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UNDER THE INFLUENCE:

Drinking and Temperance Among Soviet Workers, 1900-1930

(with an addendum on drinking and sobriety in contemporary Russia)

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Executive summary

Despite the dramatic upheavals in Russia's political and economic structures from 1900 to the 1930s, significant threads of continuity ran through the daily lives of ordinary workers. Drinking patterns of the Russian working-class changed little with the revolutionary changes of the first decades of the twentieth century. Even though prohibition may have at first resulted in a decline in the consumption of alcohol, the working masses soon found ways to brew their own. Especially for women, bootlegging became an important cottage industry, supplementing incomes lost due to the war. Despite the Soviet government's best efforts, it could not stop the flow of illegal alcohol.

Neither dramatic change at the top, nor radical legislation, nor ideological constructions were sufficient to motivate workers to alter their traditional forms of sociability and fraternization. But perhaps more significantly, drinking rituals and practices retained their symbolic meanings through the years of war, revolution, civil war, and cultural revolution.

Drinking, more than most leisure activities, derives meaning from its social context and setting. Be it the camaraderie of “Cheers” or the lone drunk with a bottle, drinking (and, consequently, sobriety) are defining activities for the individual and society. Perhaps nowhere is this more true than in Russia, where vodka has evolved into a product of everyday consumption for ordinary people. The tenacity of traditional drinking cultures, firmly embedded in Russian popular culture, has thwarted social reformers’ best efforts for nearly two centuries.

The most sustained effort at controlling private drinking behaviors, and hence social relations, identities and cultural values of the working class, began in the 1920s, as Soviet authorities attempted to transform former peasants into efficient workers who shared their worldview and their commitment to building socialism. The industrial workforce in the 1920s formed what Moshe Lewin has termed a “quicksand society,” characterized by flux, uncertainty, and mobility – peasants became workers, workers became bosses, and bosses often found themselves dismissed from jobs or in jail.¹ All of this simultaneously altered some aspects of traditional working-class cultures and reinforced others, as workers sought to order their daily lives.

One of the primary cultural traditions of both workers and peasants was the shared experience of drinking as an important symbolic vehicle for affirmation of the social relations of community that formed the basis of Russian preindustrial society. For men, not to drink was tantamount to a complete withdrawal from a socially meaningful existence. At the same time, the primary working-class behavior that Soviet authorities deemed to be old, uncultured, and “bourgeois” was alcoholism. Newspapers and the trade union press throughout the 1920s abound with descriptions of drunkenness as “bourgeois degeneration”, and as evidence of *meshchanskii* (middle-class) or *nepovskiy* (NEP-ish) decay.

¹Moshe Lewin, *The Making of the Soviet System*, (New York, 1985), p. 221. See also, William Rosenberg and Lewis Siegelbaum, eds., *Social Dimensions of Soviet Industrialization* (Bloomington, 1993). On industrial policy and social conflicts, see David Shearer, “The Language and Politics of Socialist Rationalization,” *Cahiers du Monde russe et soviétique*, vol. 32, no. 4 (October-December 1991), pp. 581-608.

According to Soviet rhetoric, a socialist worker was a sober worker.² And according to working-class cultural norms, *real* workers drank.

This emphasis by leading Bolsheviks on sobriety as an essential cultural value emerged only after the revolution. In prerevolutionary years, the Bolsheviks paid relatively little attention to the problem of drunkenness. While criticizing the state's exploitation of the vodka trade for fiscal purposes, most party commentators were too absorbed by the larger struggle for social revolution to concentrate on temperance. Within months of the revolution, however, the Bolsheviks had dramatic evidence of alcohol's effect on crowds. In November and December 1917, a series of riots, sparked by struggles over control of liquor supplies, by soldiers and civilians alike rocked Petrograd. Soldiers garrisoned in other towns raided shops and warehouses for alcohol in drunken orgies that lasted days. In many cases rioters maimed and killed many people and destroyed much property before loyal Red Guard units could restore order.

It is not surprising, therefore, that in 1918 the Council of People's Commissars (*Sovet narodnykh komissarov* or Sovnarkom) nationalized the liquor industry, declaring the existing stock of alcoholic beverages state property.³ The following year the new government decided to continue prohibition, introduced in 1914 by the tsarist government, by passing a law entitled "On the banning of the manufacture and sale of spirits, alcoholic drinks, and other products containing ethanol within the territory of the RSFSR."⁴ The law provided for strict punishment and imprisonment of anyone who made, sold, or traded in illicit spirits.

While, in principle, the Soviet government seemed to favor prohibition, its "temperance" legislation fit into the larger struggle for grain procurement that marked the period known as War

² Leon Trotsky, "Not by Politics Alone," in *Problems of Everyday Life* (New York, 1973), p. 20.

³ *Sobranie uzakonenii*, 1918 82\866, 26 October 1918.

⁴ Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Ekonomiki (Russian State Archive of the Economy, RGAE), f. 7733, op. 1, d. 4433; *Sobranie uzakonenii RSFSR*, 1920, no. 1-2, p. 2; and *Dekrety sovetskoi vlasti* (Moscow, 1957), vol. 7, pp. 34-38.

Communism, 1918-1921. In response to a desperate food-supply crisis, local soviets began requisitioning grain, sometimes brutally, from peasants who refused to sell it for depreciating currency, turning it instead into the more profitable *samogon* (homebrew).⁵ Consistent with the militancy exhibited in this period, the law identified *samogonshchiki* (bootleggers) as enemies of the revolution, charging them with sabotaging the state's food-supply policies. Whatever the state's precise aims and goals in legislating prohibition, the effect made grain alcohol legally unavailable to the masses. While some of the more radical vanguard workers welcomed these new laws, there is no evidence to suggest that prohibition received widespread popular support from ordinary male working-class Russians, for whom alcohol played a central role in their social, cultural, and economic lives. The *narod* (common people) most likely viewed prohibition as one more obligation imposed from above.

The lower classes soon found various ways around prohibition -- most commonly, and most troublesome for the government, developing and expanding a thriving illegal brewing industry. Except in some of the more remote areas of Siberia, workers and peasants, prior to 1914, had no significant tradition of illegal domestic brewing.⁶ Peasant women legally distilled beer and *kvas* as a common household skill, and members of the gentry engaged in a modest amount of *legal* domestic distilling, but not until the introduction of prohibition did *samogon* begin to make an appearance.

Throughout the 1920s home brewing remained an integral part of both rural and urban life despite the regime's best efforts to curb the flow of illegal spirits.⁷ For example, in 1923 in Kharkov guberniia, local militia launched an all-out crack-down on bootleggers. From January to June, the militia

⁵Rossiskii tsentr khraneniia i izucheniiia dokumentov noveishei istorii (Russian Center for the Preservation and Study of Documents on Recent History, RTsKhIDNI), f. 17, op. 10, d. 139, l. 33.

⁶David Christian, "Prohibition in Russia, 1914-1925," unpublished manuscript (1991), p. 8. [I am grateful to the author for making a copy of this available to me.]

⁷For discussion of the regime's campaign against *samogon*, see Helene Stone, "The Soviet Government and Moonshine, 1917-1929," in *Cahiers du Monde russe et sovietique*, XXVII (3-4), 1986, pp. 359-380, and Neil Weissman, "Prohibition and Alcohol Control in the USSR: The 1920s Campaign Against Illegal Spirits," in *Soviet Studies*, XXXVIII, no. 3, 1986, pp. 349-68.

arrested 5,373 people and confiscated 2,310 stills and 4,401 *vedros* (one *vedro* is equal to 3.25 gallons) of homebrew.⁸ In July alone, authorities in Kharkov arrested 3,165 bootleggers seizing 695 *vedros* of samogon. That same month 3,777 were arrested for drinking samogon and 1,925 for selling it.⁹ Sentences ranged from 140 days to one full year in jail plus confiscation of all the offender's property.¹⁰

The harsh penalties for illegal brewing and selling of alcohol did not deter rural *samogonshchiki* (bootleggers) from streaming into the cities to sell their wares. Vendors sold *samogon* in factories, in private homes, and openly in small restaurants, cafes, and shish-kebab stands. It was even often displayed on restaurant shelves as "lemonade" in an unsealed bottle. In Moscow one could buy it in the markets at any booth by "requesting 'lemonade' and winking at the sales clerk meaningfully."¹¹ At restaurants in Tomsk, vendors did not even bother to disguise their wares.¹²

For the lower classes, and especially working-class women, distilling was an important cottage industry that often replaced lost incomes owing to unemployment or the death of a spouse. For example, in 1922 one-third of those arrested in Moscow for illegal distilling were unemployed urban workers. In Tomsk, most illegal brewing was done by unemployed and under-employed women, usually single mothers, or widows trying to feed themselves and their families.¹³

While illegal distillation and sale of grain alcohol may have boosted the incomes of many lower-class Russians, the economic impact of prohibition on the government was tremendous. Not only did

⁸Tsentralnii derzhavnii arkhiv vishchikh organov vlasti ta upravlinia Ukrainsi (Central State Archive of Organs of Higher Power and Administration of Ukraine, TsDAVOVTU), f. 6, op. 1, del. 1955, l. 13.

⁹Kommunist, no. 196 (13 August 1923), p. 3.

¹⁰Derzhavnii arkhiv Kharkivskoi oblasti (State Archive of Kharkov Oblast, DAKhO), f. R-203, op. 1, del. 1085, l. 83.

¹¹Pravda, 6 October 1922; 13 October 1922; 5 January 1923; and 13 October 1923.

¹²Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Tomskoi Oblast (State Archive of Tomsk Oblast, GATO), f. R-279, op. 1, del. 127, l. 1.

¹³Tomskoi oblastnoi tsentr dokumentatsii noveishei istorii (Tomsk Oblast Center for the Documentation of Recent History, TOTsDNI), f. 76, op. 1, del 105, l. 7; GATO, f. R-279, op. 1, del. 127, ll. 1-3.

prohibition fail to keep Russians from drinking, as evidenced by the spread of *samogon*, but it cost the government millions in lost revenues. The tsarist government had instituted prohibition as part of its mobilization for war in 1914. The previous year, the population had consumed 104.6 million *vedros* (or 339.95 million gallons) of state-produced vodka, yielding just over 953 million rubles or twenty-six percent of total state revenues.¹⁴ By the 1920s, many Soviet authorities thought that reviving the state alcohol trade would help the state attain financial solvency while simultaneously gaining a measure of control over illegal brewing. However, the idea of the new socialist state producing and selling alcohol for any reason was contrary to the utopian idealism characteristic of the period and sparked heated debates among party leaders. In the end, financial considerations prevailed and in August 1921 the new government reversed its policy and legalized the sale of all wines. Six months later it legalized the sale of beer thereby beginning the slow retreat from prohibition, which continued during the early years of the New Economic Policy (hereafter NEP). In January 1923 the state legalized the production and sale of twenty-percent liquor, and by 1 October 1925, it began making and selling forty-percent vodka marking the end of prohibition and the reintroduction of the state liquor monopoly.

Even prior to the reintroduction of the liquor monopoly, party visionaries focused their attention on the problem of working-class drinking. Given the seemingly more crucial and immediate problems facing the new regime, this attention to drinking might seem misplaced, unless viewed within the context of state-building. The Bolsheviks assumed that the industrial working class would provide the necessary social support for the new revolutionary regime, the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” just as it had for the most part supported the October Revolution. In the midst of postrevolutionary social disintegration, however, the Bolsheviks found themselves, at least temporarily, the vanguard of a fragmented and nearly

¹⁴G. Y. Sokolnikov, *Soviet Policy in Public Finance, 1917-1928* (Stanford, 1931), p. 39. These figures are difficult to verify. However, Sokolnikov, who was head of the Commissariat of Finance in the early Soviet government and is credited with being the organizer of the State Bank in 1921-22 as well as the author of the currency reform of 1923-24, presents the most coherent and consistent figures for the period. His data correspond with data in Khromov, *Ekonomicheskoe razvitiye*.

nonexistent class.

At the beginning of 1917, Russia's industrial working class (including workers in the non-Russian regions) comprised about three and a half million members, with an additional million railroad workers.¹⁵ By the end of the Civil War in 1921, the total number of industrial workers had dropped to just over one million.¹⁶ Moreover, with the beginning of industrial recovery in 1923, waves of new workers from the villages and peasant *otkhodniki* (peasants who left the village for the towns and factories in search of work during the agricultural off-season) joined the industrial labor force, radically altering the social composition of the working class and "ruralizing" the cities.¹⁷ In fact, peasant migrants and *otkhodniki* composed the majority of workers who filled the expanding employment opportunities under the NEP.

In the early 1920s, therefore, the issue of drinking became critical for the Soviet state as the Bolsheviks came face to face with their number one quandary: workers did not act right. The behavior of the new working class, especially those fresh from the village, did not meet Bolshevik expectations: they came late to work, if at all; they broke their machines; they ignored the authority of bosses; and above all, they drank themselves into oblivion.

Alcohol lubricated many shop floor customs and dominated life after work as well. Drinking among workers was especially troublesome for state administrators because they saw traditional drinking habits colliding with the imperatives of an industrialized modern society. Rural drinking patterns, especially the peasant custom of drinking oneself into oblivion (*zapit'*), found its way into the culture of the new industrial workforce. The time-discipline and labor-discipline that industrial labor demanded

¹⁵E. G. Gimpel'son, *Sovetskii rabochii klass. 1918-1920* (Moscow, 1974), p. 80.

¹⁶A. G. Rashin, "Dinamika promyshlennykh kadrov SSSR v 1917-1958 gg." in *Izmeneniia v chislennosti i sostave sovetskogo rabocheego klassa* (Moscow, 1961), p. 9.

¹⁷Here I am referring to an argument by Moshe Lewin in Lewin, *The Making of the Soviet System*. See also, William Chase, *Workers, Society, and the Soviet State* (Urbana, 1987); Hiroaki Kuromiya, "The Crisis of Proletarian Identity in the Soviet Factory, 1928-29," *Slavic Review*, 44, no.2 (Summer 1985), pp.280-97.

were alien and oppressive concepts that many new workers from the countryside found difficult to assimilate. These new workers frequently missed work and regularly resorted to drinking, often even before and during work. In 1926, a letter from the Central Committee of the Communist Party (TsK VKP[b]) to all party organizations blamed the fall of labor discipline directly on “the influx of new workers into industry, especially those from the countryside. Due to their drunkenness and mischief, these new workers exceed the limits of traditional carelessness and poor discipline.”¹⁸

But it was not only new workers who drank. Frequenting the neighborhood tavern remained a regular social ritual for many veteran workers (and party members). Especially on paydays, the beer halls and taverns were full of workers, who often drank up their entire paychecks. Complaints about workers’ drunkenness appeared frequently in the press beginning in 1923. The following from the newspaper *Rabochaya gazeta* (*Workers’ Gazette*) portrays a typical tavern scene on payday:

Accordions screech and corks pop. The entire shop is drunk. In one corner stumbles the boiler room staff, in the other the furnace workers. There is nothing but noise and fights. And in the street there are two lines. One – male – waits for free tables, the other – female – waits for their drunken husbands to come out.¹⁹

Perhaps more importantly for the new regime, whose political authority was still tenuous, the worker-elite, those skilled workers who entered the factories before 1917, also failed to help the party create a sober culture. They continued to come to work drunk, and often they drank during working hours from bottles smuggled in and hidden in machinery, garbage cans, and rafters. For example, in 1927 at the Krasnoe Sormovo factory in Moscow, thirty-three percent of all workers were written up for either drinking on the job or coming to work drunk. Of these, over half were highly skilled workers.²⁰

Moreover, older workers often demanded payment in vodka from new workers before they

¹⁸RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 85, d. 347, l. 1.

¹⁹*Rabochaya gazeta*, no. 280 (1924), p.2.

²⁰Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (State Archive of the Russian Federation, GARF), f. 5515, op. 20, d. 7, l. 117.

would train them. As one new worker complained: “If you want to begin something, if you want to learn or understand... vodka is necessary.... If you don’t play along, you can study for two hundred years, but nothing will ever get started.”²¹ Individual apprenticeship was everywhere linked to this type of payment – trainees had to “pay what they must and keep quiet.”²² Trainees were also advised to make a contribution to the trainers’ liquor cabinet unless they wanted to be reported to the factory committee for receiving unofficial recruitment and training.²³ When a highly skilled worker at the Lenin factory in Saratov was promoted to overseeing the training of unskilled recruits, he used his position to stay drunk at work and extract vodka from his charges, where previously he had been a model worker.²⁴ So widespread was this phenomenon that in 1928 *Golos tekstilei* (*Textile Workers’ Voice*) published cartoons showing new recruits approaching a mill loaded down with vodka and food while members of the factory committee looked on through their fingers.²⁵

Naturally, not all workers extracted vodka for training or drank at work, but there is much evidence to suggest that skilled workers and foremen (promoted from the ranks of skilled workers) could more or less drink with impunity on the shop floor. In 1928-29, the Department of Moral Statistics of the Central Statistical Bureau (Tsentral’noe statisticheskoe upravlenie, TsSU) conducted extensive investigations of workers’ consumption of alcohol, broken down by region, industry and skill level.²⁶ According to these surveys, per capita consumption of vodka among skilled workers in Kharkov, Moscow, and Saratov averaged between eighteen to twenty-two bottles a year and, for unskilled workers,

²¹ *Komsomol’skaya pravda*, 27 February 1927, p. 3.

²² *Rabochii krai*, 11 March 1927, p. 7.

²³ *Komsomol’skaya pravda*, 27 February 1927, p. 3.

²⁴ Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Saratovskoi oblasti (State Archive of Saratov Oblast, GASO), f. 616, op. 1, d. 222, l. 3.

²⁵ *Golos tekstilei*, 19 May 1928, p. 1.

²⁶ Much time and debate went into formulating the wording of the questionnaires and how the surveys would be conducted. See, RGAE, f. 1562, op. 1, d. 490, ll. 1-194.

between twenty-two and thirty-seven bottles a year.²⁷ These figures are misleading, however, because they do not take into account consumption of *samogon*. Further, average consumption levels were estimated on the entire population of a given region, including women, children, and the very old. Obviously, real consumption levels for individual workers were much higher.

Until the mid-1930s, however, skilled workers were rarely punished or received light reprimands for drinking on the job. For example, in 1933, the head electrician at the Mikhalkovskii combine came to work drunk and promptly fell asleep. He therefore did not notice that one of the cooling pumps was malfunctioning, and it burned up. Despite the fact that the factory was without water and could not operate for two days, he was not reprimanded.²⁸ At one regional factory committee meeting in Moscow, a member of the factory committee cited five highly skilled workers who were repeatedly written up for being drunk at work, but the factory could not fire them because their skills were needed. Noting that, by contrast, unskilled workers or workers with ties to the countryside were regularly fired for coming to work drunk, he argued that production in the factories would stop altogether if skilled workers were fired for drunkenness.²⁹

In 1928 at several *raikom* (regional party committee) meetings in Kharkov, the focus was the “systematic drunkenness” of older party members heading factory party cells.³⁰ These drunken vanguard workers established systems of patronage in the factory and were not disciplined, not only because their skills were valuable, but also because they were allied with the administration in what the party termed “protectionist policies.”³¹ This complaint was echoed repeatedly in trade union meetings and noted in

²⁷RGAE, f. 1562, op. 15, d. 607; f. 1562, op. 15, d. 594. For per capita consumption of all alcoholic drinks by village and city, see RGAE, f. 7971, op. 2, d. 662.

²⁸GARF, f. 5515, op. 20, d. 28b, l. 10.

²⁹GARF, f. 5469, op. 13, d. 419, l. 31.

³⁰RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 26, d. 873, l. 89; f. 17, op. 26, d. 878, l. 6; f. 17, op. 26, d. 860, l. 33.

³¹GARF, f. 5515, op. 20, d. 7, ll. 19-20.

factory reports by the Workers' and Peasants' Inspectorate (RKI, Narodnyi kommissariat rabochekrest'ianskoi inspeksi).³²

Aside from drinking in the workplace, workers also drank quite frequently in public parks, dining halls, co-operatives, private homes, in the streets, and even workers' clubs. Although there is no comprehensive list of places that sold alcohol, there is abundant evidence that many male workers drank in various public areas despite official regulations prohibiting the consumption of alcohol there. For example, workers' clubs, intended by the regime to be centers of culture and enlightenment, were constantly besieged by drunken workers, or were passed up by workers on their way to the beer hall.³³ In one account, two metalists who had been excluded from the trade union arrived at a club, ate, drank vodka, and threatened to shoot anyone who disturbed them.³⁴ Similarly, a trade union paper noted that drunken youths frequently visited the club and started fist-fights when asked to leave.³⁵

Dining halls also were places where male workers engaged in rough and drunken sociability, despite the administrations' attempts to prevent this. In 1924, *Vestnik profsoiuzov* (Trade-Union Herald) complained that the majority of dining halls were gradually being converted into beer halls.³⁶ In Kharkov, where the factory party cell had banned the sale of beer in the dining hall, workers nonetheless brought their own. The *Khar'kovskyi proletarii* (Khar'kov Proletariat) ran a cartoon under the caption, "The Dining Hall as It Really Is". The cartoon depicted a scene of chaos with drunken workers retching

³²GARF, f. 5469, op. 13, d. 419, l. 31; f. 5515, op. 20, d. 7, ll. 19-20, 27; f. 374, op. 15, d. 58 (2), ll. 83-84; RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 85, d. 307, ll. 85-86.

³³*Saratovskie izvestia*, 28 January 1928, p. 3; *Povelzhskaya Pravda*, 24 July 1928, p. 6; *Trezvost' i kul'tura*, no. 1, (July 1928), p. 11; *Krasnyi treugol'nik*, 21 December 1929, p. 4. See also Laura Phillips, "Everyday Life in Revolutionary Russia," PhD dissertation (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1993), pp. 219-20; and John Hatch, "Hangouts and Hangovers: Workers' Clubs during NEP," unpublished paper for the Workshop on Soviet Popular Culture.

³⁴*Trezvost' i kul'tura*, no. 1 (July 1928), p. 11.

³⁵*Krasnyi treugol'nik*, 21 December 1929, p. 4.

³⁶*Vestnik profsoiuzov*, no. 8 (August 1924), p. 95.

on the floor, others passed out on tables, still others engaged in drunken fights.³⁷

While these examples were most probably exaggerations, they highlight the conflictual world of the worker in the 1930s. The implied condemnation of workers' drinking was a clear refutation of worker values and culture, whether former peasant or older skilled worker. That this challenge to their traditional way of life by representatives of the workers' state was met by resistance demonstrates that workers resented such perceived challenges to their rights as workers and as individuals to exert their own wills in structuring their leisure and social institutions.

While perhaps not actually drinking at the same table or bench, or even at the same pub, club or dining hall, the use of these places by both new and old workers demonstrates workers' passive and outright resistance to the regime's calls for workers to adopt a sober lifestyle. It also implies a form of common male worker solidarity against what they perceived to be unjust demands made on them by the state: to spend their work time in the sober creation of socialist production and their leisure in sober, cultured entertainment. The rejection of official values in favor of peasant or prerevolutionary worker culture amounted to an act of self-definition for the members of the industrial workforce. When they went to the beer hall instead of the club, they were rejecting the official model of proper behavior for workers. Such activity not only reflected their culture, but served to reaffirm and consolidate their sense of social identity.

Despite the dramatic upheavals in Russia's political and economic structures, significant threads of continuity ran through the daily lives of ordinary workers. Overall consumption patterns of the Russian working-class changed little with the revolutionary changes of the first decades of the twentieth century. Even though prohibition may have at first resulted in a decline in the consumption of alcohol, the working masses soon found ways to brew their own. Neither dramatic change at the top, nor radical legislation, nor ideological constructions were sufficient to motivate workers to alter their traditional

³⁷*Ibid*, p. 7.

forms of sociability and fraternization. But perhaps more significantly, drinking rituals and practices retained their symbolic meanings through the years of war, revolution, civil war, and cultural revolution.

Addendum: drinking and sobriety in the 1990s

Drinking is an integral part of Russian life, and Russians' consumption of alcohol is legendary. Historically, alcohol abuse has had staggering effects on Russia's social order, public health, and economy. But alcohol has also been a source of much wealth for the Russian state. Beginning in the 17th century, first the tsarist, then the Soviet governments relied on substantial revenues from the state monopoly on the production and sale of alcohol. Therefore, it has been with reluctance that the state periodically cracked down on various aspects of excessive alcohol consumption, and the results have been mixed.

Faced with rising alcohol-related crime and absenteeism, and falling health standards, the Gorbachev leadership in 1985 launched a nation-wide drive against alcoholism that rivaled the anti-alcohol campaign of 1928-32. The government reduced vodka production and raised the price, limited the hours of state-run liquor stores, established a temperance society, and mounted an aggressive propaganda campaign spearheaded by the temperance journal, *Trezvost' i kul'tura*. All these measures had already been unsuccessfully employed by the Stalinist regime in the late 1920s; in the 1980s, the anti-alcohol campaign had catastrophic effects. Sugar, used in the production of moonshine, disappeared from the stores as bootlegging became epidemic; thousands of people died from drinking brake fluid, industrial alcohol, and other vodka substitutes; the government lost nearly two billion rubles in revenues; and the population, dissatisfied by the lack of consumer goods, became further angered by the abrupt unavailability of alcohol. Within two years the state backed away from its ill-fated crusade, and by 1990

Russians were drinking more than ever before.

With privatization of the Soviet economy, the state abandoned its monopoly on alcohol in 1992. Vodka became more available and cheaper, and annual per capita consumption of alcohol rose to an estimated sixteen liters. This figure is misleading, however, since it is extrapolated over the entire population. Average consumption levels for adult males is actually much higher – one bottle of vodka every two days.

In addition to increased consumption, the dissolution of the alcohol monopoly had other serious consequences. Without state involvement, there are no controls on the quality of vodka produced for sale to the public. By 1994 nearly half the alcohol for sale by street vendors was illicit and contained toxic additives such as ether, lacquer polish, and the like. Alcohol-related deaths rose from 176 per 100,000 in 1988 to 500 per 100,000 in 1995. There has been a dramatic increase in deaths due to frostbite, exposure, drowning, and accidents of persons in a state of inebriation. Male life expectancy has fallen from 56.7 in 1994 to 47 in 1999.

Ironically, as alcohol-related illness and problems increase, the state has become less able to respond to them, owing to the financial crises plaguing the Russian government. Under the Soviet state, treatment measures were punitive rather than rehabilitative. Defined in the 1920s as a petit-bourgeois holdover from the capitalist past, alcoholism and its treatment were complicated by political and ideological considerations. In the 1930s, Stalin declared that socialism had been achieved and therefore the USSR no longer suffered from petit-bourgeois problems such as prostitution, drug addiction, and alcoholism. For the following fifty years, alcoholism per se did not exist – there were cases of mental illness that caused the afflicted to drink, but the primary treatment was either for criminal drunkenness or for insanity.

There were basically three institutions for dealing with alcoholics. Local drying out

stations – jail cells designed for short-term internment until the offender sobered up – were the most common. Repeat offenders landed in the infamous LTPs – prisons where the hopelessly addicted could languish for years. These were appallingly dirty and often lacked heat, hot water, and proper sanitation. Inmates did not receive treatment or medical attention, and many died “recovering” from abusive drinking. In larger cities, the Soviet state ran treatment centers, usually located in a mental hospital ward. These centers employed a combination of aversion therapy and drug therapy that was highly ineffectual.

Not until Gorbachev introduced *glasnost*' was a medical model of addiction employed in defining and treating alcoholism in some new treatment centers. In the mid-1980s, western-style alcoholism treatment centers emerged in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Kiev. Most of these were partially funded through the Ministry of Health in conjunction with funding from American or European institutes or individuals. Initially patients paid very little, but as the 1980s gave way to the financially troubled 1990s, patient costs soared. By 1993 state funding ended, and many centers had to downsize, close, or switch to out-patient treatment. Those that were cost-effective, or funded entirely by private individuals or foreign interests managed to survive the 1990s. Following the economic collapse of August, 1998, only four private treatment centers remained in Moscow, one in Kiev, and three in St. Petersburg.

Other organizations have stepped in to fill the gap. The Russian Orthodox Church has become closely involved with the treatment of alcoholism, providing moral and spiritual assistance for the rehabilitation of heavy drinkers. The Church also began to re-establish “sobriety fraternities.” Prior to the revolution of 1917 there had been over 2,000 such fraternities. A change in the law in 1990 gave the Church the legal right to once again engage in this kind of charitable work. The Seventh Day Adventists are also quite active in combating

alcoholism, especially in Ukraine, where government measures are lacking.

The most wide-spread and perhaps most effective civic organization involved with the treatment of alcoholism is Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). After decades of resistance, the Soviet government in 1982 allowed the first delegation of American AA members to visit Russia and establish the first public AA meeting in Moscow. After seven years of false starts and overcoming obstacles, the first Russian AA group, the Moscow Beginners, was founded in 1989.

In the ten years since the founding of the Moscow Beginners group, AA has spread tremendously. In 1999, Moscow reported over 20 registered groups with more than 1,000 members. St. Petersburg has twelve groups, Kiev seven, and AA has even made it to Siberia with three groups in Tomsk and five in Novosibirsk. Moreover, since the 1980s, drug addiction has been on the rise as well, with heroine being the most popular among 20-year-olds. The sister program to AA, Narcotics Anonymous for drug addicts, has also taken root in the larger centers throughout the CIS. Tomsk even boasts the first treatment center specifically for drug addicts, which opened in 1998.

Despite public outreach and the growth of various treatment strategies, drug and alcohol abuse remain intractable social problems. As the political and economic situation in Russia continues to deteriorate, vast numbers of people are turning to substances as a way out of their daily miseries. As a young woman, on her way into an AA meeting in Tomsk told me, "I am here but I do not know why. Why should I quit? My life will not get better no matter what I do. There is no hope today and none for the future. Better to drink and forget than to remain conscious of all my suffering."