

SUNDAY BOOK REVIEW

‘The War on Alcohol,’ by Lisa McGirr

By JAMES A. MORONE DEC. 30, 2015

My great-grandfather Vincenzo negotiated Prohibition by fermenting two barrels of wine a year. It was perfectly legal, he insisted. Vincenzo was lucky to be a New Yorker. In her fine history of Prohibition, “The War on Alcohol,” Lisa McGirr, a professor of history at Harvard, shows us that a poor Italian in Illinois or a black man in Virginia might very well have been jailed, shot or sentenced to a chain gang.

Chain gangs are a far cry from Prohibition’s lore, which imagines puritans winning a ban on liquor that America flatly rejected. Magazines gleefully published “bartender’s guides,” directing the thirsty to the nearest whiskey. The law spawned crime, shootouts and a kind of gangster romance embodied by Jay Gatsby. Worse, drinking became hip. Young people sported flasks and haunted speakeasies. Eventually, inevitably, the whole mess collapsed.

In reality, outlawing alcohol had many supporters and inspired more fervor than any reform except abolishing slavery. An extraordinary coalition conquered liquor. Women fought for protection from abusive husbands. Southern leaders grasped for more control over black lives. Progressive reformers attacked the workers’ saloons where machine politicians swapped favors for votes. Western populists hoped to tame the urban Gomorrahs. Methodists funded the Anti-Saloon League, which grew so formidable it inspired a new term of political art — the interest group. With congressional ratification of the Prohibition amendment in

1920, alcoholism plummeted; drinking levels did not rebound to pre-Prohibition levels for half a century. The “noble experiment,” as McGirr shows, reflected a deep heartland yearning to protect American health and morals from the rising tide of foreigners, cities, social problems and jazz.

Book Review Newsletter

Sign up to receive a preview of each Sunday’s Book Review, delivered to your inbox every Friday.

☒ Receive occasional updates and special offers for The New York Times’s products and services.

I’m not a robot

reCAPTCHA
Privacy - Terms

[See Sample](#)

[Manage Email Preferences](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

McGirr makes two major contributions to the historical record. First, she vividly shows how enforcers targeted immigrant and black communities. During the 1910s, immigration reached its all-time high — 41 percent of New Yorkers had been born abroad — and, suddenly, there were more people in the cities than the countryside. McGirr documents Prohibition’s nativist spasm by zooming in on Herrin, Ill., where labor violence transformed into a war on Italian drinkers. Incredibly, national - officials deputized the local Ku Klux Klan, which raided homes, rounded up violators and shot resisters. In the South, blacks faced impossible fines or hard time. McGirr has less to say about the racial tangle of segregation, lynching and Prohibition — still the untold story of the era.

Second, McGirr tells us that Prohibition gave birth to big government — an argument that could have a major impact on how we read American political history. The audacious effort to remake drinking habits required unprecedented authority: Federal police powers grew, jail construction boomed and courts turned to plea - bargaining and parole. “The War on Alcohol” might have delved more deeply into

the judiciary, which, over hundreds of cases, rewrote Fourth Amendment law (on search and seizure) and built a legal regime later deployed by the war on drugs.

But the newly muscular state, McGirr suggests, inspired heretical thoughts: An ambitious government might cast aside its anti-liquor campaign and, instead, combat poverty, empower labor or punish lynching. Prohibition spurred its victims into politics; they flocked to the Democrats when the party turned wet in 1928. Although Herbert Hoover doubled down on Prohibition and won in a landslide, the newly mobilized opponents were primed for Franklin Roosevelt — and active, liberal government — four years later.

How does Prohibition fit into the moralizing urge to discipline the poor and powerless? The question, as old as the Salem witch trials and as fresh as Black Lives Matter, lies beyond the book's scope. However, our present-day nativists would do well to heed McGirr's meticulous reconstruction of a time in which oppressed people fought back and helped build a coalition that dominated American politics for 40 years.

THE WAR ON ALCOHOL

Prohibition and the Rise of the American State

By Lisa McGirr

Illustrated. 330 pp. W.W. Norton & Company. \$27.95.

James A. Morone, the author of “Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History,” is the John Hazen White professor at Brown.

A version of this review appears in print on January 3, 2016, on page BR15 of the Sunday Book Review with the headline: Bootleg Politics .