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Michael Kwass, *Contraband. Louis Mandrin and the Making of a Global Underground*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014. 457 pp. Figures, notes, index. \$49.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-674-72683-3.

Review by David Garrioch, Monash University.

Any historian who has spent time on France's ancient borders in Savoy, the Alpes Maritimes, or elsewhere, will have heard tales of smuggling, some banal and some heroic. And nearly everyone in France has heard of Louis Mandrin, the bandit smuggler who became a folk hero in the eighteenth century and who remains (quite unhistorically) a symbol of resistance to oppressive government. The two central insights of Michael Kwass's engaging book are, first, that this illicit trade was a key part of the eighteenth-century globalization of commerce, and second, that the ruthless pursuit of smugglers by the authorities, and particularly by agents of the General Farm (*Ferme générale*) that managed most indirect taxation, was a key factor discrediting France's government in the final decades before the Revolution.

The impact of the consumer revolution of the early modern period was, Kwass shows, more complex than generally assumed. Reacting against earlier critiques of consumerism in modern society (and, I would add, responding to its elevation to iconic status by today's economists), recent historical work has generally taken a positive view of the growth of domestic consumption in Europe, even while recognizing that much of it depended on slavery. Yet the global trade in tobacco and cotton had some very negative consequences for France. In pointing this out, Kwass is not referring to the impact on the kingdom's domestic textile industries or to the health consequences of snuff or smoking, but to the veritable war that the French government and its agents launched against its own people in order to regulate and profit from the growing demand for these products. In order to fund his military campaigns, Louis XIV made tobacco into a royal monopoly, imposing high duties on an imported luxury product. As usual, the collection of the duties was given to tax farmers, the wealthy financiers who ran the General Farm. The government could count on the regular revenue that the General Farm paid up front, and the financiers subsequently made huge profits. Many of these were ploughed back into government bonds, giving the monarchy the short-term credit on which it relied and providing still greater revenue to the investors. All this was, of course, at the expense of consumers. In the case of printed cotton cloth, produced mainly in India, the French government was primarily concerned about domestic textiles and until 1759 banned imports altogether. After that, it imposed a 25 percent duty.

Predictably, in an era of expanding international trade and rising demand for exotic commodities, the bans and high duties produced a thriving black market. Both European and American tobacco were smuggled in along the Atlantic coast and also across the inland borders, although there, because of the privileges enjoyed by Artois, Alsace, and Franche-Comté, the line of prohibition actually ran between these provinces and the rest of the kingdom, through some fairly wild terrain. Calico was smuggled through Atlantic and Mediterranean ports, but particularly across the eastern borders. Very often, customs officials and border authorities were complicit in smuggling operations.

Having described this situation, Kwass then devotes eight chapters, the bulk of the book, to the smuggler with the highest profile, Louis Mandrin. Based on a combination of abundant primary and secondary sources, this makes fascinating reading. The son of a local notable in Dauphiné, Mandrin

took the risk of investing in a military contract that failed, leaving him with considerable debts. Like many others in the borderlands, he and his brothers then turned to smuggling, but in their case also theft, and one of them was subsequently executed for counterfeiting. Louis himself was condemned to death following a violent incident that left two young men dead. He then moved across the border to Savoy and joined a band of smugglers who specialized in tobacco and calico. By mid-1754 he was heading up his own group and developing a very particular mode of operation, forcing agents of the General Farm to buy the tobacco he carried. His band targeted increasingly large centres, including Bourg-en-Bresse, where they even captured the intendant of Burgundy, whom Mandrin treated with great courtesy. Later they took Beaune and Autun. Kwass offers a very skilful and persuasive analysis of the band's moral economy: they always provided exactly the quantity of tobacco at the price they set, and always gave receipts for the money they received so that local agents could seek reimbursement from the Farm. They had no hesitation in using violence against soldiers and Farm guards, but Mandrin kept a tight rein on his men and allowed no pillaging except in retribution for attacks on them. In each town, they liberated smugglers held in the prisons, but refused to release those convicted of most other criminal offences.

All of this made Mandrin a legend, a kind of gentleman outlaw, represented favourably or at worst ambiguously even in some of the mainstream press. The circumstances of his capture and death contributed further to his stature as a folk hero. Eventually, alarmed not only by his exploits but by the wider incidence of violent smuggling, the government sent in the army, which finally caught up with the Mandrin's band but failed to stop them escaping across the border. Only with the help of spies did the French authorities finally track the outlaw down, and only by risking a diplomatic incident and crossing into Savoy did they manage to capture him. He was then brought before the feared Commission of Valence and broken on the wheel, a particularly brutal form of execution that he reportedly faced with great courage.

Kwass here sets the individual case in a wider context, outlining the escalating repression of smuggling across the first half of the century. Even nonviolent importing of contraband was now treated as a criminal offence, punishable by flogging and the galleys. When the ordinary law courts failed to impose draconian sanctions, the government, prompted by the Farmers General, created separate judicial commissions to deal with smuggling, from which there was no appeal. Valence, created in 1733, was only the first, and between the 1730s and 1789, they judged tens of thousands of smugglers, dealing out far more brutal sentences than the ordinary courts imposed for what most people considered more serious crimes.

The final two chapters of the book cover the treatment of smuggling in enlightened debates over legal reform. The system of tax farming was attacked by most political economists as a distortion of the market, and both reformers and conservative magistrates rejected the commissions as illegitimate courts. For many French people they had become a symbol of despotism by the reign of Louis XVI. Kwass then links this to the Revolution, pointing out that tax revolts were among the most frequent forms of rebellion in the late eighteenth century, including in the early 1790s, and that indirect taxation was the most widespread grievance raised in the cahiers of 1789. The people of Paris attacked the customs posts around the city before they assaulted the Bastille, provoking similar attacks on tollgates in other parts of France. One of the Revolution's achievements was eventually to free the French people from the regressive burden of indirect taxation, replacing it with payments based on wealth rather than on consumption.

The research on which all this is based is impeccable, and the writing throughout the book is excellent. Kwass is right to insist on the connections between the global and the local and between what are too often different branches of history, and he offers a model of how to link the social history of smuggling and tax rebellion, the economic history of production and consumerism, the intellectual history of political economy, and the political histories of repression and subsequent revolution. He perhaps sometimes overstates his case: the many historians who have in recent decades written on the French Atlantic may agree that "a global perspective is most sorely needed in French history" (p. 5), but they may also feel that they have been providing one for some time. More generally, I did not feel that the different arguments of the book all fitted together perfectly. The examples of calico and tobacco certainly support the case that "from a macrohistorical perspective, it

is possible to see that the simultaneous rise of global trade, the fiscal-military state, and European consumption produced turmoil not only in the colonies but also in the very heart of the metropole” (p. 11). Yet, the fact that this did not happen all over Europe, and that in France itself, equally important products such as sugar and coffee did not create the same kind of turmoil, suggests that there was something a little more contingent going on than this broad statement suggests. Had Louis XIV not chosen to tax tobacco and calico, would the situation still have arisen? The answer is probably that it would have, but because of other types of indirect taxation that were not so closely linked to global trade. Salt was the most important smuggled commodity, as it had been for a long time, and arguably it was the one that caused most resentment, both when it was taxed and when smugglers were pursued and punished. Yet it was not linked in the same way to global trade and was not a luxury product of the same type.

Kwass does not engage with Olwen Hufton’s arguments that after 1760 tobacco smuggling declined as a result of the repression, and that it became a monopoly of bandits who bore little resemblance to the myth of the gentleman outlaw.^[1] If its high point was indeed in mid-century, then is its link to later events so clear? I also could not help feeling that the very long treatment of Mandrin, while it obviously increases the book’s marketability, goes well beyond what is needed in order to demonstrate the author’s more general arguments. It is a great story, and Kwass’s analysis is sophisticated and entertaining, demonstrating a number of ways in which Mandrin’s career does bring to life the conflicts and brutalities encouraged by the taxes and their brutal repression. Yet, Mandrin was far from typical of the smugglers even of tobacco and of calico, and despite his lingering fame, I was not persuaded that he played much of a role in the unpopularity of the tobacco and calico taxes, or of tax farming more generally. Rather than devoting such a large chunk of the book to his career, the “processes, contingencies, and conflicts inherent in the history of global capitalism” (p. 363) might have been better demonstrated by examining a variety of cases across the century. Be that as it may, Kwass certainly challenges us to think more carefully about these connections.

For me, his key achievement in this book is to remind us of the aspect of government in eighteenth-century France that many ordinary people experienced as most oppressive and unfair. Indirect taxes that fell predominantly on the poor were enforced by private armies of Farm guards and by petty officials who threw their weight around and often conducted intrusive searches. During the last two reigns of the Old Regime, smugglers were pursued and punished with a severity that was, in most people’s eyes, out of all proportion to the offence they had committed. And everyone knew that the profits went to the already fabulously wealthy Farmers General. No wonder they were so hated. If anything persuaded people that government was in need of reform, it was this.

NOTE

[1] Olwen Hufton, *The Poor of Eighteenth-Century France, 1750-1789* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), especially pp. 304-5.

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