAD, SHANGHAI, IN JANUARY 1925": "This case arose from a complaint lodged before the Mixed Court ... that [two individuals named] did dispose of certain stolen opium contrary to the provisions of the Chinese Criminal Code which deal with the receiving and disposal of stolen opium, and at the same time a petition in Civil action was brought before the Court against the same persons and [two companies named] for the issue of a summons for immediate security in the sum of M.\$ 1,000,000 alleging that 180 cases of opium which had been shipped from Constantinople for Vladivostock on a bill of lading jointly owned by the plaintiffs had been feloniously removed from the ship by the defendants and sold by them at Shanghai."

In that note by the Secretary-General of the League of Nations, based on communications from concerned Governments and circulated to the members of the League, the Parties to the Opium Convention, and the Members of the Advisory Committee, we find essential elements of information exchange that is required today:



Note by the Secretary General, League of Nations, 1925.

The note speaks of the involvement of syndicates and their making, methods and means of drug smuggling, including use of free ports and postal services, routing through different cities, involving different nationals, and exploiting loopholes of national laws and international drug control treaties. It also speaks of specific details of how diversion of drugs from licit channels into illicit traffic took place, using import certificates apparently bought, involving pharmaceutical companies selling drugs knowingly that the drugs would

be diverted into illicit traffic (it names pharmaceutical companies well known to date), and it speaks of such meticulous details of findings from examinations of telegrams and other communications exchanged between those involved in drug trafficking, and shared with Governments through the League of Nations.

The Secretary-General's note refers to the making of the syndicate in question:

"The papers seized in Shanghai do not disclose in what way the Syndicate came to be formed; it is evident, however, that the actual organisation was in the hands of a member of G... and Company of

Shanghai – probably [a Chinese name], who was ultimately convicted. The syndicate was financed by a Japanese in Kobe named M [or H]... K..., to whom was handed, on October 20th, 1924 'the whole account of your concerned'. Beyond this, nothing is known of M... K..., but it can be confidently assumed that he was not merely a sleeping partner in the concern. Members of the Syndicate frequently made visits to Kobe." The note continues to describe the movements of individuals concerned, also tracking financial transactions. In such a process, it even identifies, for instance, a company operating under two different names as actually being one company.

It also tracks the voyages of a vessel used in transporting the drugs smuggled:

"The S.S. 'K... Maru' [a Japanese vessel; owner's name listed], was chartered through the firm of Y... and Co., of ... Kobe, in October 1923. Very large expenses were incurred in Japan prior to the departure of the vessel; various hotels were stayed at, visits were made on the business of the syndicate from Kobe to Osaka, Moji and Wakamatsu."

"On December 16th, the vessel was at Singapore, where a stay of 1 1/2 days was made, and a payment to L... K... of 530 yen had been made by G... and Co., by cable, on the 23rd November. On the 11th January, 1924, the vessel was at Port Said, where a payment of £10 was made ... to [a Chinese name] ..."

"On the 24th January, the ship arrived at Genoa, where she took on board 26 cases of drugs, which were shipped ... and consigned to ... at Vladivostock." Inquiries then made by the Italian authorities revealed that the drug had been imported, under proper customs permits, from Switzerland and that the vessel proceeded to Constantinople (present day Istanbul).

At then Constantinople, involvement of individuals of different nationalities became further evident:

"According to the Danish Vice-Consul at Constantinople, who is responsible for the protection of Chinese subjects in Turkey, C.K. Y... [a Chinese name] evidently acting as super-cargo, was accompanied by C. H..., his secretary and interpreter, and a Russian ... who was fraudulently in possession of a Chinese passport." A thorough investigation appears to have been conducted, as it, for instance, identified this Chinese individual as the author of "a well written descriptive and statistical study of the reduction of opium in Turkey" found amongst the papers discovered at Shanghai.

At Vladivostock, which was purportedly the destination, “a naturalised British subject of Swiss origin” was said to be in partnership with an individual who “appears to be a Caucasian resident at Vladivostock.” The practice of the partnership was to obtain licences to import opium, which were used as a cover to obtain opium abroad. “The opium was never imported into Vladivostock, but transhipped into junks and clandestinely conveyed to China.”

The Secretary-General’s note then speaks also of the smuggling mode:

The vessel then loaded 2,200 tons of salt at Smyrna (Ibiza), and 180 cases of opium at Constantinople. While the later papers seized at Shanghai apparently revealed little about the return journey of the vessel, when she arrived at Sabang and searched, 180 cases of raw opium was found “hidden behind a wooden screen in one of the holds, together with 26 cases of drugs.” Although fined for the failure to report the cargo of opium, since there was no evidence that the opium was intended for smuggling into the then Dutch territory, the ship was allowed to sail from Sabang with the opium and drugs on board.



Photo by Akira Fujino

An opium poppy field.

It also notes that, while where the ship discharged the entire opium cargo was not known, it speaks of how the opium was brought into Shanghai. Through a commercial agreement, the opium was transported to “Kautshaungmiau”, which is the Chinese name of the Arsenal, “and the Arsenal was under the direct control of the Defence commissioner, the highest military official in Shanghai.”

Another note issued by the League of Nations<sup>i</sup> speaks of what the other drugs were and how all those drugs were disposed of:

“According to the testimony of the crews... the ship reached, on the 27th April, near the North Saddle Island off Shanghai and there they trans-boarded the opium to the Chinese junks waiting for the steamer. Before they accomplished this trans-shipment, the ship had tried to enter the river Yangtsu, but failing to do so, she then went to Pusan, Korea, and returned on the 27th to the proximity of North Saddle Island. Here the cargo of 180 cases of opium and 13 cases of morphine were trans-shipped. It was also stated that 13 other cases of morphine were thrown into the sea in the vicinity of Saishu [Jeju] Island, south of Korea, and then the ship sailed for Kobe ...”

Yet another note issued<sup>ii</sup> speaks of a further case of smuggling:

“Details are not yet to hand, but the press reports a very large seizure within the last few days, of morphia from Germany. The seizure was at Shanghai and was discovered, in a large consignment of iron-beds from

Germany. All the hollow bed-posts were filled with morphia.” “As is quite natural, during this time of National commotion, opium and drugs are having a free run, except for occasional seizures.”

The drugs eventually smuggled were initially diverted from licit channels. The aforementioned note<sup>iii</sup>, for instance, speaks of some well-known, even to-date, companies, referring to a specific letter:

“It is quite evident from this letter ... that [the company] had been in the habit of supplying ... large quantities of drugs to [another company], and that they were well aware of the nature of the traffic in which they were engaged.” Speaking of yet another company, the note says “This company is notoriously engaged in the illicit traffic. It was discovered in 1919, when resident at The Hague, to be shipping drugs to the Far East via the Free Port Copenhagen. It subsequently removed to Frieberg, Baden, from whence it transacted a considerable traffic in drugs and arms to the Far East. In consequence of the searching enquiries made by the German Government into its dealings, the firm decided to move to a more convenient centre, and in 1924 established itself at Riehen, Basle.”

Those companies were also aware of the activities of the League of Nations. The note<sup>iv</sup>, for instance, speaks of the correspondences between some companies as “interesting as showing the keen interest displayed by these firms in the activities of the League of Nations and the result of the Opium Conference – [the company named in the first case above] anxiously enquired if there is any trouble in passing the Suez Canal.”

All these show that, right before the first international drug control treaty with binding control measures was adopted [1925 International Opium Convention], the Secretariat of the League of Nations was already instrumental in disseminating findings of investigations internationally. Such information/intelligence sharing was essential, as it is today, in preventing traffickers from exploiting weak links.

In early 1900s, such was a role played by the League of Nations at a time when international drug control treaty system was still at its infancy.

## References

<sup>i</sup> League of Nations Advisory Committee on Traffic in Opium, Note by the Secretary General reference C.463.M.173.1925.XI., O.C.276 (a) of 26 August 1925.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid., reference C.421.M.153.1925.XI., O.C.301 of 8 August 1925.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid., reference C.381.M.125.1925 of 27 July 1925.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid., reference C.381.M.125.1925 of 27 July 1925.

**Author’s Note: Texts in italics were reproduced verbatim. Names of individuals are withheld.**