



PROJECT MUSE®

---

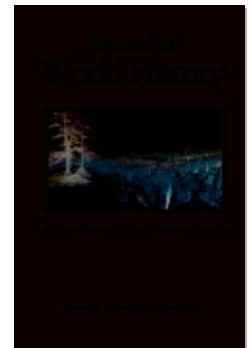
*The Cigarette: A Political History* by Sarah Milov (review)

Tricia Starks

Journal of World History, Volume 31, Number 2, June 2020, pp. 473-475  
(Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jwh.2020.0018>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/757116>

Latin American elites sometimes exercised a surprising degree of control over the political destinies of their nations—measured here by their ability to defy Washington or chart a non-Cuban path to populist governance—that does not mean that “Latin Americans” writ large enjoyed the same kind of agency. In fact, one might draw exactly the opposite conclusion from the book’s chapters: that the “secret war” between Washington and Havana was most costly to the people who benefited the least from it, namely, ordinary Latin American civilians. At times, one wishes Brown had made more use of the vibrant scholarship on the regional reverberations of the Cuban Revolution, written largely by Latin American historians drawing on newly declassified sources in their respective archives. Such work might have allowed him to deepen his claims regarding the degree to which both leaders and ordinary people found room to maneuver in the bipolar world of the Latin American Cold War.

Nonetheless, both Brown and McMeekin have given their respective subfields, not to mention the field of comparative revolutionary history, much to chew on in their ambitious, well-researched books. Above all, they show us what can be gained from thinking beyond national borders. As they both persuasively argue, international events shaped both the Russian and Cuban Revolutions from their genesis, and would continue to do so through their radicalization and institutionalization. Just as consequentially, both revolutions would themselves become vital actors on the world stage, ushering in new rules for hemispheric and global engagement. In order to capture these reverberations, scholars must also be poised to think and work across national borders.

JENNIFER L. LAMBE

*Department of History, Brown University*

*The Cigarette: A Political History.* By SARAH MILOV. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019. 400 pp.

In 1964, the Surgeon General of the United States released his report *Smoking and Health* indicting tobacco smoking in a long list of health problems—from cancer to heart disease. In response, smoking among Americans dropped precipitously only to rebound the next year. Perhaps even more mystifying than the resilience of smoker’s devotion to tobacco, which was buttressed by nicotine dependency, was the continuing support of the American government for tobacco

agricultural programs past this point. Despite the leading American medical spokesperson's condemnation of tobacco, the government would subsidize tobacco production for another forty years—until 2004. This contradictory relationship—a state fighting tobacco with one arm and propping it up with the other—forms the central conflict of Sarah Milov's *The Cigarette: A Political History*. The other side of the fight comes from groups little explored in other tobacco histories. 1964 was not just the year of the Surgeon General's report, it was also a turning point for civil rights in the United States. In Milov's tightly-argued, well-written analysis of American tobacco politics it is activists—not from the civil rights movement but often borrowing its language, ideological underpinnings, and protest culture—who created the conditions for the decline of government support for tobacco.

Milov argues that, "Cigarettes were central to American political institutions throughout the twentieth century" (p. 2). She grounds this claim in discussion of the economics of tobacco agriculture and manufacture in the 1920s and 1930s outlining the creation of agriculture programs in the New Deal era that ended with government subsidizing tobacco agriculture and stabilizing the tobacco market to the advantage of both farmers and manufacturers. In the postwar era, as fears of surpluses and possible economic collapse pushed forward aid to Europe, tobacco was a big winner. Milov reveals that in the 1948 Marshall Plan, due to active lobbying by agricultural groups, one billion dollars of the thirteen billion dollars in assistance to the countries of Europe was in tobacco. This was a third of the food aid from the program. The importation of American leaf ended in the switch of Europeans from the lower-nicotine and more fragrant oriental blends they had previously preferred to the higher-nicotine, more easily inhaled, and therefore more dangerous American blend. While devastating in consequence for European health, for the American tobacco farmer this was a great deal. Tobacco Associates, American tobacco farmers' advocacy group, kept up the pressure for increased consumption of American leaf in Europe, capitalizing on the win of the Marshall Plan, negotiating under the umbrella of the Agriculture Trade Development and Assistance Act of 1954, pushing forward with trade shows, and forging on into untapped markets of the eastern bloc.

Having built up the associational political stylings of tobacco agriculture and its promotion, Milov then turns to the future of such cooperation between agriculture, manufacturers, tobacco-affiliated organizations, and government against the backdrop of increasingly dire news of tobacco's health dangers. Recounting the story of big tobacco and big government and the slow response to scientific and

medical warnings, Milov moves in to show the shift towards the nonsmoker as a significant actor, the judicial system as a field of battle, and the local as the place for victory. Here it is the story of lawyers like John Banzhaf, activists like Clara Gouin of GASP (Group Against Smokers' Pollution), and plaintiffs for smoke-free workplaces like Donna Shimp of EIA (Environmental Improvement Associates) who carry the fight against smoking. As workplace costs came more to the center, so too did the costs of tobacco subsidies—some fifty million dollars from over forty years—finally came under scrutiny. Still, while a first stab was taken at the support in the 1980s, all price supports were not eliminated until 2004.

Milov's investigation into the tangling of tobacco and governance, as well as the shift away from big tobacco to focus on farmers and the small-scale activists instrumental to the decline of subsidies, is an important addition to the field of tobacco studies. Like Joel R. Bius' *Smoke 'em if you got 'em: The Rise and Fall of the Military Cigarette Ration*, Milov highlights the ways that government programs encouraged the development of American tobacco dependency and propped up the industry with tax dollars well after the government's own agents had decried the danger and invested in fighting smoking. Like Allan Brandt's Pulitzer-Prize winning *Cigarette Century: The Rise, Fall, and Deadly Persistence of the Product that Defined America*, Richard Kluger's *Ashes to Ashes: America's Hundred-Year Cigarette War, the Public Health, and the Unabashed Triumph of Philip Morris*, and Robert N. Proctor's *Golden Holocaust: Origins of the Cigarette Catastrophe and the Case for Abolition*, Milov helps to explain the forces that hindered cessation action in the United States even as evidence mounted on tobacco's dangers.

Milov decenters the regulation and health questions from the usual binaries of big tobacco versus the state to describe a much messier process and a long, multi-front battle. By so doing, Milov brings light to another way in which tobacco becomes rooted in society and resists easy, "one-point" policy fixes. Milov's work will be of value to scholars of tobacco history, American policy, public health, and the global tobacco giants. Her moving descriptions of the tactics of resistance from individual activists, as well as their perseverance despite numerous setbacks, will be inspiring to anyone seeking to take down a Goliath.

TRICIA STARKS

University of Arkansas