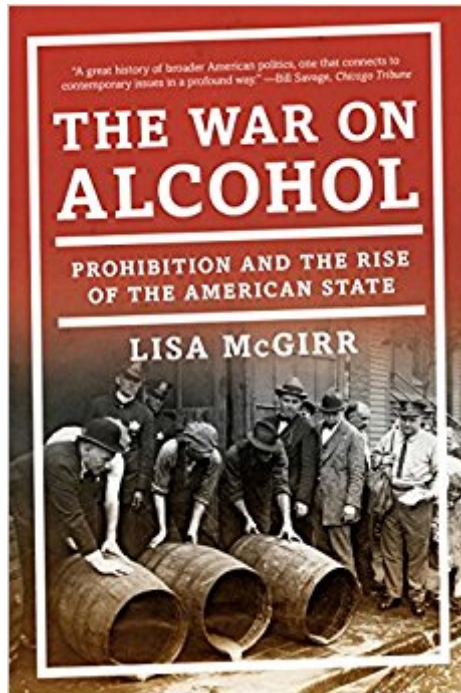




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The War On Alcohol: Prohibition And The Rise Of The American State



Synopsis

“[This] fine history of Prohibition . . . could have a major impact on how we read American political history.”
—James A. Morone, *New York Times Book Review*

Prohibition has long been portrayed as a “noble experiment” that failed, a newsreel story of glamorous gangsters, flappers, and speakeasies. Now at last Lisa McGirr dismantles this cherished myth to reveal a much more significant history. Prohibition was the seedbed for a pivotal expansion of the federal government, the genesis of our contemporary penal state. Her deeply researched, eye-opening account uncovers patterns of enforcement still familiar today: the war on alcohol was waged disproportionately in African American, immigrant, and poor white communities. Alongside Jim Crow and other discriminatory laws, Prohibition brought coercion into everyday life and even into private homes. Its targets coalesced into an electoral base of urban, working-class voters that propelled FDR to the White House. This outstanding history also reveals a new genome for the activist American state, one that shows the DNA of the right as well as the left. It was Herbert Hoover who built the extensive penal apparatus used by the federal government to combat the crime spawned by Prohibition. The subsequent federal wars on crime, on drugs, and on terror all display the inheritances of the war on alcohol. McGirr shows the powerful American state to be a bipartisan creation, a legacy not only of the New Deal and the Great Society but also of Prohibition and its progeny. *The War on Alcohol* is history at its best—original, authoritative, and illuminating of our past and its continuing presence today. 8 pages of illustrations

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Customer Reviews

“McGirr’s book pivots from being a very good, tightly focused history of Prohibition to a great history of broader American politics, one that connects to contemporary issues in a profound way.” - Bill Savage, Chicago Tribune

“In [McGirr’s] view, Prohibition was not a farce but a tragedy, and one that has made a substantial contribution to our current miseries. Nearly a century later . . . the legacy of Prohibition can be seen in our prisons, teeming with people convicted of violating neo-Prohibitionary drug laws. Many at the time viewed Prohibition as an outrage, and, in McGirr’s view, we are missing its true meaning if we are not outraged, too—and ready to resist its equally oppressive descendants.” - Kelefa Sanneh, The New Yorker

“McGirr’s important new book . . . leaves us with a Prohibition that looks less like an anomaly than an eerily prescient rehearsal for the current national war on drugs.” - John Fabian Witt, Wall Street Journal

“In this remarkable book, Lisa McGirr transforms our understanding of Prohibition and its legacy. Moving beyond familiar tales of speakeasies and gangland violence, she shows how this episode contributed to the expansion of the authority of the modern American state and the origins of mass imprisonment. No history could be more timely.” - Eric Foner, author of Gateway to Freedom

“McGirr’s book, fascinating and deeply researched, offers a startlingly fresh argument for why so many of our current problems—from the war on drugs to mass incarceration—grow out of Prohibition. Anyone who wants to understand the 1920s, 1930s, and 2000s should read this book.” - Jonathan Alter, author of The Defining Moment

“This is not just the best book ever written about the era of Prohibition; it is a landmark history of modern America. With splendid insight and illuminating details, Lisa McGirr demonstrates that the war on alcohol was the health of the state.” - Michael Kazin, author of American Dreamers

“In her revelatory new book, Lisa McGirr moves Prohibition from the gin-soaked edges of the Roaring Twenties to the heart of the American state.” - Kevin Boyle, author of Arc of Justice

“[A] fascinating account of Prohibition and its consequences, written with verve, depth, and imagination.” - Ira Katznelson, author of Fear Itself

“Lisa McGirr has given us an admirably fresh look at a supposedly shopworn subject. She convincingly demonstrates that the Prohibition era deserves to be taken seriously as the nursery of many stubbornly persistent practices, including a moralizing, meddlesome state that targets its punitive powers on the least-advantaged citizens.” - David M. Kennedy, author of Freedom from Fear

Lisa McGirr is professor of history at Harvard University. She is the author of *The War on Alcohol*

and an award-winning history of the new right, *Suburban Warriors*. She and her family live in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

"The social experiment that didn't work" is how many people remember or were taught about prohibition. In her wonderful book, *"The War on Alcohol"*, Lisa McGirr delves into what prohibition meant and what it also did to people. Perhaps the most underscored part of the book is what prohibition did to crime and the increased levels of arrest and incarceration that often followed. But the author relates how prohibition affected women and minorities...i.e. how many poor women had their own stills to garner extra income. The political shift from the working class from the Republicans to the Democrats is also well-documented. With President Hoover's wish to crack down harder on enforcement he left the door open to a whole new order of people who helped elect FDR in 1932. *"The War on Alcohol"* is superbly written and I highly recommend it.

Lisa McGirr is obviously well versed in the history surrounding the Prohibition. In that regard this book is good... and therein lies the only good. This book is poorly written. It is not unreasonably academic; it simply lacks good writing. Many excellent historians write academically rigorous books, but they manage to find the overarching story threading together all the people, places, and dates into a cohesive and captivating narrative. Doris Kearns Goodwin, Steven and Hugh Ambrose, David McCullough, S. C. Gwynne, and Ronald C. White are just a few of the examples that come to mind. Sadly, McGirr does not demonstrate the same skill with history. Rather, she somehow manages to take a topic and era with a plethora of intriguing material (gangsters, corrupt politicians, moralistic crusaders, oppressed minorities, powerful elites, and a watershed period in the development of the federal government), and she turns it into the stuff of boring undergraduate lecture halls with glassy-eyed students nodding off as the professor drones on with a ceaseless recitation of seemingly random facts. Bottom line: I was very disappointed in this book. It is well researched. However, McGirr has woefully failed to weave together a compelling narrative capturing more than the bare, dry facts of this period in history. If you want good history writing, check out any of the authors I mentioned above. If you want a GOOD read about the Prohibition era and its impact on American society, you'll have to look elsewhere. If you just want something that feels like a semester's worth of dry undergraduate lecture transcripts on the topic of the Prohibition, this is your book.

One of the most intelligence and informative books that I have ever read. It should be a textbook.

Excellent book for anyone studying or who likes to be informed about this period.

Very interesting insightful book. A lot of people should read it!

Lived up to expectations

I was in the fourth grade (in 1960) when I first heard about Prohibition. As soon as I did I made a beeline for Grandpa Rennhack's apartment (right above where Mom & I lived) and asked the soon-to-retire Rheingold Brewery worker how did he (and his father) fare between January 1920 and December 1933. "Gramp & me made near-beer, less than 0.5% alcohol. We drove it to flower stores, drug stores, pool halls. What happened to it after that didn't concern us." But Ms. McGirr reminds us it concerned a lot of people on both sides of one of the most unpopular laws in USofA history. Its effects are still felt in 2015. Most of the people who lived through Prohibition have passed on, ergo we need books like this one to tell the story of a seemingly unbelievable era...although I've no doubt Grandpa and Gramp could have added more to the story! Read this book as an introduction to the subject.

Lisa McGirr's *The War on Alcohol: Prohibition and the Rise of the American State* now joins Daniel Okrent's *Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition* as the two key works for shedding new light on Prohibition. Both are correctives for the clownish cartoon of a failed experiment that we often have in mind and that blocks us from looking deeper. Okrent helped us to understand the rise of Prohibition by linking it to movements such as women's suffrage. Now McGirr sheds light on its aftermath by linking it to the formation of the Democratic Party coalition that first rallied around Franklin Roosevelt and to the expanding role of the national government including in matters of incarceration and domestic wars, such as the War on Drugs".

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