

Cocaine And Opiates During The War



Pervitin

TERRY GROSS, HOST:

I'm Terry Gross. There have been many books written about Hitler, but a new one called "Blitzed" focuses on something that's often in the background in biographies - Hitler's drug use, drugs including oxycodone and cocaine prescribed by his doctors. The book is also about how the German soldiers in World War II were amped up by methamphetamine, which enabled them to keep fighting for days without sleeping. The book is based in part on papers that were declassified in the past few years, as well as the private records of Hitler's personal physician, Dr. Theo Morrell, who kept track of the approximately 90 varieties of injections and pills he gave to Hitler, including treatments made from animal hormones. My guest is the author of "Blitzed," Norman Ohler. He's a German novelist and filmmaker. He planned to write a novel about drugs in the Third Reich, but after starting to do the research, he decided he wanted to write about the facts.

Norman Ohler, welcome to FRESH AIR. So just to set the context, before the war, Germany was already a major manufacturer and exporter of opiates. What were some of the drugs Germany was known for before the war started?

NORMAN OHLER: Basically, all the drugs we know today at one point were German products. Heroin, for example, was a patent by the Bayer Company. Cocaine was a trademark of the Merck Company in Darmstadt. It's surprising to see that Germany, at one point, was an inventor of drugs of all kinds.

GROSS: So Germany also manufactured a lot of methamphetamine under the trademark name Pervitin.

OHLER: The irony of the story is that when the Nazis took power in 1933, they imposed strict laws against drugs. They were the first German government to actually wage a war on drugs. But then, in the mid-1930s, there was a company in Berlin called Temmler which developed a new type of medicine - as they called it in the beginning - which was methamphetamine, which they branded as Pervitin. And Pervitin, methamphetamine - which we now know as crystal meth or that - at least it's the street name - was perfectly legal and was seen as a legitimate way of boosting your daily performance. It was like a potent cup of coffee.

GROSS: Hitler, you say, had a reputation for being anti-drug, for being a teetotaler and for being something of, like, a health fanatic, like a vegetarian. This was part of his myth. But you document that he was taking an extraordinary cocktail of drugs. What are some of the drugs that he took during the war years?

OHLER: Hitler met a doctor called Theo Morell in 1936, and Morell was famous for giving vitamin injections. And Hitler, with his healthy diet, immediately believed in this doctor and got daily vitamin injections for about five years and said to everyone that wanted to hear that Morell is elevating his healthy

diet onto a scientific level by giving him these vitamin injections.

But then in - as the war turned difficult for Germany in 1941 against Russia in the fall, Hitler got sick for the first time. He couldn't go to the military briefing, which was unheard of before in military headquarters, and Morell gave him something different that day. He gave him an opiate that day, and he also gave him a hormone injection. And Hitler, who had suffered from high fever, immediately felt well again and was able to tell his generals - to go to the meeting and tell the generals how the war should continue, how the daily operations should continue.

And he was really struck by this immediate recovery from this opiate, which was called Dolantine. That's a brand name of the opiate that he was taking that day. From that moment on, he asked Morell to give him stronger stuff than just vitamins. And we can see that from the fall of 1941 to the winter of 1944 Hitler's drug abuse increases significantly.

GROSS: So would you run through some of the drugs that Hitler took over the course of the war?

OHLER: I could identify three phases in Hitler's drug career.

The first one are the vitamins given in high dosages intravenously. The second phase starts in the fall of 1941 with the first opiate but especially with the first hormone injections.

Morell was really into giving steroids, animal products. He manufactured concoctions of animal organs in his own lab in occupied Czechoslovakia and gave those to Hitler. So these are, I guess, we could call them typical doping substances. He gave a lot of those between 1941 and 1943. And then in '43, the third phase starts, which is the heavy opiate phase. Before a decisive meeting with Mussolini, Morell gives Hitler a half-synthetic opioid, as it's called, with the brand name Eukodal. The active ingredient is oxycodone.

GROSS: So oxycodone is very addictive, and you tried to figure out, like, how much oxy did Hitler get. And you had access to Dr. Morell's notes and his journals. And he very carefully recorded all of the, you know, vitamins and shots that he gave Hitler. And he lists specifically 24 different injections of oxycodone under the name Eukodal. But you say every time - there were a lot of injections where it's just listed as X, and you make the assumption that every time the doctor writes X, it stands for the oxycodone. Why do you make that assumption? What can you back that up with?

OHLER: Actually, I don't claim that every time Morell writes X it's oxycodone. I examined a few instances carefully when he does write X and tried to figure out what's behind the X. For example, on July 20, 1944, Stauffenberg's bomb goes off in the fuhrer headquarters, the assassination attempt. And Hitler is quite severely injured in that incident. He has hundreds of splinters in his body that have to be extracted individually. His eardrums are blown, and he's quite badly shaken, actually, from that explosion that took place in the very room where he attended the military briefing, where he was leading the military briefing. And coincidentally, a few hours after the explosion, there was a meeting with Mussolini, who was arriving in the wolf's lair that very day.

GROSS: This was his headquarters.

OHLER: Yeah, the headquarters in East Prussia, which now is Poland. And obviously, everyone wanted to cancel the meeting with Mussolini because there's just been an assassination attempt, and the other officers, higher generals have been dying in that bomb attack. And Hitler was severely injured, but he called Morell to give him one of these shots that would immediately restore his health and make him function again as the dictator. And Morell administers a shot a few minutes after the devastating bomb had gone off, and Morell just writes X. And - but then another doctor comes in and takes out all these

splinters and - from Hitler's body and treats the blown eardrums and writes in his report later to the U.S. intelligence that he was absolutely amazed that Hitler felt no pain whatsoever. He said this is basically impossible that a person would be able to endure those treatments without showing any signs of pain. So for me, it's pretty clear that X given on that day was a strong painkiller and was most probably Eukodal because that was Hitler's preferred narcotic and painkiller. So I try to be quite careful in examining what that X stands for. It's kind of like detective work trying to figure out what is most plausible.

And then of course we see quite often after the bomb attack on July 20, that Morell explicitly writes Eukodal. For example, in September of 1944, there's a week when Hitler receives Eukodal every other day in the dosage of 20 milligrams intravenously, which is a very high dosage. And Eukodal, if you receive it on a regular basis, for example, every other day in such a high dosage, does make you dependent after two weeks.

GROSS: So you think Hitler got addicted to Eukodal, which is basically Oxy?

OHLER: Absolutely.

GROSS: Do you think Hitler or Morell understood that Hitler was addicted to some of the drugs he was taking?

OHLER: Hitler spent more time with Morell than with any other person. And the two men would talk quite openly about the drugs and medicines that Morell would give Hitler. Hitler was quite interested in the subject of medication, and thought he was an expert in it. I assume that Hitler kind of pushed it back in his mind what was actually going on. For him, it was important to be able to function at all times, to never have a day off because he distrusted anyone in his surroundings, especially the generals. He had to take all the military decisions.

He only came to the conclusion that Morell actually had made him addicted to opiates very late in the war, namely when he

fired Morell in late April, 1945. Several witnesses who were present in the bunker at that particular moment reported that Hitler shouted at Morell, you have been giving me opiates the whole time. Get out of the bunker and leave me alone. So it looks like it came as a revelation to Hitler that he's been drugging himself in a way through Morell the whole time.



Cocaïne

GROSS: And if you're just joining us, my guest is Norman Ohler. He's the author of the new book "Blitzed: Drugs In The Third Reich." And it's about the drug use - addictive drugs - that Hitler used and addictive drugs that were used by the German soldiers during World War II.

So getting back to this time after the assassination attempt when there was shrapnel in Hitler's body, his ear drums were seriously injured. And a different doctor, not Dr. Morell, but another doctor came to treat him and was shocked that Hitler could handle the pain. And you think it's because he was given Oxycodone before that by Dr. Morell.

So this second doctor after the assassination attempt treated Hitler with cocaine. So if Hitler had already been on Oxycodone and then was given cocaine at the same time for the wounds that he suffered after the assassination attempt, you said that's a

classic speedball. So what does is speedball, and what impact does it have on the person who's taking it?

OHLER: Speedball is a term for a drug combination of a very strong sedative like an opiate, which in Hitler's case would be the Oxy and a stimulant like cocaine. You have the so-called speedball effect, which creates very strong euphoria but is also very tiring obviously for the system. Hitler needed those highs to substitute his natural charisma, which he had had in the years prior, but which he had lost in the course of the war when the war started to look very bad for the Germans.

He needed something that would enable him to go into those meetings and radiate that sort of confidence that would convince his generals to stay on track, to not change tactics and to continue believing in the so-called endsieg, the final victory. Which was exactly Hitler's strategy, and which was a completely irrational strategy, and which his generals tried to change over and over again.

But over and over again, they were beaten in those military briefings. Or they were convinced during those military briefings by Hitler's optimistic way of presenting the situation, that in fact Hitler knew something that they didn't know, that Hitler had information that he obviously couldn't share with them, that he had perhaps a secret weapon up his sleeve that would change the war around in the last second. So there's many reports of people who took part in those military briefings in the second half of 1944 being completely surprised by the optimism of their Fuhrer.

GROSS: So just one more question about the assassination attempt. Why would cocaine have been the drug prescribed when Hitler was wounded from the assassination attempt?

OHLER: This doctor that came in, he was a ear, nose and throat specialist. His name's Giesing. He was questioned after the war by U.S. intelligence and made the statement that he was looking

for an anesthesia to calm Hitler's pain in his ear drums and in - basically in his head, and that he used cocaine. And it's not so unusual actually because there weren't so many drugs available to use for that effect.

So Giesing chose cocaine to numb Hitler's head pain. And there's a few conversations that he records that took place between Hitler and him between early August and October of 1944. Now, he gave Hitler cocaine about 50 times during that period of time. A few conversations that he records where Hitler talks about the effect that cocaine has on him.

He says things like, doctor, give me that cocaine again. It would take the pressure away that I have in my head. It will enable me to think clearly again. It will enable me to get rid of my headaches. So I suppose the cocaine, which also has a euphoric making effect, was also to Hitler's taste in a way.

GROSS: Is there any evidence that Hitler ever went through withdrawal from one of the addictive drugs that he was taking?

OHLER: What puzzles everyone who studies Hitler in those last months of his life is his shaking, his tremor. It can even be seen on some of the footage that's - that has been shot and has been released even by the Nazi propaganda machine where we can see Hitler shaking the hands of young kids, Hitler Youth, or very late in the war effort, and his whole body is shaking, and his hand is shaking. Without even shaking the hands of these kids, his hands are already shaking.

And some historians have claimed that this is the result of Parkinson's disease because Morell, in fact, administered a medicine against Parkinson's once in April 1945. So perhaps Hitler did suffer from Parkinson's. It's a bit hard to say in retrospect. What we can say is that Morell writes in his notes that he is lacking the drugs that he had been given Hitler in late 1944. In 1945, these drugs are not available to him anymore, or they're hard to come by. He writes about sending two of his

aides on motorcycles through bombed out Berlin with the prescriptions that he wrote for Hitler, trying to find pharmacies in destroyed Berlin that are still able to supply him and Hitler with drugs like Eukodal.

The fact is that the Merck Company in Darmstadt had been destroyed by British air raids in December 1944. So Merck was not able to produce Eukodal anymore, and Morell doesn't give any of the potent substances that he gave Hitler before - he doesn't give any of those in 1945, which leads to the conclusion that he didn't have those drugs anymore. And if you take oxycodone intravenously for some time and suddenly you're not able to get the drug anymore, you would certainly suffer from withdrawal symptoms.

So I believe that Hitler's deteriorating health in 1945, when he was in the bunker in Berlin, that wreck of a man that we can witness in certain photos or in that footage that came out of that time, is due to withdrawal symptoms.

GROSS: My guest is Norman Ohler, author of the new book "Blitzed: Drugs In The Third Reich." After a break, we'll talk about how German soldiers during World War II were given methamphetamine to keep them - to help them fight for several days without sleeping. And TV critic David Bianculli will review the new season of the FX series "The Americans," which is set during the Cold War.

GROSS: I'm Terry Gross back with Norman Ohler, the author of the new book "Blitzed" about how Hitler and his soldiers used addictive drugs. Hitler's doctor, Theo Morell, gave him approximately 90 different types of injections and pills, ranging from vitamins and animal hormones to opioids and barbiturates. Another doctor added cocaine to the brew. The German troops were given methamphetamine to enable them to fight for days without sleeping.

So methamphetamine seems to be the drug most associated with the German soldiers during World War II. And you write a little bit about Dr. Otto Rank, who was the director of the Research Institute of Defense Physiology in the Third Reich. And he wanted to find a way to stop fatigue in soldiers and came up with the idea of using meth. So can you talk a little bit about that decision on his part?

OHLER: Professor Otto Rank realized in 1938 that there was a medicine out there that was highly popular in the German civilian population. This was Pervitin, methamphetamine. And he read some of the studies that had been done in German universities on the effects of methamphetamine. And these studies concluded that methamphetamine reduces the fear level if given in high dosages and also reduces the need to sleep. And those two factors seemed very interesting to Rank for German soldiers or for soldiers in general because to reduce the fear level and to reduce the need for sleep could be two decisive factors that could give a soldier an edge in battle over the enemy.

So he started doing tests in 1938 and in 1939 on young medical officers in Berlin, gave them methamphetamine, gave them coffee and gave them placebos and compared the results. And he came to the conclusion that meth is a perfect drug for soldiers. And he suggested this to his superiors. He said, we should distribute meth officially among the troops. But he wasn't successful in the beginning.

And then the war against Poland started. And he wrote to all the medical officers in the field asking for reports on whether Pervitin was already being used and what were the effects. And he received a lot of reports from the Polish front. These reports are now archived in Freiburg in the German military archive. And they paint a vivid picture of how meth was beneficial to the German invasion of Poland. There's descriptions of soldiers being more able to carry out their job, as it was called, to stay

awake, to overrun the enemy, to stay fresh, to not be depressed about the job.

And so Rank compiled these positive findings and again went to his superiors and said, for the next campaign - which was the campaign against the West, the attack on Belgium, Holland and France - Pervitin should now be officially distributed. And this time it was. The German High Command issued a so-called stimulant decree in April of 1940 describing to the medical officers of the army how they should administer Pervitin to their men, how much they should...

GROSS: What was that description? Like, how frequently were the soldiers expected to take it? Was it only on the days of battles that they had planned on? Like, what was the strategy for taking Pervitin? And for anyone just tuning in, Pervitin was the commercial name for methamphetamine in Germany.

OHLER: The surprising strategy of the attack against the West was to move the tank troops and to move the whole army with the tank troops as its avant-garde through the Ardennes mountains in a very rapid fashion. And in order to do that, Pervitin was being used so the advance wouldn't stop within the first three days and three nights. The Western Allies didn't think the Ardennes mountains would be a threat because any army would have to rest at night and then could easily be destroyed in that mountainous terrain. But the German strategy was to not stop and to reach the French border city of Sedan after three days and three restless nights.

And 35 million tablets of methamphetamine were being distributed just before the advance and were being taken by the tank troops in regular intervals. Two pills had to be taken once the advance starts, and then after 12 hours another pill, and then after 12 hours another pill. This was written down in the so-called stimulant decree.

And it actually worked. The Germans reached Sedan after an amazingly short period of time, namely three days and three nights, while the French and British army were still in northern Belgium where they had actually expected the German attack.

And it took them away longer to head back to France than it took the German tank troops to already invade the country and to already head towards the channel and to cut off the Allied troops from the French mainland. This is the famous sickle cut, as Churchill described it.

GROSS: So I know that there were troops in the Allied forces and the American and British forces that used amphetamine. So do you have any sense of what the difference was between the German military use of methamphetamine and the American and British use of amphetamine?

OHLER: Actually, the Western Allies didn't use amphetamine at all in the beginning. When the Germans attacked on May 10, 3,500 trucks filled with red wine were making their way from the French wine regions to the north of Belgium to supply the French troops with red wine, which had been the drug of choice in the first world war. Later on, the French army concluded that the use of red wine was actually a disadvantage in the second world war because a soldier drunk on red wine has a disadvantage compared to a soldier drugged with methamphetamine, which makes a person completely alert and awake while red wine makes you rather tired. Three-quarters of a liter were administered to each French soldier per day.

So in the beginning, it was only the Germans using a potent pharmaceutical drug. But there were reports coming to the surface in the fall of 1940 that the Germans are using methamphetamine. And then also, German planes shot down over Great Britain were being examined and Pervitin was found. And then slowly, the British Royal Air Force started a program trying to evaluate whether a methamphetamine or an amphetamine use could also be beneficial to the British troops.

And they concluded after they did tests that they should use amphetamines.

So they reacted to the German methamphetamine approach by giving out amphetamines in 1941 and later on. So we can say that the Germans were kind of changing the game and the Allies then reacted to it. And also, the American forces, often coming through Great Britain into the war, were being handed these amphetamines or were being informed about the amphetamine use by the British army later on in the war and then also took amphetamines, and actually continued their amphetamine use also after World War II in the wars of the second half of the 20th century.

GROSS: If you're just joining us, my guest is Norman Ohler. He's the author of the new book "Blitzed: Drugs In The Third Reich." And we're going to take a short break and then talk some more.

GROSS: If you're just joining us, my guest is Norman Ohler, author of the book "Blitzed: Drugs In The Third Reich." And it's about drug use in the German military during World War II and addictive drugs and hormones that Hitler was administered by his doctor. So a question you ask in the book is so many historians have studied Adolph Hitler. Is it possible that there was a blind spot in a lot of historians in not noticing or not taking seriously enough the amount of drugs, addictive drugs that Hitler was prescribed by his personal physician Theo Morell?

I'd like you to elaborate on that question for us 'cause your interpretation is really different than other historians. And other - several other historians who have reviewed your book say that you're putting too much emphasis on the drugs that Hitler used, which we discussed earlier, and that you're exaggerating the amount of drugs that he used. So I'd like you to speak to that.

OHLER: It was important for me to work with a prominent historian while I was researching the book and while I was designing or developing the book. And I had the fortune to work with the late Hans Mommsen, who was a leading historian in Germany on National Socialism. And when I presented to him my findings about Hitler, he said that this explains Hitler's behavior or it partly explains or helps to understand Hitler better after the fall of 1941. He says all Hitler biographies have a problem explaining a change in Hitler that basically starts in the fall of 1941.

And this is when his heavy drug abuse basically starts. So he thought it was perhaps a missing puzzle piece and was an interesting angle that could give us a fuller picture of the so-called fuhrer. I recently realized that I actually have not examined even the full extent of Hitler's drug abuse because in "Blitzed" I don't even talk about the barbiturates that he took.

And I also don't talk about quite a few opiates that he takes before 1943. So I think in a way I do not exaggerate Hitler's drug abuse. Rather to the contrary, I think what happened in reality might have been even more extreme than what I explain in "Blitzed."



Heroïne

And I, in fact, do not understand why historians have overlooked this for so long. Because if you read the two prominent biographies on Hitler, one by Joachim Fest and one by Ian Kershaw, you can see that they both realize that Morell plays a very important role, both write about Hitler's fatal drug dependency or write that Morell gives Hitler an incredible amount of different drugs. But they don't get into the subject matter, they don't examine what really happened, what drugs had what effect and especially what effect that might have had on Hitler's decision-making.

GROSS: So let me read a quote to you. This is in the review of your book in The Guardian by Richard Evans. He writes (reading) Germans, the author hints, were not really responsible for the support they gave to the Nazi regime, still less for their failure to rise up against it. This can only be explained by the fact that they were drugged up to the eyeballs. And the excuses get even more crass when it comes to explaining the behavior of the Nazi leader.

And he's referring there to the fact that you say a lot of Germans were taking addictive drugs during the war, not just Hitler and not just the soldiers.

OHLER: So what is the argument by Evans?

GROSS: That he thinks that you're excusing the German...

OHLER: Oh.

GROSS: ...People and the Nazis by saying well, God, they were so drugged up. That's why they behaved the way they did.

OHLER: Yeah, I think this is a completely wrong argument that Evans is making because I make it quite clear in "Blitzed" that I don't excuse or that I don't try to diminish the responsibility of the German people or of Hitler. It's a principle in law that if you inebriate yourself in order to commit a crime which you have planned prior, it does not lessen your responsibility. And I think

I make - I write about that quite intensely in the book. So I think Evans is making a completely false claim. And we would have to ask him why he read it like that because it's not written like that.

GROSS: And I just want to quote Nikolaus Wachsmann, who is a historian who wrote, like, an 800-page book on the concentration camps. And he says, (reading) if any substance really fueled Nazi violence on the killing field and in the camps, then it was not Pervitin, it wasn't methamphetamine, it was alcohol, which Norman Ohler discounts altogether. What's your reaction to that?

OHLER: Well, I write in "Blitzed," in fact, that alcohol was the legal drug of choice of Nazi Germany. And I think it deserves its own book. I didn't want to go into alcohol because it is really a massive subject on its own.

GROSS: I don't mean to put you on the spot with this, but have you come across anybody in your extended family or friends or colleagues who had relatives during World War II in Germany who conveyed stories about the use of methamphetamine in the military?

OHLER: Well, I spoke to Rene Boll, who's the son of Heinrich Boll won the Nobel Prize for literature after the war. And he told me that his father first encountered Pervitin when he was a German soldier in World War II and that he also used it later on for writing his books. He would - after a stressful day, he would go into his office or his writing room at 8 at night and take a Pervitin and then be able to work until 2 or 3 at night and work on his books. Also the mother of my partner in Berlin told me that after the war, her parents were still used to Pervitin in such a way that they would put half a Pervitin into her morning cereal when she had a hard test in school in the '50s.

I spoke to the father of a friend of mine who was fighting under Rommel. My research showed that in Rommel's troops a lot of Pervitin was being taken. And I spoke with him at length about

the battle of Alamein in Africa, the decisive battle against the British. And towards the end, I asked him, so what about Pervitin? And before I asked him that question, he had been very forthcoming with information, very detailed in his memory. But when I asked him that question, he said that there's nothing to talk about here and that he would like to end the conversation. And he would - he was clearly uncomfortable with speaking about the subject.

I think it was sort of taboo for many German soldiers to actually talk about it because there's so many bad things that they were confronted with after the war in Germany that now to admit that they were also regular users of a hard, addictive drug might have been too much for this gentleman to talk with me about.

GROSS: Norman Ohler, thank you so much for talking with us.

OHLER: Well, thanks for having me. It was really a pleasure to speak with you about it.

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