

DANCING WITH THE DEMON DRINK.
DRINKING CULTURES IN RUSSIA

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RUSSIA'S THRILL, RUSSIA'S ILL

editorial

The stereotypes are well-known: Russia has a special relationship with vodka; Russians drink more than other people and more than is good for them and for their society. The authors of this issue of *kultura* assure us that foreigners are not alone in thinking so. Russians do too.

kultura is not aiming either to corroborate or to challenge these stereotypes. What we are offering are insights into Russian drinking culture. In Russia, the debate about the topic has flared up again since 2004, when a law was drafted (and passed in 2005) to combat the 'beer revolution' among the young. Since the end of 2005, a new system of taxing alcoholic beverages, purportedly introduced out of concern for their purity and to promote public health, has provided more food for that debate. Now, in July 2006, there are reports of an alcohol crisis: in many places alcoholic beverages are sold out, shelves are empty, and a campaign is underway to destroy illegally produced alcohol. The state is proving unable to implement its own law.

In terms of drinking culture, Russia is part of Europe, the region that has the world's highest rate of alcohol consumption. More precisely, it belongs to the so-called 'northern' variety of European drinking culture, where high-proof liquor and beer play the same role as wine does in the south. In the north, it is said, people drink at greater intervals, but also in greater quantities, while in the south, they regularly drink small amounts. However, these patterns have no impact on annual per capita intake of pure alcohol among adults, which was officially 11 litres across the EU in 2005, though the real figure is estimated to be 15 litres.

Until recently, studies from Russia reported a consumption rate of 15–16 litres of pure alcohol per adult (15 or older), one third higher than the

official statistics. This difference is attributed to (among other factors) large quantities of alcohol produced illegally to avoid taxes. Figures recently mentioned in the media were as high as 19 litres. Interestingly, in 2000, Russians didn't drink more frequently than, say, Finns: about 60 times a year (76 times for men and 35 times for women), although that figure is on the rise. However, they drink three times as much: in total, 81 litres of different alcoholic beverages (Finns: 27 litres). With 29 litres per capita, women were lagging far behind men (127 litres per capita): Russian alcohol culture is a distinctly male culture.

This is also illustrated by the enormous gap – 13–14 years – between male and female rates of life expectancy (58.9 years compared to 72.3 years in 2004). By virtue of comparison, in other countries that gap ranges between 4–5 years (in Israel and Muslim countries) and 10 years in countries where people have a penchant for hard liquor. In Russia, working-age men come top in terms of both alcohol consumption and mortality.

Despite these figures, Russia has an impressive amount of non-drinkers (20–25%, as against a European average of 15%). Yet again the gender aspect of drinking patterns is important: while 29–37% of women say they are teetotallers, only 12–18% of men do.

Life isn't easy for non-drinkers in Russia, for alcohol is a crucial element of social life. If one is to believe the singer-songwriter Vladimir Vysotsky, even the most desperate boozer will look for a drinking mate. Non-drinkers are easily suspected of wanting to stand aloof, or even of considering themselves superior. The future will show how long this strong ritual element in modern drinking culture can survive the advance of individualism.

‘NO REASON NOT TO DRINK’:
ALCOHOL DRINKING PATTERNS IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA

Mikhail Timofeyev

analysis

The article looks at some wide-spread ways in which certain popular alcoholic drinks are consumed in Russia. As many people model their behaviour on these models, they contribute to shaping Russian alcohol culture. The article attempts to explain the relationship between popular stereotypes about Russia as a country of heavy drinkers and the diverse ways in which alcohol is consumed in practice.

‘Countries and peoples may be classified by beverages no worse than by religion’, Pyotr Weil and Alexander Genis wrote in their essay *Tales about Germany*. This taxonomy is not natural, but being the result of a drawn-out, often centuries-long and therefore almost imperceptible accumulation of drinking practices, it is usually perceived as immutable. Thus not only foreigners, but also Russians themselves uphold the view that Russia is a country of heavy drinkers.

According to a survey taken in 2005, a majority of Russians – 68% – consume alcoholic beverages, including 75% of men and 62% of women. 29% of women and 13% of men never drink alcohol. A significant proportion of women (41%) only drink a few times a year. Only 3% of women consume alcohol at least two or three times a week, as do 18% of men.

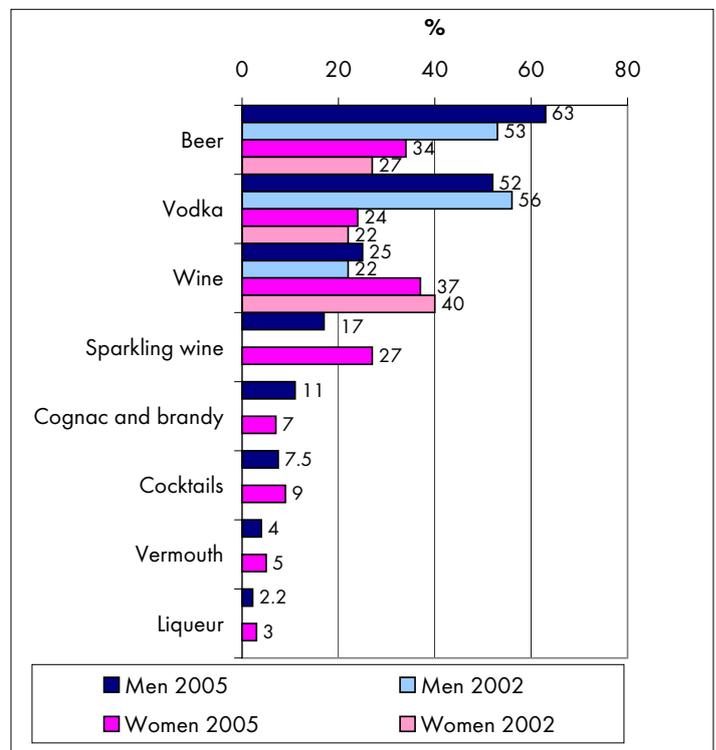
Over the past three years, the preferences have changed somewhat. The graph opposite depicts the popularity of different alcoholic drinks over time (more than one answer was possible).

In this article, I shall attempt to describe the stable patterns and scenarios of alcohol consumption that influence everyday practice and may to a certain extent be considered nationally specific. These patterns are represented in folklore, the media or works of art. Even where these representations are distorted, they still contribute to shaping ac-

tual drinking patterns.

Large-scale experiments aiming to change existing practice are usually inspired by the authorities, e.g. in the form of campaigns against heavy drinking or periods of prohibition. In the course of globalisation, new drinking practices are ‘imported’, causing a change in the infrastructure of consumption. People begin to consume new drinks as part of leisure activities that take place in new types of settings. Different social groups consume alcohol differently, and factors such as

Popularity of different alcoholic drinks with men and women in 2005 and 2002



Whisk(e)y, gin or rum were chosen by less than 2.5% of the male respondents; for women there were no data available.

Sources:

For 2002: Fonds “*Obshchestvennoe mnenie*”: <http://www.sostav.ru/news/2003/09/23/52/>

For 2005: IA “*Rosalkogol*”: <http://www.rosalcohol.ru/site.php?id=5503&table=bmV3c19waXZv>

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gender, age, social position, income, place of residence and ethnic and religious affiliation, in addition to personal preferences, become relevant in this respect.

VODKA – WITH AND WITHOUT A SNACK

Since the 16th century, Russians consumed vodka in taverns called *kabaki*, which didn't serve food. Only in the 19th century did they begin to serve hot and cold snacks.

Contemporary practices are not, of course, strictly related to habits over a century old. In the 20th century, both the authorities' view of alcohol and socially accepted ways of consuming it underwent several changes. While extreme practices such as drinking vodka on an empty stomach and simply sniffing at a piece of black bread have a long history, new aphorisms are now used to uphold them, e.g. 'The more grub you pick, the less will be the kick'. In the 1990s, the *nouveaux riches* known as New Russians shocked foreign restaurateurs by ordering the most expensive drinks and downing them without eating. This ritual goes back half a century: in 1958, the sale of alcoholic drinks in canteens, snack bars and other cheap public catering establishments was banned. It became common for a person wishing to drink to look for two others of like mind. Each of the three would contribute 10 roubles towards the price of a half-litre bottle of vodka. They would then drink it near the shop – in a courtyard or, in winter, in an entryway. The idiomatic expression 'to think it out in a trio' stuck in the Soviet vocabulary, and is taken up today in the names of vodka brands such as *Daring Trio*, *Threesome* or *Three of one Hundred and Fifty* [millilitres] *Each*.

The culinary historian William Pokhlyobkin noted that Russia has no culture of drinking, and nobody is working on creating one. In 1991, he bitterly remarked that masses of people, rather than sitting down at table to drink their liquor,

consume alcohol outdoors, 'by the lamppost'. Improvised alcohol-drinking rituals do not usually require a decent snack. Another difference between vodka and wine drinking rituals is that wine accompanies food, whereas with vodka, it is the food – then referred to as *zakuska* – that accompanies the drink. As one Russian joke goes, when you are out of vodka, *zakuska* becomes mere food.

RESPECTABLE WAYS OF CONSUMING ALCOHOL

Yet Russian history, and particularly the culture of nobles and merchants, has known alternative, more respectable ways of consuming alcohol. Throughout the 19th century, nobles were allowed to produce vodka and consume it not only in public places, but also at home. Moreover, the well-to-do classes could consume imported beverages (wine and champagne), and consequently adopted the drinking cultures of the countries of origin. After 1917, these patterns gradually declined; they were preserved only in a few families who had survived the revolutionary upheaval. Partly, however, the new Soviet *nomenklatura* made these customs their own.

NEW LEISURE ACTIVITIES, NEW DRINKS

The modern type of alcohol consumption has emerged thanks to new leisure activities and venues as well as new types of drinks – previously unavailable ones that are now imported, such as tequila, or entirely new beverages, such as canned low-alcohol cocktails. After the range of imported alcoholic drinks increased in the mid-1990s

'Uncle Shura, our Galya is getting married. ... Mama has brewed beer and everything will be proper, as it should be. Uncle, you must come, don't turn down our invitation!'

Alexander Yashin: 'The Vologda Wedding', short story, 1962

analysis

and became accessible to people with high and medium income levels, glossy men's magazines began to supply their readers with information about alcohol. The articles not only explained how to consume drinks such as whisky or tequila, which had been beyond the reach of most Soviet citizens, but also expounded ways of drinking dry red or white wine, cognac and, astonishingly, even vodka. The magazines also published new, unusual cocktail recipes based on previously inaccessible ingredients.

Beer and low-alcohol cocktails are currently popular with young people. These ready-made beverages differ from the 'Russian folk cocktails' which used to consist of two ingredients: beer and vodka made a 'wire brush' or 'ruff'¹; a mix of sparkling wine and vodka was known as 'northern lights'; cognac was added to vodka to yield a 'brown bear', and a concoction of methylated spirit and beer was called 'silver fox'. In the 1960s and 70s, these cocktails were symbols of both mocking and glorifying attitudes towards disreputable practices of alcohol consumption. In a song by Alexander Dolsky, a character acknowledges that he 'knew not the etiquette of refined salons, but that of the entryways. I'd mix Southern Port with cologne – that, old chaps, was my trademark bouquet!' As for the phantasmagoric cocktails Venedikt Yerofeyev describes in his poem *Moscow Stations*, merely listing their ingredients, the author sarcastically remarks, is enough to make one faint.

DISREPUTABLE PRACTICES

Those living below the poverty line no longer drink cologne as a liquor substitute. In rural areas and small towns and settlements, people drink home-brew as well as non-standard drinks such as a glass cleaner lovingly named *Little Maxim*, or 'stimulating bath essences' containing 90% alcohol, called *Sturdy Youngster-2*, *Troyar* or *Russian*

North, that are sold at the chemist's at 20 roubles a 250 ml bottle. Water is added in order to obtain half a litre of a liquid with 40% alcohol content. These beverages are currently wide-spread among homeless people or those with very low incomes. Another popular drink with these groups is strong beer sold in 1.5–2 litre plastic bottles. Habits such as drinking wine or vodka straight from the bottle in parks or house entrances are receding into the past, since disposable cups are now sold in shops as well as many kiosks near bus or tram stops. So even non-standard drinks are now consumed in 'civilised' ways.

THE 'BEER REVOLUTION'

The abundance of beer brands in contemporary Russia has not only significantly modified the

'The newly-weds had to drink from the same glass and the others saw to it that they did, so the groom wouldn't quaff more than his fair share, a well-known foible of his.'

Alexander Yashin: 'The Vologda Wedding', short story, 1962

structure of male drinking preferences; it has also influenced drinking culture. Soviet-era sayings such as 'Beer without vodka is a waste of money' or 'He who comes with beer shall be sent for vodka'² do not correspond any more to actual drinking habits.

Beer, a scarce commodity in Soviet times, is now a widely available beverage. Numerous breweries continuously market new brands; new beer houses and beer restaurants attract customers with Czech or German cuisine. In large cities there are English and Irish pubs that offer beers from the British Isles. However, even some Russian brands are too expensive for most Russians.

While dried fish used to be the number one beer snack, the range now includes a variety of crisps, rye crackers, shrimps, dried and salted squid and

1 A small freshwater fish (*Acerina cerua*); the dorsal fin of the ruff (or ruffe) has 12–19 spines.

2 An allusion to the words of Alexander Nevsky, quoting Saint Matthew (26:52) 'all who come to us with the sword will perish by the sword'.

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much else. Alcohol-free beer is also available, though not very popular, since most people think that ‘alcohol-free beer makes you feel cheated’. Since April 2005, a new law had prohibited the consumption of bottled and canned beer in public, except spaces expressly reserved for this purpose. However, this ban is very laxly observed. A bottle of beer bought on the way to work is sometimes used to cure a hangover, prompting the joke that ‘beer in the morning is not just harmful, but also useful’.

DRINKING OCCASIONS

Russian Radio long used alcohol jokes as jingles. One of them went: ‘Oh well! Again there’s no reason not to drink!’ So what occasions are marked by drinking? Above all, nationwide holidays, especially New Year’s Eve, International Women’s Day and the Defender of the Fatherland Day, as well as confessional holidays, Easter being the most important one for Orthodox Christians. New

‘If you don’t drink to the bottom of the cup,
you don’t like the hosts.’

(Russian saying)

state holidays such as Russia Day and the Day of National Unity are not widely celebrated.

Birthdays are also popular occasions for treating relatives, friends and colleagues to alcoholic beverages. Other events that ‘call for a drink’ include childbirth, when people symbolically ‘wash the baby’s feet’, graduation, the first salary, a bonus, promotion to a new job or military rank, a new academic degree, a new flat or car and much else. In each of these cases, the lucky person must buy drinks for his or her friends or colleagues. Drinking parties may take place at work, e.g. at the office, and may be held to celebrate personal occasions as well as professional achievements.

One example of a ritual performed to ‘mark the occasion’ is the military habit of dropping newly-

awarded insignia, such as epaulette stars, into a glass of vodka, which is then drunk.

During the anti-alcohol campaign that started in 1985, vodka became a liquid currency, used to pay for any service. Rates were quoted by saying ‘you owe me half a litre’ or ‘you owe me a glass’, expressions that are still jokingly used today. Alcohol is used as a token of gratitude for services rendered, in situations where it is ethically or otherwise impossible to remunerate a person, e.g. a friend or relative, financially. A bottle of sparkling wine, cognac, whisky or expensive vodka is often used an extra gift on top of a fee, a standard practice in dealing with doctors.

STILETTO HEEL AND WOMEN’S RIOT

Culturally, women are supposed to favour light drinks such as vermouth, wine and beer, or sweet ones, i.e. liqueurs. However, a quarter of female alcohol consumers drink vodka. Quantities vary according to the occasion, but are usually much lower than male doses. Producers have launched special ‘female’ brands, including *To Russia’s Women*, *Ladies’ Surprise*, *Dovgan Ladies’ Vodka No. 5*, *Scandinavia for Ladies*, *Stiletto Heel* and *Women’s Riot*. One of these brands, *Mysterious Emmanuelle*, is advertised as ‘vodka for the fair sex, for the lovely ladies. Moderate consumption increases your sexual attractiveness and helps you turn your fantasies into reality.’

WHAT MEASURE?

Many students of Russian culture stress its propensity for excess, one of whose manifestations are patterns of alcohol drinking. This is illustrated by contemporary sayings such as ‘No matter how much vodka you buy, you’ll still have to shop twice’ or ‘Send a fool for a bottle and he’ll be foolish enough to buy only one’. Russian has several words to describe binge drinking. In his *Notebooks*, Sergey Dovlatov mentions a person

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who drinks every day – and sometimes goes on a binge. This sounds paradoxical, but has to do with the fact that whether or not one is on a drinking binge is defined by individual perceptions of whether one is still able to stop. A binge is not just a medical condition; it is also the stuff of folklore and numerous works of art. General von Radlow's several days' drinking binge shown in Nikita Mikhalkov's film *The Barber of Siberia* is an obvious exaggeration of 19th century drinking practices. However, it is supposed to demonstrate superhuman male qualities, also displayed by the male protagonist in Vladimir Menshov's Oscar-winning 1981 melodrama *Moscow Does Not Believe In Tears*, or the nature-loving heavy drinkers in Alexander Rogozhkin's comedies from the 1990s, *The Peculiarities of National Hunting* and *The Peculiarities of National Fishing*.

In these films, bouts of heavy drinking are shown as ordinary rather than tragic events, something that every 'real man' can endure. In the mid-1970s, the American journalist Hedrick Smith wrote that many Russians admit they cannot trust a person unless they've drunk with him. 'Vodka drinking', he wrote, 'is invested with the symbolism of machismo.' Alcohol consumption is pre-

sented as a kind of test of one's strength, an exploration of one's capabilities. However, one should remember the melancholy joke from 'The Song of the Demon Drink': 'In the struggle against the demon drink, it is the demon who wins.'²

*Translated from the Russian
by Mischa Gabowitsch*

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MEN'S DRINKS, WOMEN'S DRINKS:
THE GENDERED CULTURE OF ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION

Olga Chepurnaya, Larisa Shpakovskaya

In Russia, alcohol consumption is traditionally regarded as an important element of culture. Many forms of social interaction hardly ever take place without alcohol. Nevertheless, the role of alcohol in Russian everyday culture has been little studied. Drinking patterns are not based on a fixed constellation of norms and rituals: they vary with gender, age and social position. This article is about gender aspects of alcohol consumption in contemporary Russia.

Alcohol plays an important role in relations between the sexes, acting as a catalyst that helps break taboos and reduce inhibitions. Alcohol is often seen as a mandatory element of the ritual

of courtship, as are flowers and candy. As a first step to greater intimacy, men invite women to dinner and serve them wine, often sparkling wine. Alcohol is also seen as indispensable for

² 'Pesenka pro zelenogo zmeya', lyrics M. Tanich, music N. Bogoslovski, in the film-comedy "Zhili tri kholostiaka" (1965).

sketch

sketch

seducing women. This view of alcohol is part of a wide-spread everyday sexism. It presupposes that women are reluctant to engage in sexual relationships, whereas alcohol allows them to loosen up and relieve tensions. This is illustrated in a popular paraphrase of the highwaymen's song from a well-known cartoon: 'With a woman you don't need a knife. You just pour her a drink, tell her what she wants to hear, and then she's all yours.' Our sociological interviews about sexual encounters also featured many stories about women being seduced using alcohol.

The drinks used for that purpose need be of the kind that 'women like', i.e. sweet and light, and

at the same time make them drunk. Men invent their own cocktails for women they want to seduce, e.g. by mixing fortified and dry wine, or vodka, dry wine and fruit syrup. Women also believe that alcohol allows them to unwind. Their accounts of sexual experiments – sex with strangers, casual affairs, group sex and the like – are always couched in a context of alcohol consumption. The state

of intoxication serves as a justification for behaviour they would otherwise consider immoral. Women's stories about seducing men, by contrast, hardly ever refer to alcohol as a tool of seduction. Self-assured women tend to attribute their sexual conquests to their attractiveness rather than to alcohol. These differences reflect a sexist culture that treats women as objects of desire.

That same culture distinguishes between bever-

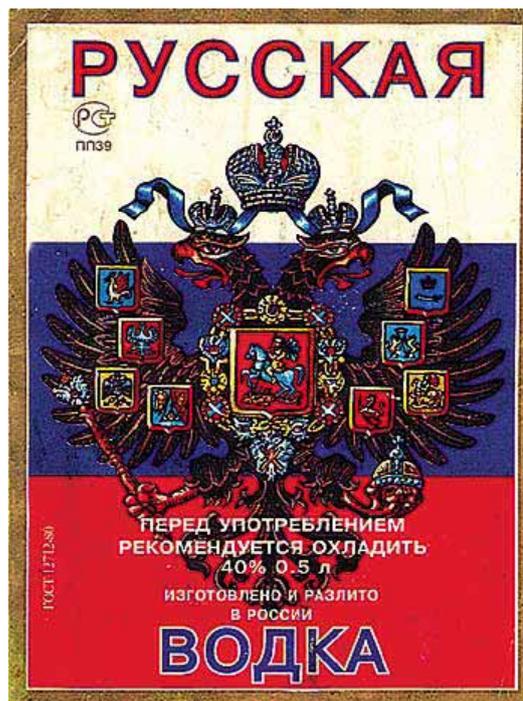
ages which are appropriate, respectively, for men or women. Strong drinks are seen as 'masculine' and are drunk undiluted. Beer is also considered more suitable for men than for women. The 'ability to drink' – i.e. to drink a lot without losing control – is viewed as a male quality. Women are supposed to drink sweet and light beverages – cocktails, liqueurs, sweet or sparkling wine, aromatised or sweetened types of beer.

The peculiarities of the gender rules governing Russian drinking are in many ways rooted in Soviet consumer culture. The USSR produced sparkling wine ('champagne') on a large scale as a 'luxury good for the masses', turning it into

an essential feature of celebrations, festivities and, generally, positive and pleasant events in the life of Soviet citizens. As a luxury item, sparkling wine was often set aside for women, who drank less often and attached greater importance to taste. Another example of the preservation of Soviet drinking traditions is 'port', which used to refer to a cheap mass-produced fortified wine that was part of male alcohol culture. Although expensive brands of seasoned port

are now available, it is still considered a masculine drink.

The development of the alcohol industry and an attendant media discourse has redefined the image of certain types of drinks. Thus there are now brands of sweet vodka specially made for women, who may now be shown gathered around a bottle in TV adverts. Producers take care to position



Ill. no 1: Russian Vodka. Russian coat of arms on tricolour Russian flag

sketch

their products in terms of gender. Newly marketed sweet beer-based drinks and sweet low-alcohol cocktails such as gin and tonic or screwdriver are

‘Drink, don’t be shy! Drink vodka, beat your wife, don’t be afraid of anything!’
(Russian saying)

sold canned or bottled, just like beer. Advertisements for these beverages feature sexually attractive women who become more uninhibited and enterprising after drinking.

Other adverts feature men gathering to drink beer with a ‘male character’ after a hard day’s ‘masculine’ work. Since hard liquor publicity was banned from TV and outdoor advertising a few years ago, it has moved onto the pages of glossy magazines. Men’s magazines like *Maxim* or *Esquire* feature adverts for vodka, cognac, whisky and beer. Women’s magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Gala* or *Glamour* carry fewer alcohol ads, and usually only for sparkling wine, champagne or Martini. All of them, however, feature advice on alcohol consumption. Men’s magazines include recipes for cocktails ‘you can treat your girlfriend to’, whereas women’s magazines present alcohol as something to serve to one’s guests – to accompany a dinner or to make them relax.

Thus on the level of representation, beverages and

consumption norms are strictly separated by gender. In everyday practice, however, this distinction is often disregarded on both sides. Thus beer is gradually turning into a ‘universal’ drink, especially among young people. Strong drinks that cause quick intoxication are consumed by both men and women to relieve stress and tensions and forget about their problems. Sparkling wine is used by both sexes on festive occasions: at weddings, housewarming parties, exhibition or shop openings and the like. On the whole, drinks that are traditionally gender-specific lose that quality once consumed outside traditional settings.

*Translated from the Russian
by Mischa Gabowitsch*

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‘RUSSIAN VODKA’: RUSSKAYA, ROSSIYSKAYA AND SOVIET

Mikhail Timofeyev

overview

Vodka truly deserves a monument as a gastronomic symbol of Russia. Although other countries also produce numerous brands of vodka, Russians consider it their national drink. In 1982, the Court of Arbitration of the International Chamber of Commerce in Paris granted the USSR the exclusive right to produce and sell ‘Russian vodka’,

validating the main Soviet export slogan: ‘Only vodka from Russia is genuine Russian vodka!’

Until the anti-alcohol campaign of 1985, less than 30 different brands of vodka were produced in the USSR. None of them were called ‘Soviet’ vodka, however: that attribute was reserved for the sparkling wine known as ‘Soviet champagne’. After

overview

the state monopoly on vodka production was abolished on 7 June 1992, the number of vodka brands produced in Russia increased significantly. This article is based on my analysis of over two thousand types of vodka produced between 1992 and 2005 by 300 companies in 74 regions of Russia.

A look at vodka counters across Russia shows that references to ethnic, national and Soviet

themes have been used throughout the post-Soviet period to attract customers. A wide range of vodka labels display Russia's tricolour flag or coat of arms (see Illustration no 1), emphasising the country's new national identity. Along with these official state symbols, unofficial ones – the Kremlin, Red Square (Ill. no 2), bears and birches – are also used, and portraits of historic figures from different periods (from the Kievan princes to President Putin) stand for the

new Russian state's historical continuity.

In the Russian culture and language there are two different terms for the ethnic and the national which are both translated into English as 'Russian', but have different meanings and connotations. *Russkyi* primarily denotes all that is linked to the Russian ethnic community and the culture based on it, while *rossiyskyi* refers to the whole nation, including all citizens of Russia irrespective of ethnic affiliation. An understanding of the distinction between them is essential in order to appreciate the following examples of the ways in

which ethnic, national and Soviet symbols are used on vodka labels.

In Soviet times, the names *Russian Vodka* and *Old Russian Vodka* (both meaning 'russkyi') were written in stylised 'Old Russian' characters. However, there doesn't need to be a link between a brand name and the image on the label, as illustrated by bottles of *Old Russian Vodka* featuring portraits of Stalin or Putin. Other symbols of

different historical eras include Emperor Nicholas II on a bottle of *Old Russian Vodka* and President Yeltsin on the label of *Russian Vodka*, shown against the background of a map of the Russian Empire or the Russian Federation, respectively. Vodka brands use the adjective 'russkyi' both as part of common expressions, such as *Russian Roulette*, *Russian Frost* or *Russian Riot* and in unexpected contexts, e.g. *Russian Bootlegger*, *Russian Parliament* or *Russian Capital*. Names

such as *Russian Firebird*, *Russian Souvenir*, *Russian People's Vodka*, or *Russian Doll* allude to folklore. Other denominations, e.g. *Russian Recipe No. 1*, *Russian Standard*, *Russian Quality Guarantor* or *Russian Diamond*, serve to stress the high quality of the beverage. *Russian Beauty* is a brand name that presents vodka as an object of male desire. The names *Great Russian Vodka Nos. 1 and 3*, *Time to Be Russian*, *K-19: Russian Submarine*, *Russian Glory* or *Russian Spirit* are meant to arouse national pride. The label of *Russian Size* shows a typical vodka-drinking scene.



Ill. no 2: Russian Vodka. St. Basil's Cathedral on Red Square

overview

Aside from neutral geographic designations such as *Russian North*, *Southern Russian Vodka*, *Russian Shore* or *Russian Isle*, there is also a *Russian Alaska* (Ill. No 3) displaying a map of the American peninsula.

In the 1970s, the USSR produced a brand called *Russian (Rossiyskaya) Vodka*, showing a troika (a Russian three-horse carriage). A *Russian (Russkaya) Vodka* was launched at the same time; unlike the *Russian (Rossiyskaya) Vodka*, it did not disappear from shops, even during ‘prohibition’. In the early 1990s, producers marketed brands which included the word ‘rossiyskiy’ in their name: *Russian Toast*, *Russian Crown*, and a brand named just *Russia*. A brand called *Immense Russia* was launched in 2003, twelve years after the collapse of the USSR had significantly reduced the country’s immenseness.

Brands bearing the names of historic figures are aimed at customers familiar with Russian history. Celebrities featured on vodka labels include Old Russian princes such as Igor or Oleg; Minin and Pozharsky, the leaders of the early 17th century militia that drove an interventionist force out of Moscow; leaders of popular insurrections such as Stepan Razin or Yemelyan Pugachev; and the conqueror of Siberia, Yermak. Many brands are named after Russian Tsars or Emperors, including Ivan the Terrible, Peter I, Catherine the Great, the three Alexanders and Nicholas II, or after 18th–19th century military leaders such as Suvorov or Kutuzov. Other persons featured include the chemist Dmitry Mendeleev, also known as the father of the modern vodka standard; Russian cultural figures, among them Alexander Pushkin, Pyotr Tchaikovsky, Fedor Shalyapin, Ivan Bunin and Sergei Yessenin; and figures from the civil war of 1918–22: Admiral Kolchak, Nestor Makhno and Chapayev.

Soviet themes are comparatively thin on the ground in contemporary Russian vodka names. Above all they are referred to by brands such as *USSR*, *Born in the USSR* or *Unbreakable Soviet Union*. The text on the latter’s back label informs us that the ‘great and mighty superpower’ had a ‘nuclear shield’ consisting of 15,200 ballistic missiles. The Soviet past is also addressed in names such as *Red Aurora*, *Red Star*, *Politburo*, *Party Committee*, *Pravda*, *Socialist Vodka*, *Comrade*, *3.62 Roubles* or *Nostalgia 3.62* (Ill. No 4), referring to the fixed price at which a half-litre bottle of vodka was long available in the Soviet Union. *Vologda Convoy* refers to the Gulag, while reminiscences of Soviet place names are offered by brands such as *Stalingrad Vodka* or *Legend of Komsomolsk*. Finally, a brand from Izhevsk has been named after the creator of a Soviet trademark that may well compete with ‘Russian Vodka’: *Kalashnikov*.

This short overview shows how the consumption of contemporary Russian vodka may often turn into a symbolic statement of ethnic Russianness, national identity or ‘Sovietness’.

*Translated from the Russian by
Mischa Gabowitsch*

ILLUSTRATIONS:

- URL: <http://old.kak.ru/images/archive/15/vodka/> (a collection of vodka labels, without translation)
- URL: <http://drinks.internet.ru/Et/evolution.asp> (site dedicated to vodka labels, in Russian; nevertheless, we recommend following the links at the top on the right)

MURDEROUS ROMANCE: RUSSIA AND VODKA

analysis

Sonja Margolina

In Russia, vodka is more than just vodka. If the point needed to be driven home, then the stir caused by the publication of Venedikt Yerofeyev's brilliant novel Moscow Stations in the 1970s certainly did. World literature is full of famous alcoholics, but the spiritus vini had never inspired their work or fuelled their creativity. It was no accident, it seems, that in the late years of the Soviet Union alcoholism was aestheticised in an unprecedented manner. An intellectual 'theology of vodka', that 'Russian god', gave the subject a metaphysical dimension. Russians' dubious reputation for excessive drinking has been spread for centuries by foreign travellers, and remains a popular stereotype to this day. There is no shortage of heavy drinkers among fellow Europeans, such as the Irish, the Germans, or the French, who have the highest rate of cirrhosis of the liver. Nevertheless, Russian alcoholism is surrounded by a particularly uncanny aura.

In the second half of the 19th century, when alcoholism was first classified as a disease, Russian doctors set out to understand the reasons for their compatriots' excessive and self-destructive drinking habits. Although agrarian Russia had a relatively low per capita intake of alcohol, the consequences, as reflected in poisoning and death statistics, but also in crime rates and working time loss, were much more serious than in those European countries where consumption was higher. This 'anomaly' was attributed to the climate, which was allegedly unbearable without a supply of alcohol; to the preference for hard liquor over beer or wine; to the habit of drinking large amounts of vodka on an empty stomach; to the low quality of the traditional rotgut and to a widespread addiction to ersatz drinks, a phenomenon little known in the West. Critics put the blame on Tsarism for using vodka to keep the populace immature, while Dostoyevsky and his fellow national conservatives accused the Jews of 'making the people drunk'. Research in the 20th century didn't come up with really convincing explanations, although it did find remarkable similarities with the drinking patterns of other peoples, such as the Irish.

ADDICTION AS A MIRROR OF SOCIETY

Recent findings in addiction studies, some of them based on experiments involving animals,

cast some light on the peculiarities of Russian alcoholism. Scientists have found out that heavy drinking mirrors social hierarchies: the socially underprivileged more readily and more frequently consume addictive drugs, and are less resistant to their effects; 'when faced with a supply shortage, they exhibit a stronger craving for the drug than members of the upper classes', who are less affected by its destructive impact. Genes, social status and external circumstances all contribute to addiction. According to these results, drug addiction is not so much a chemical reaction of the body as a *mirror of society*: social relations, ways of dealing with stress, and social acceptance are among the most important factors.

The historical roots of alcohol addiction in Russia are therefore to be found in centuries of despotism, when the majority of the population was enslaved: unlike in the West, not only the lower classes, the serfs, but even the upper and middle classes as well as the clergy were disfranchised subjects of an autocratic ruler. Until today, personal immunity and human dignity are not seen as basic elements of the common weal. There are well-documented instances of superiors forcing their subordinates to drink in order to display their power. Peer pressure to drink, which used to be a key element of tribal rituals or the life of medieval European guilds, became part of official state policy almost 500 years ago, at the dawn of

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the Russian Empire.

IVAN THE TERRIBLE AND STATE DRINKING
PRESSURE

With his numerous wars and campaigns of annihilation, Ivan the Terrible had reduced the country to ruins and drained his treasury, becoming unable to pay his mercenaries. The only way to increase the Tsar's revenue was to levy taxes. Following the example of the conquered Tatar city of Kazan, he opened state taverns called *kabaki* in Moscow to make his subjects drink vodka and fill the imperial purse. Nationalising the alcohol trade and turning it into a hidden tax source was not a revolutionary idea. Since time immemorial, princes had controlled and taxed the production of intoxicating liquor, be it in *taberna libera* or at home. What was new was that the liquor trade was turned into a centralised state industry: a state official elected by the commune was in charge of the *kabak*. He had to meet or exceed a fixed revenue target, and was liable to lose his own goods and chattels if he failed. He would therefore cudgel any debts out of the 'drinkers' community'. The Englishman Giles Fletcher the Elder wrote in 1591 that people were not allowed to leave the *kabak* until they had drunk away everything they owned. Like any other tax, drinking was a duty and an expression of loyalty to the Tsar. Refusing to drink was tantamount to an act of sabotage, and severely punished. Not until after the schism in the mid-17th century did social groups emerge who practised collective abstinence. A non-drinking peasant would be stigmatised as a sectarian and an enemy of the state. Only drinks were served in the *kabaki*; eating was not allowed. The rapid shift from beer to vodka that occurred at the time was a truly radical change. The rotgut then known by that name was usually adulterated and much weaker than modern 40% vodka, yet much stronger than

the traditional fermented beverages. By the 17th century, the *kabaki* were established across the country and became the state's main source of revenue. But a burnt-out populace and corrupt officials cut income, and so the original state monopoly was replaced by a system of tax farming typical of absolutism. Merchants or nobles were given the right to collect a tax on spirits across large 'estates'. The fixed sum they had to pay in advance was raised with every new tender. That the alcohol-tax farmers, as well as the state's of-

'Poor troops, poor officers ... now they must protect the *kabak* and the sale of vodka. I wouldn't be surprised if they were decorated with little buckets to stick on their epaulettes and pint-sized crosses for their buttonholes.'
(Alexander Herzen in his newspaper *Kolokol* on 15 September 1859, writing about the use of troops to crush the abstinence movement in the Tambov region)

ficials, behaved like occupants towards their own subjects was a feature of Russian political culture that had survived since the Tatar yoke. The modern state alcohol monopoly was introduced in 1895 and culminated in Soviet state regulation.

THE DEMON DRINK: A PAN-EUROPEAN
PHENOMENON

As the *kabak* was being introduced in Russia, Martin Luther was raging in Germany against alcoholism, which he described as 'the Germans' omnipotent idol', and declared war on the 'demon drink' (1541). The rise of Protestantism and especially of the stern Calvinist and Puritanical sects led to the emergence of alcohol-free groups who preferred coffee and, later, tea – beverages befitting the free and sober individual. The middle classes became less tolerant of alcoholism and attendant excesses. Alcohol was no longer consumed in public; it was now drunk at home,

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outside working hours. It is said that in Victorian England, a visit to the pub was almost as scandalous as a visit to the brothel.

But this change in drinking culture only concerned a culturally significant yet numerically small urban stratum. Every wave of modernisation accelerated the decline of the guilds with

‘The state ... not only made the people drunk, it also sobered them up and punished them for their binge. It ... inculcated state alcoholism. Almost all Russian rulers made their mark: one by raising prices, another by lowering them, and yet another by introducing the ‘wolf’s hour’ [11 am, the deliberately late opening time for liquor shops under Brezhnev]. The people didn’t keep silent; they immortalised the names of the rulers in folk names for drinks and invented humorous songs, jokes and rhymes.’

(Alexei Levinson: ‘Vodka as a lost utopia. 13 toasts’, in: *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* no. 76/2005)

their communal mechanisms of control. Rural masses streamed into the cities, where they became an industrial proletariat struggling for physical survival and took to unrestrained drinking. Notwithstanding the Puritanical ethic, European alcohol consumption rates rose steadily. At the end of the 17th century, England was struck by a ‘gin plague’: in London, an adult male consumed an average 63 litres of gin per year. This mass alcoholism caused crime, street violence, alcohol poisoning and congenital deformities. But what happened then would have been impossible in Russia: the public began a dogged and lengthy struggle against the gin lobby in parliament. At first the movement suffered a setback: in the 1730s/40s, a drastic rise in the gin and brandy tax stirred up a *lumpenproletariat* revolt and was

revoked. Not until 1751 did efforts to curb gin production meet with success.

In Russia, the rise in vodka prices had led to *kabak* unrest a century before the British gin plague. Later restrictions on the sale of alcoholic drinks, inspired by Patriarch Nikon, were, ‘as usual’, successfully circumvented by the population. The considerable drop in revenue made the state quickly revert to the time-tested system.

VODKA’S VICTORY OVER POLITICS

Until the late 19th century, Russia had no autonomous corporate bodies that could have influenced (alcohol) policies for the benefit of the general public. The life of most subjects was shaped by the estate owner and the peasant commune, the church and the military. These institutions were all dependent on the state – and all directly or indirectly encouraged alcoholism. As tax-exempt vodka producers, the estate owners had an ‘objective’ interest in keeping their peasants from going dry. Despite a certain moral unease, especially among the higher clergy, the church, through its everyday practice, also contributed to legitimising alcoholism as a national and religious habit. For there were no religious holidays without vodka; and alcoholism was the rule among clergymen, most of whom were barely more educated and cultured than their flock.

Thus vodka beat the state. The population’s addiction to alcohol meant that the state was dependent on vodka revenue, which in turn helped preserve the feudal-agrarian structure of the economy. From Catherine II and up to perestroika, the share of alcohol proceeds in the state budget consistently remained as high as 25–40%, with the exception of the wars and revolutions of the 20th century. Every slump had dramatic political effects. Both regime changes in the 20th century, 1917 and 1989, were preceded by a state-ordained ‘prohibition’. Nicholas II’s ‘dry law’ and Mikhail

analysis

Gorbachev's anti-alcohol campaign were desperate attempts to overcome a systemic crisis of the authorities' own making through a simple forcible measure. But the 'dry law' stripped the malfunctioning state machinery of its time-honoured lubricant without providing a substitute. And so the machine collapsed.

PROHIBITION AS AN INEFFECTUAL ALTERNATIVE

The state obligation to drink was matched by high societal acceptance of alcoholism. Yet even in Protestant Europe, rough capitalist reality was such that abstinence remained an idealistic project. Starting in the 19th century, churches, civic associations and women's action groups began to speak out against alcohol. In the Scandinavian countries, they succeeded in establishing a not-for-profit state monopoly on alcoholic beverages and strict rationing as early as the 1870s. This anti-liberal,

paternalistic measure was backed by society. To this day, a fiendish excise limits the liquor-loving Scandinavians' alcohol consumption. In the USA, a fundamentalist movement notoriously brought about a period of prohibition in 1919, which simply encouraged the rise of an alcohol mafia.

At the end of the 19th century, Russia also had a public movement which called for a ban on alcohol. The issue became political, since critics asserted there was a connection between Tsarism and alcoholism, and saw the struggle against the addiction as a struggle against the regime. But it took the defeat in the Russian-Japanese war of 1904–5, attributed by many observers to rampant

alcoholism among the Russian troops, for the Tsar to promulgate the 'dry law' of 1914 – with the aforementioned consequences.

POST-SOVIET PARADOXES

One of Boris Yeltsin's first *ukase* abolished the alcohol monopoly and classified vodka as a foodstuff. He also exempted the state sports committee, the church and veterans of the Afghan war from duties on imported vodka: for the first time in history, the number one national product was produced outside Russia, and Russians' greatest

delight was moved completely outside the grasp of state interference. However, the regional 'barons' soon privatised the monopoly; in economically depressed regions, vodka remained their sole power resource. And the country still has not got over the 'divorce' between state and vodka. State alcohol revenue dropped to a small percentage of the budget,



Ill. no 3: Alaska. 100 grammes of historic justice

and an orgy of alcoholism broke out against a backdrop of dramatic social upheaval.

By now, annual per capita consumption has reached 19 litres of pure alcohol, as against a European average of 12 litres. Although the share of beer, which was until recently exempt from excise as a non-alcoholic beverage, has grown significantly since Soviet times, vodka is still predominant (about 70%). In Western Europe, hard liquor only accounts for a third of the alcohol consumed. Since only 9.7 litres of alcohol per capita come from legal production in Russia, the low-income majority must drink impure rotgut, not to mention alcohol-based detergents or other

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substitutes. These figures belie any talk of a ‘beer revolution’ and a positive change in drinking patterns. There are indications of growing moderation among managers and yuppies, but the impoverished intelligentsia and rural Russians drink all the more. Every third death in Russia is directly or indirectly linked to alcoholism. In a country with ‘European’ birth rates, the extremely high mortality rate among working-age men has led to a severe demographic crisis.

A fierce debate is raging about ways to curb alcohol consumption and the high mortality. But

‘Now there’s no-one left to make Russia drunk ... Russia drinks on her own, as much as she wants ... The culture of vodka drinking, ... inculcated by the state, is gone, and as a result of this freedom, vodka folklore disappeared instantly.’

(Alexei Levinson: ‘Vodka as a lost utopia. 13 toasts’, in: *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* no. 76/2005)

even if the experts had effective solutions to offer – which is not the case –, they wouldn’t have the means to influence alcohol policies, i.e. the lobbyists’ efforts to increase alcohol revenue. Given the volume of illegal production, any strengthening of the state monopoly would only expand the market for cheap substitutes. The repeated failure of top-down attempts to change Russian drinking culture makes one wonder whether recovery is possible at all. The answer to this is ‘yes and no’. The dynamics of modernisation and de-modernisation are changing society. On the one hand, members of the growing middle class in the (big) cities are adopting the drinking habits of comparable Western groups. In rural areas, the issue is linked with perspectives of finding a job and living a life in dignity. There are local initiatives to treat alcoholics and reward those healed with jobs at the privatised farms. It is too early to say

how sustainable these micro-achievements will be, as they do not affect the mortality statistics. And Russians’ genetic predispositions are unfavourable to boot: it is said that two fifths of male Russians’ livers store the toxic acetaldehyde that leads to alcohol poisoning.

A transformation of Russian drinking patterns is more likely to result from the migration of non-Russians into Russia. Some of the young women faced with growing alcoholism and high male mortality will have to opt for migrant men: mostly Chinese in the Russian Far East and southern Siberia, and Caucasians and Central Asians in European Russia. These migrants carry a moderate drinking culture which could gradually supersede excessive Russian habits. However, such an end to Russians’ centuries-old romance with vodka would also terminate a genuinely Russian everyday culture, at least in some regions: it might be tantamount to a partial loss of ‘Russianness’.

Translated from the German
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CRUELTY, SEX AND PEDAGOGICAL AUTHORITY: ON SOME FUNCTIONS OF ALCOHOL IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN CULTURE

Mikhail Sokolov

essay

The opinion that alcohol is one of Russia's main calamities is wide-spread both in Russia and abroad. There is much less agreement, however, on what makes Russians drink. A popular explanation is that alcohol is a means of escaping reality. According to this view, the fact that Russia has such a disastrously high per capita rate of alcohol consumption either has to do with the fact that living conditions are worse here than in other European societies, or with Russians' relative inability to endure the hardships of life and greater propensity for escapism. In both cases alcohol is seen as a means of settling problems resulting from people's inability to adapt to the demands of social reality. Without rejecting that explanation, it may be worthwhile examining a different interpretation, whereby alcohol consumption, rather than being a way of escaping society, is a strategy that allows individuals to manoeuvre between its conflicting claims.

In every society there are views about the kinds of actions an individual should abstain from to avoid becoming a social outcast. These views draw a moral boundary which separates adult, full-fledged and worthy members of the community from the rest. However, the main institutions of that very community may, in order to ensure their survival, sometimes push individuals to perform actions that are incompatible with the status of a full moral subject. This predicament is often resolved through a social stratification that

forces compromising roles upon members of the weakest social groups, branding them as morally inferior beings and justifying others' domination over them. One example is the kind of ethnic stratification where society pushes recent immigrants into disreputable or semi-criminal sectors of employment and then goes on to explain their

'To drown their talent in hard liquor,
Two learned post-graduates need a third one.
We don't grudge each other a drink,
Fill the glasses to the brim!
In the struggle against the demon drink,
It is the demon who wins.'
(The Green Dragon: A Song about the Demon Drink)

marginalisation by the alleged moral corruption manifested in their choice of occupation.

Alcohol represents another way of dealing with these difficulties. Under normal conditions, crossing moral boundaries is seen as a lengthy and sometimes irreversible process. A child needs years to be accepted as a full-fledged member of the moral community. And while it may only take someone a moment to commit a repulsive and inexcusable act and become branded as a rascal, a criminal or a lunatic, it would be very difficult to make others forget about that act and vindicate oneself. Unless the person who has 'gone astray' had been drinking. In Russian culture, intoxication is seen as a state that temporarily places indi-

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viduals outside the moral boundaries of the community – and then admits them back in without the fatal damage to their moral status that would otherwise have been inevitable. The following examples may illustrate this thesis.

In the Russian countryside, one legitimate occasion for alcohol consumption is the seasonal slaughter of cattle reared in a domestic environment. Men who agree to perform this task thereby obtain a licence for excessive drinking both before and after the job. The usual explanation is that alcohol makes it easier to kill a living being to which one has become attached after living side by side with it for many months. Be that as it may, alcohol also solves a different and possibly more substantial problem. Liquor allows the

slaughterer to dodge suspicions of being a person for whom such actions are not a matter of moral concern. In the eyes of society, alcohol allows the individual to cross a moral border, to perform a dirty but necessary deed – and to return untainted the next morning.

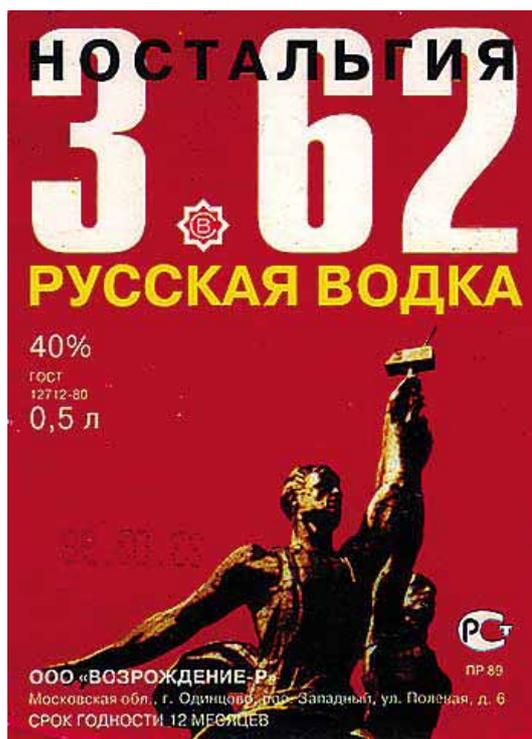
Let us now move from rural life to an entirely different social context, that of young urban professionals. As recent research has shown [see the article by Olga Chepurnaya and Larisa Shpakovskaya in this issue], they use alcohol in a similar way, albeit in a totally different area of social interaction. For young men and women from the new middle class, alcoholic beverages are an important element of flirting and courtship and

almost invariably accompany the beginning of a sexual relationship – irrespectively of whether that relationship is legitimate from the point of view of social norms, i.e. including extra-marital affairs. In this case, it is the desire for physical intimacy that runs up against almost insurmountable obstacles in the shape

of prohibitions on overt expressions of sexual desire and the risk of adverse effects on one's reputation. However, a reference to alcoholic inebriation – 'I wasn't in my right mind, I don't remember anything, we just woke up in the same bed in the morning' – is a foolproof excuse often accepted even by deceived spouses, which allows a certain freedom of action.

The third example is taken from the life of academic institutions. Rus-

sian institutions of higher education attach great importance to those occasions when all the teaching staff and students at a faculty or sub-faculty jointly celebrate a state holiday or an institutional event. Non-attendance of such parties is severely condemned despite the fact that they almost inevitably encourage informal interaction between students and professors, when the usually strictly observed divide between the two groups is narrowed down. I have noticed that such institutional rituals are especially wide-spread in those institutions where the distance is normally the greatest. Despite the differences from the two above-mentioned cases, this case follows the same logic. Russian culture is surely not alone in viewing



Ill. no 4: Russian Vodka. Nostalgia 3.62

essay

purely formal and reserved relations between people who constantly interact with each other as something wrong, as evidence of insufficient emotional openness and mutual benevolence. In this case, alcohol enables professors (who are usually the driving force behind these celebrations) to cross the boundary in the other direction. It allows them to show that they do not actually have the personality flaws which they might have been suspected of if they had stuck to their institutionally prescribed role too strictly. It also makes it easy for them to revert to that role the next morning as if nothing had happened.

Comparing the first two examples with the third allows us to see the diversity of functions that Russian culture attributes to alcohol. On the one hand, there are detailed everyday theories prescribing what one should drink, with whom and in what order, how to deal with drunk people and how to cure a hangover. On the other hand, there is no consensus on the basic question of what alcoholic intoxication does to one's personality. According to one account, alcohol peels away the husk, unveiling the individual's true 'I' for all to

see. The opposite conception is that the drunk person's needs and desires may have nothing to do with the needs and desires the same person has when sober, and thus the sober person may not be held responsible for actions committed while drunk. This fuzziness about the effects of alcohol does not, however, impede its practical use. On the contrary, the fact that it allows manoeuvring between different everyday theories makes it a more efficient means of resolving social dilemmas.

Translated from the Russian

by Mischa Gabowitsch

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MUSEUM OF RUSSIAN VODKA IN ST. PETERSBURG

- A cosy and inexpensive tavern serving an enormous variety of vodka brands (1 glass of vodka free of charge) is on the premises
- Address: Konnogvardeiskiyi boulevard 5
- Metro station: Nevskiyi prospekt/ Gostinnyy Dvor
- Buses: 3, 22, 27
- Open: 11 am – 10 pm daily
- Phone: 312 34 16, 312 01 78
- Entrance fee: about 2 €
- Excursion in English: about 2 €

KULTURA'S SEPTEMBER ISSUE WILL DISCUSS ISLAMIC CULTURE IN RUSSIA.

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