

James J. Cooke. *Chewing Gum, Candy Bars and Beer: The Army PX in World War II*. Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2009. 186pp.

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The largest American department store chain, as the chief of the Army Exchange Service (AES) once put it, is certainly not Wal-Mart or any other famous civilian store; it is none other than the army PX (post exchange) which supplies GIs with American products while stationed away from home. In *Chewing Gum, Candy Bars and Beer: The Army PX in World War II*, military historian James J. Cooke traces the history, development and cultural value of the PX during the Second World War. Organised into eight chapters Cooke offers a thorough and compelling vision of how the PX became both a much-needed service for the American army and a characteristic feature of military life, drawing on official documents as well as soldiers' private correspondence. To emphasise the significance and the important labour of the PX during the Second World War, Cooke also goes back to the American Civil War and the First World War to include information on the forerunners of the PX.

Born with the double-fold goal of boosting the troops' morale and supplying "comfort items" to the American GIs stationed both on American soil or abroad, nowadays the PX is like an actual mall where items such as clothes, TV sets or other electronic devices can be found. To get to this point, Cooke traces its origins, growth and expansion as well as the problems faced during the Second World War to achieve the goal of providing soldiers with "a home away from home" (28). Cooke reviews the early forms of carrying supplies to soldiers in the battlefield during the Civil War, when sutlers (merchants who followed armies, selling them their goods) accompanied regiments, causing so much trouble in the process that some generals resented (or even outright banned) their presence. The July 1895 General Order establishing the creation

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of PXs tried to put an end to the problems of lack of supplies that had plagued soldiers during the Civil War; however, it led to a heated national debate over alcohol and whether alcoholic beverages should be served at PXs or not, at a time when the temperance movement was strong in the country. Far from being a minor concern, this was a debate that was going to plague the PX well into the Second World War.

The First World War proved to be the training ground for the PX, the mistakes made providing a useful lesson in how not to organize the PX in the future. The Second World War forced military authorities to adapt and reconfigure the PX, adjusting as they went. Cooke outlines the major problems the PX encountered; among these, shipment space, costs and delivery times caused severe logistic drawbacks. Problems were manifold, two of the most salient ones being that soldiers sent back home articles bought at the PX because of the rationing and the scarcity of these items back home, and the quandary of how to pack products so that they arrived in their intended destinations in good condition despite the scarcity of tinfoil and cellophane. None of these problems was a minor affair, for the PX's dealings often had far-reaching political implications and serious repercussions. For example, the shortage of cigarettes and beer due to less production caused strife between the government and manufacturers, while the GIs' preference for popular brands caused allegations of discrimination from off-brands manufacturers.

Cooke also analyses the impact that the PX had on European soil. Because of the scarcity in war-torn Europe, many PX items made their way to the black market. To prevent this, ration cards and the use of military Payment Certificates (also called military script) were implemented. To the Europeans, who had been suffering the ravages and miseries of war for several years by the time the first American soldiers arrived in Europe, the PX exercised an important role in shaping Europe's image of its American allies. The GIs, with their well-supplied PXs and their boasting of items unheard of in Europe for years, seemed to live in luxury and wealth.

All in all, Cooke makes a compelling case in presenting how little things that are apparently not essential to war matters, such as soldiers' having their favourite beer or cigarette brand, are important factors in boosting the troops' morale. It is to the strength of the book that it quotes from soldiers' letters home from the European front. Also, Cooke's writing style makes for fluid reading. However, although this well-researched book provides a detailed analysis of the PX, one misses a chapter on specifically how "women's items" were gradually included in the PX's catalogue so as to meet the

demands of the growing number of women serving the army in administrative capacities or as nurses and Service Club hostesses. While Cooke briefly touches upon this issue in several chapters of the book, a more detailed and thorough examination would have been much welcomed. Yet, despite this, *Chewing Gum, Candy Bars and Beer* makes an engaging read, not just for military historians but also for popular culture scholars and those interested in the cultural value and role of apparently trivial items such as chewing gum or candy bars in reinforcing a sense of national identity.