Russia, alcohol and politics
'Drinking is the joy of the Russes', Grand Prince Vladimir is supposed to have remarked in the tenth century; 'we cannot do without it'.1 Centuries later it is difficult to dispute the accuracy of his observation. For the Grand Prince himself the fact that Christianity rather than Islam allowed the consumption of alcohol was sufficient reason for the whole country to embrace that faith in AD 988. For ordinary citizens, ever since, drinking has been a central part of virtually all aspects of their daily life. The first references to spirits as an alcoholic drink appeared in the written chronicles as early as the twelfth century.2 By the nineteenth century, vodka was the 'single most important item in the peasantry's festive diet'; it was a 'basic ingredient of all celebrations' and a 'sort of seal on ceremonials'. 'Without it', explained a contemporary, 'friendship is no longer friendship, happiness is no longer happiness'; as for the local people, it 'warms them in the cold, cools them in the summer heat, protects them from the damp, consoles them in grief, and cheers them when times are good'.3 Writers took up a position, from Pushkin's 'Bacchic Song' of 1825 to the sternly abstentionist Tolstoy, to Mayakovsky in the 1920s who believed it was 'better to die of vodka than of boredom', and on to Venedikt Erofeev in the 1960s and his 'zonked-out traveler from Moscow to Petushki – or rather from nowhere to nowhere'.4 Drinking entered the folklore: 'nothing beats water – provided it's distilled from grain', the lexicographer Vladimir Dahl was told in the 1850s. In another nineteenth-century tale St Peter tried to turn away a village drunkard, but was told 'I drank and praised God with every swallow, but you denied God three times, and you are in heaven!'5 Other peoples drank, of course, but Russians seemed to drink more than anyone else. Despairingly, it was thought, drinking had become – by the early twentieth century – part of the 'national character of the Russian people'.6
The Russian state, over the centuries, has taken an equally close interest in a commodity which – as in other societies – has played an important part in the generation of wealth, employment and budgetary income. One aspect of this concern was public health. The army needed sober recruits, especially at times of national emergency; a far-reaching reform of the drink trade followed Russia’s humiliating defeat in the Crimea, and a ‘dry law’ was introduced during the First World War. Industry needed punctual, conscientious operatives, and the state needed revenue to cover its own expenses, particularly on military purposes. The process of production and consumption required a network of inspectors to monitor the quality of the output and the honesty with which each successive transaction was reported to the authorities. Attempts to evade the law, particularly during brief periods of prohibition, nourished a growing subculture of corruption and organised crime and a corresponding mechanism of law enforcement. During the nineteenth century alcohol duties were the most important single source of government revenue, accounting for up to 40 per cent of income from all sources; alcohol consumption accounted for about 20 per cent of internal trade, and the industry was responsible for 7 or 8 per cent of national income. Neither the tsarist government, nor the Soviet government that followed it, could be indifferent to such a central means of sustaining and satisfying the refreshment and recreational needs of the society over which they ruled.

For the communist authorities, after 1917, drinking presented a more particular challenge. Brewers were often the most generous supporters of conservative and nationalist political parties, at least in other countries. Alcohol, in turn, was seen as one of the ways in which working people were impoverished, degraded and deprived of a clear vision of their class interests. Soviet sources regularly quoted Friedrich Engels on the *Condition of the Working Class in England*, first published in 1845:

*The working man comes home tired and exhausted. His dwelling is comfortless, damp, repulsive and dirty. He must have some recreation, he must have something to make the work worth his trouble, to make the prospect of the next day endurable . . . His enfeebled frame, weakened by bad air and bad food, demands some external stimulus . . . Apart from the physical influences that drive the working man into drunkenness, there is the example of his colleagues, the neglected education, the impossibility of protecting the young from temptation, in many cases the direct influence of intemperate parents, who give their own children liquor, the chance to forget the wretchedness of life for an hour or two in an alcoholic stupor . . . Drunkenness, in these circumstances, has ceased to be*
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a vice for which the vicious can be held responsible; it has become the inevitable effect of particular conditions upon an object possessed of no volition, at least, in conditions of this kind. Those who have degraded the working man to a mere object must be the ones who bear the responsibility. 9

A socialist society, by contrast, would have no reason to debase the working class for whose emancipation it had come into existence; rather, the problem of alcoholism would recede into the past, together with religion, nationalism and other ‘survivals’ of the class-divided past. Successive Soviet governments committed themselves to the ‘struggle for sobriety’ on this basis, and at particular periods, such as the late 1980s, it became the object of a comprehensive and centrally directed campaign.

Drinking before the revolution

Foreign visitors were certainly in no doubt that Russians were formidable topers. The Venetian ambassador Contarini, in Moscow in the 1470s, observed that Russians were ‘great drunkards and take a great pride in this, despising abstainers . . . Their life takes the following form: they spend all morning in the bazaars until about midday, when they set off to the taverns to eat and drink; it is impossible to get them to do anything afterwards’. 10 The poet George Turberville, a visitor in the 1560s, concluded that ‘Drink is their whole desire, the pot is all their pride; the sobrest head doth once a day stand needfull of a guide.’ 11 Giles Fletcher, a visitor of the late sixteenth century whose account of pre-Petrine Russia is the fullest and most authoritative of its kind, noted that

in every great town of his realm [the Tsar] hath a kabak or drinking house where is sold aqua-vitae (which they call Russe wine), mead, beer etc. . . . Wherein, besides the base and dishonourable means to increase his treasury, many foul faults are committed. The poor labouring man and artificer many times spendeth all from his wife and children. Some use to lay in twenty, thirty, forty rubles or more into the cabak and vow themselves to the pot till all that be spent. And this (as he will say) for the honour of gospodar’, or the Emperor. You shall have many there that have drunk all away to the very skin and so walked naked . . . To drink drunk is an ordinary matter with them every day in the week. 12

Adam Olearius, a member of the Holstein embassy to Moscow in the seventeenth century, found that prominent Russian noblemen and even
royal ambassadors charged with defending the honour of their rulers in foreign lands knew no limits when it came to alcohol. ‘If something they rather like is put before them, they pour it out like water, until they begin to behave like people robbed of reason, and finally must be picked up as though they were dead’. The Grand Ambassador sent to the King of Sweden in 1608, indeed, drank so much of a particularly fiery vodka that the very day he was to have been given an audience he was found dead in his bed. Olearius concluded that Russians were ‘more addicted to drunkenness than any nation in the world’. As he explained:

The vice of drunkenness is prevalent among this people in all classes, both secular and ecclesiastical, high and low, men and women, young and old. To see them lying here and there in the streets, wallowing in filth, is so common that no notice is taken of it. If a coachman comes across any such drunken swine whom he knows, he throws them aboard his wagon and takes them home, where he is paid for the trip. None of them anywhere, anytime, or under any circumstances lets pass an opportunity to have a draught or a drinking bout.

The avidity of Russians for their ‘fiery poison’ was ‘astounding’, wrote another German visitor, J. G. Kohl. The phrase ‘A glass of vodka!’ should, he thought, ‘occur at least ten times on every page of a Russian dictionary that pretends to convey a proper idea of the frequent use of a word and its importance.’

The kabaks, Olearius found, accepted money as well as every conceivable item as payment for drink. As he explained,

While we were there, taverns and pothouses were everywhere, and anyone who cared to could go in and sit and drink his fill. The common people would bring all their earnings into the tavern and sit there until, having emptied their purses, they gave away their clothing, and even their nightshirts, to the keeper, and then went home as naked as they had come into the world. When, in 1643, I stopped at the Luebeck house in Novgorod, I saw such besotted and naked brethren come out of the nearby tavern, some bareheaded, some barefooted, and others only in their nightshirts. One of them had drunk away his cloak and emerged from the tavern in his nightshirt; when he met a friend who was on his way to the same tavern, he went in again. Several hours later he came out without his nightshirt, wearing only a pair of underpants. I had him called to ask what had become of his nightshirt, who had stolen it? He answered, with the customary ‘F . . . your mother’, that it was the tavernkeeper, and that the pants might as well go where the cloak and nightshirt had gone. With that, he returned to the tavern, and later came out entirely naked. Taking a handful of dog fennel that grew near the tavern, he held it over his private parts, and went home singing gaily.
An earlier traveller, Anthony Jenkinson, heard of men and women that had drunk away their goods and even their children at debauches of this kind.\footnote{An earlier traveller, Anthony Jenkinson, heard of men and women that had drunk away their goods and even their children at debauches of this kind. \footnote{Drinking was not confined to men, or the laity, or even to Russians. Women, as Olearius observed, ‘did not consider it disgraceful to themselves to get intoxicated and collapse along with the men’. In Narva he witnessed an amusing spectacle. Several women came with their husbands to a carouse, sat with them, and drank amply. When the men had got drunk, they wanted to go home. The women demurred, and though their ears were boxed, nevertheless, they declined to get up. When at last the men fell to the ground and went to sleep, the women sat astride them and continued toasting one another with vodka until they, too, became dead drunk. \footnote{It was not unusual, apparently, for men and women who were drinking together to engage in sexual intercourse in full view of laughing onlookers without any sense of shame. Not only women of the ‘meaner sort’, John Perry reported in 1716, but ‘even women of Distinction and Fashion’ would ‘make no Scruple to own, that they have been very drunk’. In the taverns men and women would ‘lie about on the dirty floor with no thought for their dress or the exposure of parts of their body’; at village weddings, even girls of nine or ten would be ‘made to drink so that they would dance for everyone’s entertainment’. According to the evidence that was collected between 1903 and 1908 in Moscow, men were six times as likely as women to be admitted for treatment; alcoholism, however, was especially marked among divorced and single women workers, and among prostitutes and the down and out, and Russian levels of alcoholism among women were unusually high in comparative terms. Even priests and monks were known for their alcoholic inclinations. The English traveller Richard Chancellor, in the mid-sixteenth century, found the holy fathers were ‘notable toss-pots’. The common people, Jacques Margeret reported in the early seventeenth century, were ‘given to drunkenness more than to anything else’, and priests ‘as much or more than the others’. Monastic life was often very strict, but the monks made up for it outside the monastery walls; the rites for the dead were particularly liable to abuse. Olearius remarked that ‘One is as apt to meet a drunken priest or monk as a layman or peasant.’ Within the monasteries themselves they drank no wine, vodka or mead; but when they were the guests of outsiders ‘they not only feel that they cannot}}
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refuse a good draught, but even demand it; and they drink greedily, taking such delight in it that they may be distinguished from lay drunkards by nothing but their clothing.26 Passing through Novgorod, Olearius saw a priest in a robe or underwear (he had undoubtedly pawned his cloak in a tavern) staggering along the streets. When he came opposite my inn, he wanted to bestow the customary blessing upon the strel’tsy [musketeers] who were standing guard. When he extended his hand while endeavouring to bend over somewhat, his head proved too heavy, and he pitched over into the mud. After the strel’tsy picked him up, he blessed them anyway with his besmeared fingers. Since such spectacles may be seen daily, none of the Russians are astonished by them.27

Excesses of this kind were particularly common after the major feastdays, John Perry reported some years later; it was ‘very ordinary to see the Priests, as well as other Men, lie drunk about the Streets, and if any one comes to speak to them and help them up when they are down, they say . . . What you will, Father, it is [a] Holiday, and I am drunk.’28 Alcoholism extended less widely among traditionally Islamic groups, but by the early twentieth century it had reached most of the Empire's minority nationalities. A linguist and ethnographer, Kastren, travelling in northeastern Russia in 1838–44, described how he tried to find someone who could teach him the language of the nomadic Nenets. This was very difficult since almost all of the Nentsy were chronically drunk:

I chose the soberest of all, but even he turned out to be drunk. I tried to invite a woman, but she soon succumbed. Having called all the Nentsy out of the tavern, I explained the nature of my mission and asked them to find the soberest man who could act as my teacher. They brought him to me, but he was so incoherent that I lost patience and threw him out the door. Soon I saw him lying on the snow beside the tavern, dead drunk.

Another time Kastren witnessed a similar scene at a wedding:

When we arrived everyone had already regaled themselves well. Many lay unconscious in the street, with uncovered heads, buried in snowdrifts and the wind was covering them with snow . . . In another place, I saw them put a senseless drunk on a sledge, tie him to it, harness his reindeer to the sledge and drive off. In the chum [dwelling] the bridegroom himself was lying among the completely drunken guests. Even the bride, a child of 13, was already drunk.

Kastren spent some time in Siberia, where he found similar customs. In the village of Molchanovo, for instance, he was quartered on the top floor of a kabak: ‘Here, for the whole riotous week, I had no rest, neither night nor day, from noisy drunks.’29
Did Russians and the other inhabitants of the Empire really drink more than anyone else, or did it just seem that they did? Expenditure on alcohol per head of population, in fact, was not particularly high in prerevolutionary Russia. In the early twentieth century, according to official sources, spending on alcohol per head of population was 6.8 rubles a year, ‘significantly lower than in the Western countries’. The same was true of expenditure on alcohol compared with public spending on defence, education and health; in these terms, again, Russian expenditure was not particularly high. The same was also true when expenditure was expressed in terms of average income. The average family in early twentieth-century Russia spent about 3 per cent of its income on alcohol; the proportion of family income that was expended in this way at the same time was 10.5 per cent in Britain, 12.8 per cent in Germany and 13.5 per cent in France. Comparisons of total alcohol consumption per head of population reached similar conclusions. Dmitriev, for instance, compared average consumption levels between 1885 and 1905 and found Russia below all of the other countries except Norway in total consumption, and below Denmark, Austria-Hungary,
France, Belgium, Germany and Sweden for consumption of spirits alone. By the early twentieth century levels of consumption, though higher, were still very modest as compared with the position elsewhere in Europe or North America (see Table 1.1).

It would be equally wrong, however, to suggest that Russia was a home of cultured and moderate drinking during the prerevolutionary years. For a start, levels of consumption of distilled spirits, such as vodka, were much higher than the European average. Russia ranked twelfth for all forms of alcohol consumption in the early twentieth century, but fifth when the comparison was limited to hard liquor, and nearly 90 per cent of all drink was consumed in the form of vodka. Russians, secondly, had a predisposition towards periodic bouts of heavy drinking, rather than a steady level of more moderate consumption. In Italy and France, as Alexander Herzen remarked, there was plenty of wine but no drunks; in the whole of Europe there was ‘simply no other people that emptied a tumbler at a gulp’. Drinking, for ‘climatic reasons’, was mostly indoors, not outside in the fresh air. And finally, official calculations were based upon the whole population of the Russian Empire at the time. This included Jews, who tended to drink moderately, and the much larger population of Old Believers and other schismatics, who also drank very sparingly. The same was true of the substantial Muslim population. Per capita consumption of alcohol on the part of the Orthodox Great Russian population was accordingly much greater than official statistics suggested.

Levels of alcohol-related morbidity and mortality were in fact rather higher than in comparable Western countries at this time. In 1911 there were 55 alcohol-related deaths for every million population; in France, where alcohol consumption was much greater, the figure was 11.5, and in Prussia it was 12. In St Petersburg, similarly, there were up to 20 alcohol-related deaths for every 100,000 members of the population, compared with 3 in Berlin and 6 in Paris (patterns of mortality were in other respects very similar). Premature deaths were related particularly closely to alcohol: 1 in 4 were associated with excessive consumption, but in Prussia (for instance) only 1 in 20. Virtually all forms of alcohol abuse, indeed, were worse in Russia. In pre-war Vienna, for instance, I drunk was detained for every 1,220 population, but in St Petersburg there was 1 for every 25. And there were 15 times as many arrests for public drunkenness in St Petersburg as in Berlin and 700 times as many as in Paris, although alcohol consumption was much greater in the French capital. About half the inmates of Russian prisons, in the early
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Table 1.1. Alcohol consumption in selected countries, 1891–1895 (column 1) and 1901–1910 (column 2); litres per head per annum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>France (1)</th>
<th>USA (1)</th>
<th>UK (1)</th>
<th>Russia (1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spirits</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wine</td>
<td>91.0</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beer</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>58.9</td>
<td>135.0</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total absolute alcohol</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Derived from Bol'shaya meditsinskaya entsiklopediya, 2nd edn, vol. 1 (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’svo meditsinskoi literatury, 1956), cols. 729–30; the figures quoted refer to European Russia.

twentieth century, had been incarcerated for crimes committed in a state of drunkenness.41 There were relatively few suicides, compared with other European countries, but more of them were connected with alcohol, and a higher proportion of divorces took place on these grounds.42 There was a particularly close association between alcohol and the pogroms that swept through many Russian and Ukrainian cities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in some cases with the connivance of the imperial authorities.43

Drink and the state in prerevolutionary Russia

Public activity on this scale could scarcely remain a matter of indifference to the authorities, and from about the sixteenth century its production and consumption began to come under government control. Two main processes were involved: first of all, control and sometimes a monopoly over production, and then taxation of the various stages of consumption, particularly of the stronger liquors. Vodka, it appears, first entered Russian life at some point in the early sixteenth century.44 It began to constitute a source of budgetary revenue from the mid-eighteenth century; its value and share of government revenue rose steadily thereafter, reaching about a third of all government income by the early twentieth century and as much as 46 per cent in certain years.45 This was