

2025 Centenary of Cannabis Prohibition. Background.

CANNABIS *or* HEMP *or* MARIJUANA *or* OTHER

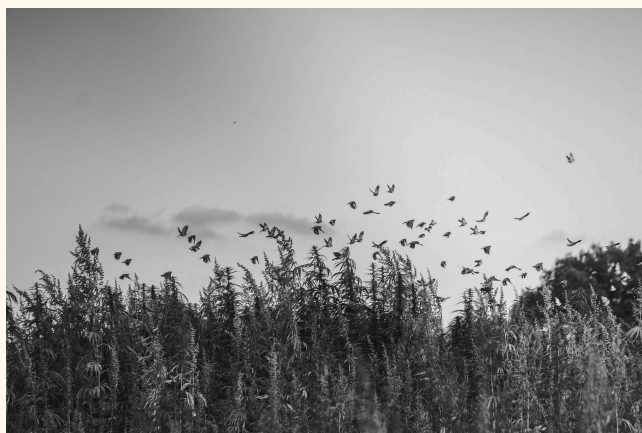
If the history of *Cannabis* and humankind was a clock, prohibition would only be its last 2 minutes.

From time immemorial *Cannabis* has grown, been grown, and used for countless purposes.

Worldwide, *Cannabis* provided clothing, food, feed and bedding for livestock, medicine, and a spiritual and social enhancer. But things changed brutally, only a hundred years ago.

The modern prohibition of *Cannabis sativa* L. plant (also known as hemp, marihuana, भांग, dagga, конопля, ganja, 麻, pot, ntsangu, haschisch, canapa, riamba, قنب, siddhi, kif, cáñamo, bangui, 大麻, chanvre, konopí...) originated before 1925 in Brazil, Egypt, and South Africa. The USA came much, much later.

But it was only **in 1925** that *Cannabis* acquired a marked world character that continues to this day, as it entered international law for the first time.

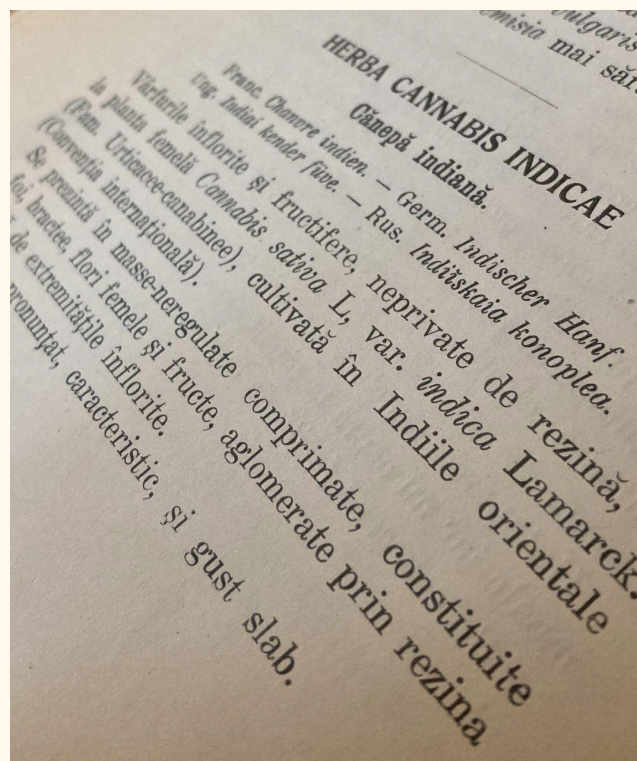


Cannabis field. Czech republic.

1925: TWO TREATIES

In 1925, the Geneva Opium Convention included “Indian hemp,” upon request from Egypt.^[1] For the first time, *Cannabis* had become an internationally-controlled drug. The conservative Brazilian, Egyptian, and South African governments had managed to extend to the entire planet their racist, colonially-biased, and intolerant views of an ancestral plant.^[2]

In 1925 also, the Brussels Pharmacopoeia Treaty included for the first time *Cannabis* (herb, extract, tincture) in the International Pharmacopoeia, alongside other important medicines.^[3]



Monograph of *Cannabis* herb, Pharmacopoeia Română, 1862.

The 1925 Opium Convention generated a descendance of treaties that **continue to be in force** worldwide today (like the **Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961**).

On the other hand, the presence of *Cannabis* in the International Pharmacopoeia did not last long: all medicinal plants (including *Cannabis*) were deleted from it, just after the second World War (WWII), leaving only active compounds.^[4]



Cannabis after harvest. Poland.

1935: BIASED ASSESSMENT

In 1935, *Cannabis* was subject to an international scientific review. It was found harmless, and its use in medicine was, at the time, quite widespread.^[5] But the scientists' outcome was misutilised by political processes, and after WWII, misinformation about the review was used to reinforce anti-*Cannabis* sentiments. The world had to wait until 2018, when a new and unbiased international scientific review took place.^[6]

1939–1945

World War I had represented the consolidation of international drug control, as victory treaties included clauses which made more countries join the early drug control Conventions. It prepared the ground for the 1925 Opium Convention to happen.^[7] On the contrary, WWII represented a curious temporary bubble of *Cannabis* enthusiasm from all parts.

Driven by the need for its fibres in the ramped-up industrial production for the war effort, all sides (including **UK, USA, Japan, Germany**) encouraged *Cannabis* cultivation to ramp up military production and supplies in various applications such as ropes, canvas, textiles...^[8]

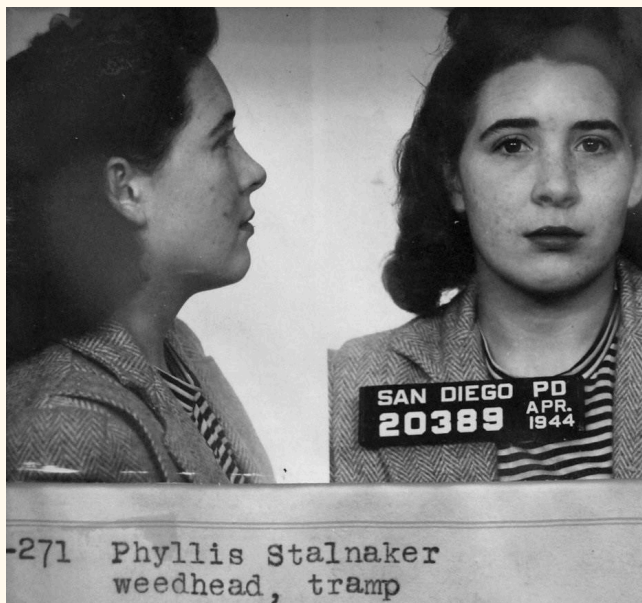
Mexico only joined WWII in 1942... but before that, the country experimented in 1940 the legalisation of marihuana and all other drugs. Although the USA pressured Mexico to revert its law within months, it remains a pioneering public health approach, still inspirational today.^[9]



A young Cannabis plant. Czech republic.

The COLD WAR... on DRUGS

Starting in 1937, the USA had begun a crusade against the plant within its border. It was paused during the war, but restarted right after. This led to the criminalisation of users and a significant decline in the production of *Cannabis* for industrial purposes —benefiting other industries. Since the USA had signed neither the Opium nor the Pharmacopoea Treaties, however, they still kept their *Cannabis* affairs internal at that time. While repression was ramping up, it was still far from the aggressive chase of smokers and patients that came after the 1970s.



Mugshot of Phyllis Joyce Stalnaker Harris (1925–1961), a victim of the repression of the poor and vulnerable.^[10] USA.

China and **Russia**, on their side, never banned the production of *Cannabis*... at least for industrial purposes. However, during the Cold War, the countries were no different from the USA in their repression of uses of psychoactive parts.

The post-war period was synonymous with ramping up prohibition in many countries, although there was not yet a global coordinated effort to eradicate *Cannabis* and its cultures.

The TAKEOVER of SEEDS

In the post-war era, the world also witnessed the appearance of novel plant varieties of *Cannabis* —mostly in Europe— tailored specifically to have the least possible amount of THC, amidst a rapid transition from traditional to industrialised agriculture. **France** and **Italy** brute-forced the adoption of the UPOV treaty,^[11] creating a form of patents on plant varieties, which favoured these novel proprietary (and low-THC) hemp varieties, over traditional hemp landraces with varying amounts of THC (but never anywhere close to zero).

In the 18th century, without evidence to back it up, some European botanists had the novel idea to classify hemp into two distinct classes: the “good” sativa from **Europe**, and the “drug-type” indica from **the Indies**.^[12] With UPOV, questionable breeders and politicians succeeded in altering the unicity of *Cannabis* in the field, centuries after altering it in the mind of (European and Western) scientists and societies.



Cannabis resin (charas) and fabric of Cannabis fibre (hemp), both obtained from the same wild varieties in Nepal.

A CENTURY of PAIN...

The 1925 Opium Convention was not a prohibition treaty. It was a treaty controlling drugs.^[13] However, this control enabled authoritarian governments to apply exceptional measures to *Cannabis*, like bans. Which they happily did (although not all). The 1961 Convention is exactly the same: it does not impose prohibition, it just suggests it to governments... which then go on gladly to implement it.



A bhang boutique, when sales were still legal. India.

The more recent part of global prohibition is better known: in the 1970s, US president Richard Nixon recovered from its initiators —Egypt, South Africa and Brazil^[1]— the reins of the anti-drugs fight, scaling it to unprecedented levels of destruction which continue to fuel massive environmental damage and human rights violations to this day.

Prohibition is global, and at the same time extremely local. *Cannabis* peoples and communities as well! **In a hundred years, they didn't succeed in eradicating us. In a hundred years, they didn't succeed in replacing our traditional *Cannabis* plant varieties with their proprietary strains.**

...vs MILLENIA of HEALING

“Quisieron enterrarnos pero no sabían que éramos semillas” – They wanted to bury us, not knowing that we were seeds.

The Cannabis Embassy has been proclaimed as an independent state without territory,^[14] to be the government that can protect, promote, and uphold your rights, the rights of *Cannabis* peoples worldwide, negated so far by their “classic” government. The Cannabis Embassy aims to alleviate this. Starting with the necessary exercise of commemoration, memory and remembrance for 100 years of death and devastation, but also celebration and upholding of the hundreds of years before 1925, when *Cannabis* and humans enjoyed positive, mutually-beneficial relationships.

In 2025, rather than marking a century of prohibition, we will honour a millennium of recorded *Cannabis*-human history. We will reflect on the positive contributions and aspects of societies and nature that our diverse Cannabis communities have safeguarded, nurtured, developed, and created throughout this period.^[15]



Cannabis activists in front of Parliament. South Africa.



Worldwide activists at the launch of the Cannabis Embassy. United Nations, Austria.

NOTES *and* BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. On this important role of Egypt in early global *Cannabis* control, two articles by Liat Kozma are must-reads: “[Cannabis Prohibition in Egypt, 1880–1939: From Local Ban to League of Nations Diplomacy](#)” *Middle Eastern Studies*, 2011: 47(3), 443–460; and “[The League of Nations and the debate over cannabis prohibition](#)” *History Compass*, 2011: 9(1), 61–70. It is also important to read Chris S. Duvall’s *The African Roots of Marijuana*, Duke University Press, 2019. And perhaps the most self-explanatorily titled book chapter by Scheerer, Sebastian (1997) “[North-American Bias and non American roots of cannabis prohibition](#)” In: Böllinger, L. (Ed.), *Cannabis Science: From Prohibition to Human Right*, Peter Lang.
2. Anna Stensrud. [The Racist Roots of International Cannabis Regulation: An analysis of the Second Geneva Opium Conference](#). Thesis, University of Oslo, 2022.
3. Officially: “Brussels Agreement on the Unification of Pharmacopoeial Formulas for Potent Medications”. The WHO [described in 2008](#) the history of the International Pharmacopoeia and the critical role of the 1925 Treaty in that process. See also notes 5 & 6 below.
4. Source: *Unification of Pharmacopoeias Committee. Sessions: 1st Session, Geneva, October 1947* (Located at: Archives WHO1, World Health Organisation Archives, Geneva, Switzerland; Docket 758.4.1.). On the history of the international pharmacopoeia and cannabis, the best reference remains Jean Volckringer (1953) *Évolution et Unification des Formulaires et des Pharmacopées*, Paul Brandouy Paris. Because THC (synonym with dronabinol) was unknown at the time, THC did not make it into the post-WWII international pharmacopoeia.
5. Kenzi Riboulet-Zemouli, Farid Ghehiouèche, & Michael A. Krawitz (2022) “[Cannabis amnesia – Indian hemp parley at the Office International d’Hygiène Publique in 1935](#)” *Authorea preprints*.
6. Kenzi Riboulet-Zemouli & Michael A. Krawitz (2022) “[WHO’s First Scientific Review of Medicinal Cannabis: From Global Struggle to Patient Implications](#)” *Drugs Habits and Social Policy* 23(1): 5–21.
7. William B. McAllister (2000), *Drug Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century*, Routledge. See also notes 1, 2, 5, and: Kettil Bruun, Lynn Pan, & Ingemar Rexed (1975), *The Gentlemen’s Club: International control of drugs and alcohol*, University of Chicago Press.
8. During WWII, all countries parties to the conflict ramped-up their production of durable and utility materials for use in military gear like ropes, parachutes, and uniforms, which included high-yield natural fibre crops, including *Cannabis*. The example of the USA is perhaps better documented and known, with the emblematic short movie “Hemp for Victory” screened at the time in the country. Vice news published a post discussing “[Hemp Against Hitler: How Cannabis Helped America Win World War II](#)”
9. In 1940, Mexican President Lázaro Cárdenas implemented a pioneering drug policy (incubated by the psychiatrist Leopoldo Salazar Viniegra) fully decriminalising *Cannabis* and other drugs, allowing small-scale sales and use, while establishing clinics to provide controlled, low-cost drugs for people with drug use disorders. The law was repealed after five months due to resource shortages and intense pressure from the USA. On this episode see: Benjamin T. Smith, (2019) “[The Dialectics of Dope: Leopoldo Salazar Viniegra, the Myth of Marijuana, and Mexico’s State Drug Monopoly](#)”, In: S. Wilson (Ed.), *Prohibitions and Psychoactive Substances in History, Culture and Theory*, Routledge; Isaac Campos (2017) “A Diplomatic Failure: The Mexican Role in the Demise of the 1940 Reglamento Federal de Toxicomanías”, *Third World Quarterly* 39(3). Sonoro’s podcast [Toxicomanía: the Mexican Experiment](#) portrays this period, providing an insightful overview of the Mexican legalisation and its context.
10. Chris Otto (2019) “[Lamenting what we’ll never know about Phyllis J. Stalnaker Harris.](#)” *Papergreat* [online].
11. On UPOV, see: [Association for Plant Breeding for the Benefit of Society](#) [online]
12. David A. Guba (2020) *Taming Cannabis: Drugs and Empire in Nineteenth-Century France*. McGill-Queen’s University Press.
13. See *Drug Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century* (note 7 above) and: John Collins (2020) “[A Brief History of Cannabis and the Drug Conventions](#)” *AJIL Unbound* 114: 279–284.
14. Cannabis Embassy (2024), “[Proclamation of the Cannabis Embassy, 17 March 2024.](#)” [online]
15. Cannabis Embassy (2024), “[2025 Centenary of Cannabis Prohibition - Global Cannabis History Year.](#)” [online].