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**NAVAL  
POSTGRADUATE  
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**MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA**

**THESIS**

**RUSSIAN VODKA – A NATIONAL TRAGEDY**

by

Dimitri Kesi

March 2009

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**RUSSIAN VODKA – A NATIONAL TRAGEDY**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

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## **ABSTRACT**

Russian governments promoted vodka because it was a major source of income. As a result, Russians are culturally conditioned to consume alcohol and are facing tragic demographic declines never before seen in the developed world.

Russia's autocratic governments are responsible for the development of vodka addiction. The crown used vodka as a source of income and steered the agrarian economy in the direction of vodka production. The Russian church used vodka both as a means to control the peasants, and as form of payment, further cementing the peasants' dependency on alcohol. Russian culture, steeped in religious mysticism and social compliance, promulgated vodka consumption. The importance of vodka did not diminish after the communists took over — the entire Soviet social fabric strongly depended on vodka.

This generational consumption has resulted in unprecedented demographic declines, which affect Russian economy, healthcare, and the military. Centuries of dedicated vodka consumption have brought Russia to the brink of societal collapse. Only social education, open markets and inclusion into the free world communities can reverse Russia's downward spiral. The U.S. needs to play a lead role in Russian recovery, so that we end up with a nuclear armed friend instead of an ostracized and insecure enemy.



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## I. INTRODUCTION

The question this paper addresses is *Why do Russians consume large amounts of distilled alcohol, and how has this consumption affected the Russian society?* Russians are notorious for their ability to consume large amounts of alcohol, especially vodka. Any foreign visitor to Russia is automatically fed vodka by the hosts. Russians may be culturally addicted to alcohol, and this addiction has already shown profound effects on her demographic condition.

This paper contends that vodka has been used by the Russian authoritarian governments, be it Czarist or communist, as a major source of income, inadvertently creating a society of addicts, whose lives greatly depend on distilled spirits. As a result, Russians are culturally conditioned to consume alcohol, and have been facing tragic demographic declines never before seen in the developed world. To Russians drinking vodka is not only an addiction, but is a fun pastime, and sadly, a source of national pride in terms of their ability to consume alcohol.

Russia's history of autocracy plays a huge role in the development of vodka consumption. The crown used vodka as a tremendous source of income and helped steer the agrarian economy in the direction of vodka production. Little changed after the communist revolution, with respect to the importance of alcohol, both to the government and the consumers. With the exception of the educated and communist party elites, most of the masses had no ability to socially progress beyond the job and immediate family and friends — alcohol filled the void that communist industry and art created.

Social problems resulted from Russia's development of generations of alcoholics. This paper will examine national health statistics, social problems, and effects on the military. Effects on the military and on the economy are particularly important. Given the poor condition of the Russian armed forces both in terms of quality of personnel and equipment, alcoholism within their ranks is an important consideration for future possible joint exercises or even campaigns.

Few counter arguments can be brought up as the Russian consumption and seeming addiction to vodka is well known. There may be disagreements as to the core, historical reasons, since Russia is not the only country/culture in the world that consumes large amounts of alcohol. However, research has shown that Russian love affair with vodka was state and church directed. No other European culture was ever as dependent on distilled spirits as Russia had been. Russia's backwardness that lasted into the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century eclipsed that of any European counterpart. It is this backwardness that helped develop a national addiction. No other nation had similar history or resulted in similar dependence on alcohol as Russia has. This sad history was made possible by the czarist authoritarian governments and the church bent on maintaining tradition and the crown greedy for the revenue distilled spirits provided. Finally, this paper will attempt to forecast the future state of the Russian society if alcohol consumption remains at current levels.

In 1992, a 23-member multidisciplinary committee of the U.S. National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence and the American Society of Addiction Medicine concluded a 2-year study of the definition of alcoholism.<sup>1</sup> "The committee agreed to define alcoholism as a primary, chronic disease with genetic, psychosocial, and environmental factors influencing its development and manifestations. The disease is often progressive and fatal, [characterized] by impaired control over drinking, preoccupation with the drug alcohol, use of alcohol despite adverse consequences, and distortions in thinking, most notably denial."<sup>2</sup> As this paper will show, the Russian consumption of vodka fits this definition precisely, as if the definition was made after a long and detailed study of Russian drinking habits. Today, Russia is a nation of alcoholics, a nation on a verge of a demographic collapse that cannot be reversed unless a dramatic cultural paradigm shift takes place immediately, something not very likely to happen any time soon.

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<sup>1</sup> Journal of the American Medical Association, "The Definition of Alcoholism", August 26, 1992, <http://jama.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/abstract/268/8/1012>, (Accessed November 14, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

## II. HISTORY OF VODKA

### A. SOVIET CLAIMS

In the late 1970s, the USSR wanted to export vodka to the West but ran into an unexpected problem—the Western competitors and Poland alleged that the USSR did not have exclusivity to the word *vodka* and therefore could not market their product as such.<sup>3</sup> Initially the USSR did not take these claims seriously, but when the free market rebelled and took the Soviets to court, the regime realized they needed to prove that not only they had the right to call their vodka *vodka*, but by virtue of inheriting the Russian culture from the previous regime, they had inherited vodka's provenance, the name itself, and therefore had the natural right to produce and sell vodka as its sole inventors.<sup>4</sup>

The Soviet government commissioned an unprecedented internal study and was able to prove that vodka was invented in Russia. In 1982, an international tribunal ruled in favor of the USSR, citing that the term *vodka* and the product it represents is genuinely Russian and the USSR can market it as it pleases.<sup>5</sup> The Soviet case was based entirely on their study, and they were able to prove that vodka originated in Moscow decades before the dates Poland claimed to have invented it.<sup>6</sup> The Soviet research was credible; after all, the tribunal was not a Soviet court, but a European one, and had heard arguments from all sides.

### B. ORIGIN OF THE TERM VODKA

There are several consumable human inventions that have affected human history in very significant ways—iron, petroleum, uranium, and gunpowder come to mind.<sup>7</sup>

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3 William Pokhlebkin, Introduction to *A History of Vodka* (London: Verso, 1992), x.

4 *Ibid.*, xvi.

5 Joseph Tartakovsky, "Vodka, Elixir of the Masses," *The St. Petersburg Times*, April 18, 2006, [http://www.sptimes.ru/index.php?action\\_id=2&story\\_id=17369](http://www.sptimes.ru/index.php?action_id=2&story_id=17369) (Accessed Mar 15, 2008)

6 *Ibid.*

7 Pokhlebkin, *A History of Vodka*, 1.

Grain spirits must also be mentioned among highly influential inventions as they have had a profound impact on human relationships, permeating all levels of social order.<sup>8</sup> The three main problems that distilled alcohol has created are fiscal, both for the state and individual, productive, again both for the state and individual and social.<sup>9</sup> It is the fiscal and the social problems that affected Russia on a level never seen anywhere else, with staggering demographic consequences that are beginning to raise their heads as the 21<sup>st</sup> century takes off from its starting blocks. Sadly, education alone will not fix the current or the future issues—the alcohol problem has become cultural, a major part of the Russian psyche that the Russian government will eventually have to deal with.

Before examining the origins of vodka, we must first take a look at the word *vodka* itself. This term is well known in almost all parts of the world. It is hard to imagine that there is a culture today that does not recognize the word *vodka* and what it stands for. And while all associate this term with distilled spirits, the actual meaning of it is nothing more than ‘little war’, a diminutive form of the Russian word for water—*voda*.<sup>10</sup> The word *vodka* was not widely published in Russian dictionaries until the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, although it had been used by common people.<sup>11</sup> Officially, it started to appear in dictionaries published in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as an independent lexical term, with its one and only modern meaning of a strong alcoholic beverage.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, most of the early contemporary dictionaries of other Slavic languages had no mention of the word *vodka*, and when they did, only in its original diminutive context of the term *voda* (water).<sup>13</sup> It is only in Moscow, the Moscow oblast, in the grain producing areas of Kursk, Orlov, and Tambov, and in the Russified Ukraine around Kharkov and Sumy that the word *vodka* was used exclusively in its alcoholic liquor context.<sup>14</sup> “It becomes clear that the middle

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8 Pokhlebkin, A History of Vodka, 1.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 5.

11 Ibid., 6.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

of the nineteenth century constituted a critical juncture, when the word vodka with its present meaning had begun to acquire a broad currency in the general Russian language.”<sup>15</sup>

While the endpoint of the origin of the word *vodka* is clear, the actual origin is not. However, the research has shown that “at least up to the beginning of the fourteenth century, the word vodka, both with the meaning of water and with that of alcoholic liquor, was absolutely unknown both in Russia and throughout the Slavic world.”<sup>16</sup> The word *vodka* in its diminutive (water) meaning did not appear in the Russian language until 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, when the Russian language began to form as a national language. As an example, the Ukrainian language did not become official until the 15<sup>th</sup> century and had no mention of vodka until much later. On the other hand, the Polish language had a heavy Latin influence and had not used the term *vodka* until centuries after it was officiated in the Russian language. And finally, thanks mainly to the Tatar invasions of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Russian language developed in relative isolation, thus coining the term vodka without any external Slavic help, and being the sole propagator of the term once the Tatar hegemony was history.<sup>17</sup>

Having established the Russian origin of the term, we must take a look at the beginnings of the evolution of Russian alcoholic drinks and see how that led to the appearance of vodka itself. Starting with the 9<sup>th</sup> century, several names for alcoholic beverages appeared in the Russian language—*pivo* (meaning drink, later to denote beer), *voda* (water), *syta* (honey water), *berezovitsa* (birch-sap wine), *vino* (wine), *med* (mead), *kvas* (a drink very similar to beer), *sikera* (beer), and *ol* (ale).<sup>18</sup> Most of these were alcoholic, with the exception of *voda* and *syta*. However, besides *voda*, all had a non-alcoholic version or could be easily fermented to produce alcohol content. Because there

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15 Pokhlebin, *A History of Vodka*, 6.

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Ibid.*, 8.

18 *Ibid.*, 9.

was so much similarity in the production process between the alcoholic and non-alcoholic versions, the non-alcoholic name was retained for the alcoholic versions of the beverages.<sup>19</sup>

The fine line between alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks was blurred even more with the practice of diluting them with water (*voda*). Of note is the practice of diluting grape wine from Byzantium and Crimea with water (*voda*). “It is easy to understand how the word *voda* came to be closely associated with alcoholic liquors, and why it had the sense of a beverage rather than merely of water in a general sense, as [it is thought of] today.”<sup>20</sup>

There is also another reason why term *voda* came to be associated with alcohol. From the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, the water that was actually drunk was called ‘running water’—that of clear, fast-flowing springs. By the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the term ‘running water’ was replaced by ‘spring water’. By the time the term *vodka* had appeared, the terms ‘spring water’ or other equivalents such as ‘living water’ or ‘water of life’ were already in use and were not given to distilled drinks as was the case in Western Europe.<sup>21</sup> Throughout Western Europe (via heavy Latin influence) spirits containing “half or less volume of water, [were] given the name *aqua vitae* (water of life), from which are derived the French *eau de vie*, the Scots whisky (via the Gaelic *uisge beatha*), and the Polish *okowita*.”<sup>22</sup> In essence, most of the European terms for alcoholic spirits are simple translations from Latin, or as in other cases (Scandinavian *akvavit*), “the Latin phrase [had] been taken directly into the national language.”<sup>23</sup> Since Russia did not fall under the Latin influence, the term ‘living water’ retained its original meaning of clean, potable water. The conclusion is that the term *vodka* was associated not with water but with the

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19 Pokhlebkina, A History of Vodka, 9.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., 10.

23 Pokhlebkina, A History of Vodka, 10.

oldest form of alcoholic beverage on earth—wine<sup>24</sup>, and thus was a clear and distinct term from that of actual drinking water—*voda*.

### C. HISTORY OF RUSSIAN ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES

Having established the origins of the term *vodka*, we need to examine the history of the alcoholic beverage in Russia. High-alcohol content drinks were already consumed in Russia as early as 9<sup>th</sup> century. Mead, an alcoholic beverage derived from honey was noted in Russia by “the Arab traveler Ibn-Dast, [who had noted] that the Russians had an intoxicating drink made of honey.”<sup>25</sup> The creation and consumption of mead started in Russia and Macedonia nearly simultaneously, and then appeared in the rest of the Balkans, and the Baltic lands. By 13<sup>th</sup> century it had made its way to Bulgaria, and two hundred years later to Czechs and Poles.<sup>26</sup> Specifically, mead was first made on the territory of present-day Belorussia and in Polotsk, both geographic areas where wild bee honey was harvested. From there it spread to the Keivan Rus via Pripyat and Dnepr rivers.<sup>27</sup>

Production of mead eventually led to the discovery of distilling techniques. This aspect of history warrants an entire paper of its own. In the end, who invented vodka is not as important as why it had spread as it had and why it became so important in Russia. Vodka spread through Russia from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries. The key to vodka becoming important is the “emergence of vodka as a social concept” followed by the formation of the state, and the state becoming “the main agent of society.”<sup>28</sup> That is when the state noted the importance of this commodity and “began to devote serious attention to vodka.”<sup>29</sup> The single, most important, bottom-line cause of Russian addiction to vodka is government dependence on vodka-generated revenue. There is only

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24 Pokhlebin, A History of Vodka, 10.

25 Pokhlebin, A History of Vodka, 10.

26 Ibid., 12.

27 Ibid.

28 Pokhlebin, A History of Vodka, 53.

29 Ibid.



one main economic reason which precisely pinpoints to the cause of existence in Russia of alcohol distilling as an organized, standard practice.<sup>30</sup> It is “a sharp change in tax policy and the taxation system as a result of the introduction of a new factor in state finances: a monopoly of alcoholic spirits, including as a rule both their production and sale.”<sup>31</sup> When the government realized the huge potential for profits, it devoted its energies to acquiring as much money as possible, thus inadvertently sowing the seeds for future alcoholism. “Alcoholism has long been a Russian problem; travelers from Europe as far back as the sixteenth century commented on Russian drunkenness.”<sup>32</sup> Five hundred years later travelers still do the same.

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30 Pokhlebkina, *A History of Vodka*, 43.

31 Pokhlebkina, *A History of Vodka*, 43.

32 Michael Kort, *The Handbook of the Former Soviet Union*, (Twenty-First Century Books: Breckenridge, 1997), 154

### III. RUSSIAN TAX FARM SYSTEM

#### A. VODKA AS 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY REVENUE

Once a unified Russia emerged and set forth her history of monarchies, vodka remained as the one commodity whose value never declined. It became a reliable source of income for the crown, which quickly turned vodka production into a state controlled enterprise. In 19<sup>th</sup> century, Russia vodka's importance cannot be understated. In the 1850s vodka accounted for at least 200 million rubles in economic impact, or more than 20 percent of the value of all internal trade.<sup>33</sup> In 1859 alone, the government's share of this huge turnover exceeded 120 million rub, or over 40 percent of all national revenues.<sup>34</sup> “[This] huge sum was enough to cover most of the peacetime expenses of the army on which Russia's status as a great power depended.”<sup>35</sup> Already by mid 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia was trapped in vicious circle—it needed people to consume vodka to sustain its army, an army made of the vodka consumers, who as will be shown later had more loyalty to vodka than to pretty much anything else in their lives.

The 1859 numbers were slightly out of line. Still, from 1805 to 1863 liquor revenues averaged around 32 percent of state revenues every year. Moreover, during this period vodka was “the single most important source of government revenues.”<sup>36</sup> The government certainly was keenly involved in this great source of income. However, the government was not the only player who had an important stake in the alcohol enterprise. A largely agrarian society, nineteenth century Russian farmers (nobles) controlled the economy with the help of the government, most efforts centering on vodka.

The nobility carried out all the distilling in Russia and had to sell their entire product to the government. The government, in turn, resold all vodka at a very handsome

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33 David Christian, “Vodka and Corruption in Russia on the Eve of Emancipation,” *Slavic Review* Vol. 46 No. 3/4 (1987): 471.

34 *Ibid.*

35 *Ibid.*

36 *Ibid.*

profit to the tax farmers, who bid on regional vodka trade monopolies at government held auctions every four years.<sup>37</sup> The government encouraged potential bidders by providing official statistics that included numbers of people living in villages, taverns, official vodka allotment, value of government taxes, and prior years alcohol sales figures, all in an effort to entice bidding and get as much money as possible.<sup>38</sup> The scale and overt dependence on distilled alcohol is stunning and could only evolve in a relatively closed society with little external trade, relatively little industrialization and with huge numbers of peasants. These peasants, once emancipated, moved to the cities where industrialization was trying to emerge and brought with them the love and the need of vodka.

## **B. 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY VODKA PRODUCTION**

The entire nation seemed to be immersed in vodka production. As an example, in the 26 Great Russian Provinces 723 distilleries existed in 1860, earning close to 17 million rubles per year in government contracts.<sup>39</sup> Besides the Great Provinces, there were sixteen lesser, or privileged provinces, which stretched from the Baltic through Russia, Ukraine and further south to the newly acquired lands. These privileged provinces had an additional 3,890 smaller distilleries, all pumping vodka into Russian veins.<sup>40</sup> All these distilleries were owned by the nobility, who had held a state-given monopoly on distilling in the Great Provinces since early 19<sup>th</sup> century; and in the privileged provinces since “time immemorial.”<sup>41</sup>

At the same time, 216 tax farmers were engaged in the retailing of vodka and most of them belonged to the merchant estate. In the twenty-six Great Russian provinces (the heartland of Muscovite Russia), the tax farmers leased monopolies on the retail trade in more than 300 distinct tax farms. Altogether, these employed more than 50,000 managers, tavern keepers, security guards, and other workers. Tax farming also existed in the

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37 Christian, “Vodka and Corruption in Russia on the Eve of Emancipation,” 479.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid., 471.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

privileged provinces, though here its scale and importance was greatly reduced, as the right to retail liquor was shared with the local nobility.<sup>42</sup>

It is clear that vodka not only involved the landed nobility, but its existence supported most of the other industries—services, security, merchants and government bureaucracy.

### C. 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY VODKA CORRUPTION AND BRIBES

Ironically, another terrible Russian habit may have evolved thanks to Russia's dependence on Vodka—bribery. Unlike the United States, and most first-world nations today, in vast parts of the world bribery is a common and accepted way of getting things done or simply showing one's appreciation of another's efforts. It certainly is and has been a case with Russia, where bribery and corruption is a way of life and practically expected and most certainly accepted. Russian large-scale, unconcealed bribery was born in the vodka business of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, beginning with the tax farmers.

As stated earlier, in Russia distilling was carried out by the nobles, who had to sell all their vodka to the government, which in turn sold it off at a tremendous profit to the tax farmers, who had leased regional vodka-trade monopolies and had bid for each tax farm every four years at St. Petersburg auctions.<sup>43</sup> The system required the tax farmers to sell at no profit the unfiltered and unflavored vodka known as *polugar* (half strength), or at 40 percent alcohol by volume, instead of the 80 percent one can derive from double distillation. By law, 50-80 percent of vodka sold was supposed to be *polugar*, sold at 3 rubles per bucket, with a 10-15 percent commission to cover costs.<sup>44</sup> Profits were only permitted on *polugar* sold above the government quota and on selling improved vodka—filtered through sand and flavored, also bought from the government. This plan looked like a sure-win for the government. The problem was that in order for the tax farmers to just break even they had to sell each bucket of *polugar* for at least 6

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42 Christian, "Vodka and Corruption in Russia on the Eve of Emancipation," 471-472.

43 Ibid., 479.

44 Ibid., 480.

rubles per bucket, a sum double of what the government had mandated.<sup>45</sup> This is because the government charged 2.41 rubles per bucket and an average 1.99 rubles per bucket in taxes.<sup>46</sup> So, what the tax farmers did is filter the *polugar* through sand and flavor it with honey, and sell it at a serious profit, sharing the windfall with government officials who turned their eyes away from the illegal practices.<sup>47</sup> That is why the tax farmers bid on the auctions for seemingly non-profitable enterprises—to make money through corruption, and corruption only. They would also use false measures and dilute *polugar* with water. Some estimates are that most *polugar* was diluted 10-30 percent with water, thus for all practical purposes selling water at the price of alcohol.<sup>48</sup> “A contemporary remarked: ‘Moses may have worked a miracle when he drew water from a rock, but to turn water into gold requires no miraculous powers at all.’”<sup>49</sup>

The bottom-line on *polugar* profit was that it was sold at an average of just over 7 rubles per bucket (year 1859), implying that over 40 percent of the turnover of vodka was illegal—with over 140 million rubles in sales for one year, 60 million rubles was generated illegally.<sup>50</sup> This does not include money made by extortion through legal, but vile private security armies the tax farmers maintained. They would extort money from the farmers for transporting vodka across tax farm lines (illegal) by planting evidence and then charging extreme fines for the offense, or by charging tavern keepers with a vodka tax just to do business.<sup>51</sup>

Since a large share of the tax farmers’ revenue was generated illegally, bribes were necessary to keep the money coming in. The tax farmers had to protect their sources of revenue, and the government had to collude in order to attract the bids every four years. Government officials received large sums in bribes, which in essence were

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45 Christian, “Vodka and Corruption in Russia on the Eve of Emancipation,” 480-481.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid., 481-482.

50 Ibid., 484.

51 Ibid., 483.

normal parts of their incomes. “In this way, the vodka trade spun a network of corruption that embraced all levels of the government and diverted millions of rubles of entrepreneurial capital from more productive forms of investment.”<sup>52</sup> Vodka-derived bribery was widespread in Russia.

It reflected both the ancient Muscovite tradition of letting officials live off the land and a traditional Russian notion of hospitality. Its familiarity ensured popular acceptance of the necessity, and even legitimacy, of bribes. These attitudes were shared even by senior government officials. The first government enquiry into corruption, held in 1856, concluded that bribes under 500 rubles should not be counted as bribes at all.<sup>53</sup>

This was not an insignificant amount of money. As an example, the nobles who did not own land could earn annual salaries ranging from 250 rubles for a provincial secretary to 500 rubles for a titular councilor, and from 1,000 rubles for a college administrator to over 1,500 for a district police chief.<sup>54</sup> The pay for domestics was even less, albeit they did receive free housing and raised own food on the landowners land. Still, to put the 500 rubles bribe in perspective and to understand the scope of the corruption it is important to note that peasants could earn one rubble per year for cattle work, seven rubbles for blacksmithing duties, 25 rubbles for a steward and up to 50 rubbles for an equerry.<sup>55</sup> Doctors could earn 1,000 rubles per year, while building materials for a hospital could cost less than 500 rub.<sup>56</sup> The 500 rubles bribe was more than an average white-collar salary in Russia. Yet there was so much money being made on vodka that sacrificing such sums on bribes was well worth it.

Russian historical archives have documents officially approving bribes for administrators who went above and beyond their duties doing extra work on behalf of the government. In some documents calling such extra income as bribes is outright

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52 Christian, “Vodka and Corruption in Russia on the Eve of Emancipation,” 483.

53 Ibid.

54 Viktoria Mihaylovna Sergeeva, “The nobles of Stavropol,” Vitrual Reference System of the City of Tolyatti, [http://gorod63.ru/page/tlhistory/stavrdvor\\_eng/](http://gorod63.ru/page/tlhistory/stavrdvor_eng/) (Accessed Jun 25, 2008).

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

denounced.<sup>57</sup> What is even worse, these bribes were not incidental in their nature, but institutionalized, semi-formal payments expected and executed by both the giver and the receiver.<sup>58</sup> And since the central government was dependent on the revenue from the tax farmers and had to collude in the bribe business to ensure the farmers' success punitive action was unthinkable.<sup>59</sup>

As an example of the levels of corruption, "when Nicholas I called for a list of those governors who did not take bribes in the early 1850s only two could be named out of forty-five."<sup>60</sup> Starting with the governors, the tax farmers worked their way downwards through the bureaucratic establishment, doling out money in a methodic, calculated way. "There even existed regular pay scales, calculated by government officials and based on information from 'private' sources."<sup>61</sup> A study done on the tax farm bribery revealed that a provincial exchequer would normally get an annual bribe of 2,000 rubles (the very person responsible for the crown's revenue collection), while a governor would receive 3,200 rub.<sup>62</sup> These sums represented approximately five and four times their annual salaries respectively. If an average government controller today makes approximately \$80,000,<sup>63</sup> and the average governor salary is close \$125,000<sup>64</sup>, then bribes of \$400,000 and \$500,000 respectively every year, condoned by the government without any punitive actions would be hard to resist. On the provincial level the bribes looked as follows: governor, the secretary of police (300 rub), the commissaries of police (3x600 rub), precinct police officers (6x360 rub), district police captain (600 rub), circuit judge (600 rub), commissaries of rural police (3x720 rub), permanent assessor (300 rub), Secretary of rural police court (300 rub), councilor for

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57 Christian, "Vodka and Corruption in Russia on the Eve of Emancipation," 473.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid., 472.

60 Ibid., 473.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid., 474.

63 PayScale, Inc., [http://www.payscale.com/research/US/Job=Comptroller\\_\(Financial\)/Salary](http://www.payscale.com/research/US/Job=Comptroller_(Financial)/Salary) (Accessed October 7, 2008).

64 Andrew Knapp, "Govs' salaries range from \$1 to 206,500," Stateline.org, (May 15, 2007), <http://www.stateline.org/live/details/story?contentId=207914> (Accessed October 7, 2008)

department of liquor (600 rub), head clerk (500 rub) and bureau overseer of liquor (600 rub).<sup>65</sup> This repeated pretty much over all 45 provinces. Bribes for district-level officials were half of the provincial ones. In all, an average tax farmer paid out a staggering 14,760 rubles in bribes along per year.<sup>66</sup>

There were officials who did not take bribes, but their numbers were few and they had even fewer sympathizers. These honest people were ridiculed and considered dangerous as they undermined everything for everyone. Often the tax farmers would bribe the subordinates of these honest people so that the subordinates would lose respect for their honest supervisors. Also, an official who did not take bribes would earn the enmity of the tax farmers, who would quickly and efficiently have him fired, as he jeopardized the valuable venture for all involved.<sup>67</sup>

#### **D. END OF VODKA CORRUPTION AND ITS LEGACY**

As large as the bribes were, they only constituted anywhere from 3 percent to 13 percent of the total tax farm turnover. That was a small price to pay considering that the money bought a blind eye to all the human and fiscal abuse that the tax farmers perpetuated upon their employees and upon the national treasury.<sup>68</sup> Their influence was so great, that by 1850s the central government had little control over the provinces and suffered a great moral plunge among its employees who did not work in the provinces. The revenue vodka generated was so profound and the corruption so deep, the crown could not even impose own controls without the approval of the tax farmers.

On occasion, the tax farmers could bully even the autocratic Nicholas I. In 1850, for example, it was discovered that no ordinary vodka was on sale anywhere in St. Petersburg, though the tax farm regulations required that it be available. The emperor ordered an enquiry. Immediately, a delegation of tax farmers complained to the Ministry of Finance that the vodka taxes could be paid only if the government continued to protect sales of more expensive drinks. Indeed, they explained frankly that it was

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<sup>65</sup> Christian, "Vodka and Corruption in Russia on the Eve of Emancipation," 473.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 475.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 477.



precisely on this understanding that they had bid high at the auctions for the 1851-1855 tax farms. Ten days after the emperor had ordered an enquiry, he cancelled his own order, and things returned to normal.<sup>69</sup>

As will be shown later, this will not be the last time a Russian government attempted to control the sphere of vodka, each and every time succeeding only to fail. Eventually the corruption collapsed under its own weight. Decades of corruption resulted in a significant number of enemies who were bitter at the money they were not seeing themselves: consumers who were forced to pay double, noblemen distillers who were forced to sell their product to the government at a set price; and central government officials aware of evil effects of monopolizing vodka business. By 1861 Alexander II had decided to abolish the tax farm system. Despite vigorous opposition of the tax farmers, the emperor was persuaded to change the law, which he did with great success. The new law got rid of the monopolies in both distilling and trading and established a tax on distilling and licensing for alcohol trading, which were collected by officials who had nothing to do with the previous system and were paid much higher salaries to keep them honest. And while most vodka-related corruption ended, the government's own vodka revenues did not diminish.<sup>70</sup>

This was one of the more significant legal changes in Russian history, ending an era of practically legalized government corruption. The new laws did away with the source of corruption, the tax farm, and finally made government officials employees of the government and not of the tax farmers.<sup>71</sup> “Economically, the reform was equally significant, for it redirected huge sums of entrepreneurial capital from a corrupt and unproductive form of enterprise into more productive areas.”<sup>72</sup> The millionaire tax farmers now had to invest their money elsewhere. Many of the tax farmers became millionaires with nowhere to invest their money—primitive accumulation of capital with

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69 Christian, “Vodka and Corruption in Russia on the Eve of Emancipation,” 478.

70 Ibid., 486-487.

71 Christian, “Vodka and Corruption in Russia on the Eve of Emancipation,” 486.

72 Ibid., 486.

no economic benefits for the nation.<sup>73</sup> It is “from this circle of tax farmers came, later, many of the most powerful capitalists, railway concessionaires and bankers.”<sup>74</sup> One may conclude that vodka made it possible for Russian industrial enterprise to emerge.

What made it possible for vodka to influence the Russian government so much? The answer is government revenue. The government was so dependent vodka money it circumvented its own laws. Russian crown and the Russian nobility had similar values. So while industrial processes such as distillation were acceptable, merchandising of vodka was not. This led to the nobility and the crown turning a blind eye to what went on with the product they provided. Thus the act of tax farming was beneath the nobility both in terms of the actual commerce and in terms of corruption.<sup>75</sup> But since the money the tax farmers brought in was so high, things were left status quo.

Also, those participating in tax farming were rather influential. Between 1859 and 1863, of the 145 tax farmers who had paid 100,000 rubles for their monopolies, 63 percent were merchants, 20 percent government officials, 10 percent army officers and just 4 percent nobles.<sup>76</sup> To maintain internal peace and the flow of cash the government could not risk ending this enterprise. So, to distance itself from the embarrassing activities of the tax farms the government issued contradictory rules designed to stop the abuses, but did not enforce them. The tax farmer was the scapegoat for the people’s woes, leaving the crown to collect revenue in peace. And this led to corruption, as the raising merchant class wanted more and more influence, albeit unofficial, but highly effective.<sup>77</sup> Abolition of corruption, however, did not end the consumption of vodka. Vodka was there to stay, although the reasons for its consumption or more precisely for its permeation of the society vary.

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73 Christian, “Vodka and Corruption in Russia on the Eve of Emancipation,” 486.

74 Ibid., 487.

75 Ibid., 487-488.

76 Ibid., 488.

77 Christian, “Vodka and Corruption in Russia on the Eve of Emancipation,” 488.

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## IV. VODKA CONSUMPTION

### A. 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY PEASANT DRINKING

Russian alcohol consumption evolved from traditional drinking to modern, instinctive inebriation. Traditional drinking was mostly ritualized and controlled largely by the church, while modern drinking did not have such built-in inhibitions.<sup>78</sup> “Traditional drinking was characteristic of peasant society and of a weakly monetized economy; modern drinking, of wage labor.”<sup>79</sup> Peasants drank excessively only on special, culturally significant occasions. The industrial worker, however, “knew no such proscribed days and was prone to go on a spree every payday.”<sup>80</sup> However, the industrial worker came from the farm and brought with him farm habits.

While it may seem that the peasant did not drink much, research points to the contrary. Although the peasant drinking indeed was ritualistic, the occasions for drink were numerous, thus leading to a frequent state of inebriation. Generally, peasants drank on four occasions: religious holidays, important family events, in extending hospitality, and in connection with a business transaction.<sup>81</sup> The problem was that the practice of religion was closely tied to vodka. To honor God, peasants drank. Moreover, Orthodox feast days consumed over one third of the calendar.<sup>82</sup> What’s worse, the days before and after the holiday were warm-up and cool-down days that also had to be observed with vodka. In addition to religious alcoholism, private occasions such as marriages, baptisms, funerals, arrivals and departures, all were marked by drinking.<sup>83</sup> Peasants spent staggering sums of money on equally staggering quantities of vodka. An average bridegroom commonly provided 75-100 liters of vodka, all of which was drunk before

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78 Patricia Herlihy, “Joy of the Rus’: Rites and Rituals of Russian Drinking,” *Russian Review* Vol. 50 No. 2 (1991): 133.

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid.

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid., 134.

83 Ibid.

the wedding.<sup>84</sup> At the wedding itself the bride's family might spend as much as 200 rubles on vodka, which was equal to the average cost of the wedding itself.<sup>85</sup> Even the peasants themselves recognized that the money spent on alcohol was unreasonable. "These families dissipated in a week the profits of an entire year."<sup>86</sup> As if this was not enough, clergy also mandated vodka to be drunk on days that it considered pagan—to drink the evil away.<sup>87</sup> While traditional drinking was limited to only special occasions, these special occasions could have easily comprised at least half of the calendar. Surveys taken at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century revealed that there were almost no abstainers in the Russian countryside. The peasant drank on holidays, baptisms, funerals, weddings, at bazaars, village assemblies, when conscripts departed and returned, and when paid in vodka for any task performed.<sup>88</sup> Thanks to the crown, to the tax farm corruption and to the clergy the peasant was drunk a lot.

## **B. 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY RELIGIOUS DRINKING**

What really did in the peasant were the religious holidays. In peasant culture one praised God when one drank to Him, and praise of God was the way to heaven. Unfortunately the opportunities to praise God were quite frequent. The same survey mentioned earlier revealed that over 100 calendar days could be devoted to religious holidays.<sup>89</sup> Anton Chekhov, the great Russian short story writer and playwright of the 19<sup>th</sup> century wrote in one of his stories describing peasants of an imaginary village Zhukovo: "On Elijah's Day they drank. On the feast of the Assumption they drank. On Holy Cross Day they drank. The feast of the Intercession was the parish holiday for Zhukovo and the villagers seized the chance to drink for three days."<sup>90</sup> Continuing in this vein, from 24 Dec to 6 Jan (*Sviatki* period) was the time for feasting. Days before, during

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84 Herlihy, "Joy of the Rus': Rites and Rituals of Russian Drinking," 134.

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid.

87 Ibid., 135.

88 Ibid., 133.

89 Ibid., 134.

90 Ibid., 134.

and after Lent and *Maslenitsa* (Russian week-long pancake carnival) were designated drinking periods.<sup>91</sup> The forty days of fast before Easter may have been the only time that the peasant did not drink. Upon Easter, heavy drinking resumed extending all the way to the second Tuesday after Easter to remember the dead.<sup>92</sup> “Easter religious procession became notorious as a march of inebriated clergy and parishioners alike.”<sup>93</sup> In addition to national holidays, local congregations celebrated own festivities such as parish founding anniversary and their own saints. After almost every religious holiday the feasting went on for several days. These supplementary drinking days were called *podgvozdky*.<sup>94</sup>

Besides holidays, public events mandated vodka consumption. When hosting any sort of visitor vodka was mandated to be served. The clergy seemed to have no occasion spared from vodka consumption—blessing construction sites, consecration of churches, hosting visitors, and parish assemblies were just some of the occasions to be celebrated with alcohol.<sup>95</sup> And while the peasant did not drink during the harvest, the end of it was certainly celebrated with excessive drinking. “The end of field work in late summer (and cash provided by the harvest) initiated a period of heavy drinking that extended to the start of the Christmas fast, making autumn an extremely wet season.”<sup>96</sup>

### C. POMOSCH – VODKA AS PAYMENT FOR LABOR

Vodka’s importance extended beyond fellowship. The beginning and ending of any contractual agreements were marked with vodka. Other economic agreements such as the partitioning of forests, purchases and sales, and debt repayment were all sealed with vodka. Vodka was also an accepted form of payment for late debts and for actual labor, also known as *pomosch* (help).<sup>97</sup> This was work to be repaid in

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91 Patricia Herlihy, “Joy of the Rus’: Rites and Rituals of Russian Drinking,” 134.

92 Ibid.

93 Ibid.

94 Ibid.

95 Ibid., 136.

96 Ibid.

97 Ibid., 137.

hospitality—a widespread custom that only entrenched the love of alcohol in the peasant community. According to the Russian historian Boris Mironov, “When a peasant had fallen victim to illness, fire, or cattle plague, neighbors and sometimes the entire commune came to help...[;] they worked without pay the entire day, receiving only food and drink upon the completion of the work.”<sup>98</sup> While such idyllic scenarios did take place, the reality was less picturesque. Unpaid priests counted on volunteer work by the congregation. However, *pomosch* was inconceivable without vodka—the work began and ended with vodka. And while the workers did not require cash, their tolerance for alcohol was so high, that impressive amounts of vodka were needed to attract the laborers and to keep them satiated.<sup>99</sup>

*Pomosch* was a popular way of hiring large numbers of men without having to pay labor wages. This practice was especially popular among wealthy peasants, who hired 20-30 men at a time for fieldwork, and among young village men as they looked forward to heavy drinking once the job was done. *Pomosch* could be initiated any time of the year, be it for spring-time plowing or fall harvest. The peasant hiring would advertise several days in advance and would negotiate payment beforehand. Oftentimes entire families would participate, including women and even the elderly.<sup>100</sup>

The work started at dawn and lasted all day. The employer would provide food and *kvas* throughout the day and at sunset was responsible for providing a veritable feast. The feast began with vodka and was accompanied by traditional Russian food. Some workers would actually go home before the feast to get some food into their stomachs so they could absorb more vodka. Other workers invited relatives to freeload on food and vodka. While the host did not like to feed freeloaders, his stinginess with food and vodka could cost him dearly next time around, as the whole village would summarily ignore an ungracious host next time he called for help. Some laborers, especially women, would take their vodka and sell it later for cash to subsidize their families’ incomes.<sup>101</sup> Most,

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98 Patricia Herlihy, “Joy of the Rus’: Rites and Rituals of Russian Drinking,” 137.

99 Ibid., 138.

100 Herlihy, “Joy of the Rus’: Rites and Rituals of Russian Drinking,” 139.

101 Ibid.

however, drank into the night, often continuing the drinking several days after the job. The fact that there were peasants who actually hired other peasants showed there was a “need for hired labor, [which] clearly [promoted] *pomosch* and, as a consequence of the still underdeveloped wage system, the diffusion and consumption of vodka.”<sup>102</sup> Some Russian social scientists went as far as suggesting that the kulaks (rich peasants) used vodka to oppress their poor counterparts.<sup>103</sup> In reality, it was a symbiotic relationship between the kulaks and the poor. The kulaks were rich in real property (cattle, land), but not in cash. They needed the poor peasant as much as the poor peasant needed vodka. As stated earlier, had the peasants been mistreated once, such a custom would have never developed.

#### **D. EARLY PEASANT ALCOHOLISM TREATMENT**

By late 19<sup>th</sup> century some peasants seemed to be trying to find cures for alcoholism with the help of folk medicine. Babies that had accidentally swallowed baptismal waters or who had been born on the 13<sup>th</sup> of the month were marked as future alcoholics—they were given vodka as children so that as adults they could better resist it<sup>104</sup>, possibly cementing alcohol dependence in the poor children. Other methods may have been more effective although certainly more disgusting and dangerous. The goal was to create an association between vodka and a vile drink so that the patient would never want to drink again. The patients would drink vodka with eels, horse sweat, mice, rotten fish, pig placenta, vomit, snakes and worms, grease, maggots, urine, water used to wash corpses, and other disgusting things.<sup>105</sup> Another was to feed a victim food and drink laced with vodka for five days, all the while being locked in a shed. The hope was that the drunkard would be sickened for life and never touch vodka again.<sup>106</sup> In Siberia vomiting was induced by making people drink boiled moss medicine with vodka. After the initial vomiting, the procedure was repeated several times in hopes of achieving

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102 Patricia Herlihy, “Joy of the Rus’: Rites and Rituals of Russian Drinking,” 140.

103 Ibid.

104 Herlihy, “Joy of the Rus’: Rites and Rituals of Russian Drinking,” 140.

105 Ibid.

106 Ibid., 141.



vodka-vomit association.<sup>107</sup> “The association of vodka with illness supposedly remained with the patient, who for months and even years afterward would become sick at the mere prospect of drinking vodka.”<sup>108</sup> These were valiant efforts that went largely unheeded and were mostly ineffective. The vast majority of peasants were happy with the customs and traditions, not to mention the church, whose dogma and vodka thoroughly subjugated their parishioners.

## **E. EARLY URBAN DRINKING**

Urban drinking patterns were quite similar to those of the countryside, although even more intense. While seasonal drinking mirrored that of the peasant, the spring and fall alcohol lulls of the farms did not take place in the cities. Also, the city workers were not as cash-poor as their peasant counterparts—this enabled them to drink all year long. The mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian cities were populated by newly urbanized peasants with deep countryside roots to include alcohol and religious customs and habits. Now, the workers drank pretty much all the time—religious holidays, days off, after work and seasonally when celebrating farms’ spring and fall rituals.<sup>109</sup>

Of course the blue-collar set was not the only vodka addict. Russian intelligentsia indulged in vodka quite heavily, often on par or worse than the peasant. Both St. Petersburg and Moscow had several holidays when the educated and the noble would drink themselves sick (Anniversaries of respective Universities’ founding, *Maslenitsa*, etc). Moreover, the newly urbanized workers developed new traditions for drinking: getting hired required the new person to treat all; *pomosch*-like city hires were pervasive, where workers or craftsmen would work for weeks just for vodka alone; and finally, reversed order drinking when employers would treat new hires for coming on and existing workers for sticking around were quite common and often expected.<sup>110</sup>

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107 Patricia Herlihy, “Joy of the Rus’: Rites and Rituals of Russian Drinking,” 141.

108 Ibid.

109 Herlihy, “Joy of the Rus’: Rites and Rituals of Russian Drinking,” 143.

110 Ibid.

## F. 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY MILITARY AND VODKA

The Russian military was also a big contributor to the Russian love of vodka. Peasants drank heavily before departure and continued so while in the service.

The introduction of compulsory military service in 1874 made the army [a] school of drunkenness, where boys [acquired] heavy drinking habits. Soldiers were traditionally given free distributions of vodka [on] nine holidays during the year, and also on special occasions declared by regimental commander. During wartime, rations of vodka and meat were distributed three times a week. (Sailors, while at sea, received a ration of vodka every day.) Vodka was also given as a reward for good performance. The soldiers could take money in lieu of vodka but were under considerable peer pressure not to do so.<sup>111</sup>

Contemporary military leaders were weary of vodka's influence on soldiers but could not do much, as vodka was expected by the troops. Some officers believed that withholding vodka would actually improve morale and professionalism, as well as improve the lot of new recruits who would not be subject to drunkenness, disorder, crimes and misdemeanors committed by drunken soldiers.<sup>112</sup> "The process of turning new recruits into alcoholics and drunks was inescapable due to the social aspect of drinking."<sup>113</sup> In a vicious cycle, the new recruits were forced to drink out of custom by old soldiers who had to offer drink out of custom. It was custom to drink with friends and would have been considered a grave insult if one did not.

A survey done between 1878 and 1883 showed that while 57 percent of the soldiers accepted their vodka ration in 1878, by 1883 93 percent had accepted their vodka rations and over 50 percent of those drank more besides what they had gotten. This is attributed to the new recruits being forced to drink and to ever increasing ration

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111 Patricia Herlihy, "Joy of the Rus': Rites and Rituals of Russian Drinking," 141.

112 Bryce David Andreasen, "Stuck in the Bottle: Vodka in Russia 1863-1925," Lethbridge Undergraduate Research Journal Volume 1 Number 1 (2006), <http://www.lurj.org/article.php/vol1n1/vodka.xml> (Accessed October 7, 2008).

113 Ibid.

dispersals. Rations were given on holidays and as rewards. The navy was especially notorious for dolling out vodka—it helped deal with the cold seas, something no one really wanted to do.<sup>114</sup>

Ironically, most of the military leadership was against stopping the vodka rations. They believed it kept the soldiers happy and actually had health benefits. Despite some serious attempts to curb vodka in the military in the late 1890s, the fact that vodka had been an irreplaceable part of the daily Russian life outside the military, any and all attempts to curb availability of vodka to the troops failed. Despite the fact that contemporary research had suggested that 75 percent of all military ailments were caused by alcohol poisoning, and between 10 and 44 percent of all military deaths had been alcohol related the military, and especially the navy refused to do anything about it.<sup>115</sup>

The infamous Russian debacle known as the Russo-Japanese War in 1904-1905 showed the incompetence of the military. Besides the poor planning, alcohol is blamed in equal share for the poor performance of the Russian military. Incredible amounts of alcohol were sent to the war. A 1910 article claims that the government had sent over 10,000,000 pounds of vodka for 400,000 men in 1904 and an additional 9,000,000 pounds in 1905, averaging to about 25 pounds of vodka per man. This had caused many drunken soldiers, and numerous accounts of the Japanese simply bayoneting soldiers too drunk to fight. Other accounts speak of quartermasters dolling out vodka in ladles to soldiers too tired and drunk to fight. As a result of this debacle, the government had decided to hand out light wine and beer to soldiers. It was not until the eve of WWI that the government had finally instituted prohibition among the soldiers.

## **G. END OF THE IMPERIAL ERA**

By the beginning of the twentieth century vodka had become much more than a recreational commodity—most of the Russian life depended on it in one way or another.

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114 Bryce David Andreasen, "Stuck in the Bottle:Vodka in Russia 1863-1925."

115 Ibid.

Even in the 1930s, American social scientists researched the vodka epidemic in Russia.

Joseph Barnes' 1932 article *Liquor Regulation in Russia* states:

Russians have always been inclined to irregular but intensive intoxication, especially on feast days and religious holidays. Such habits prevailed among the upper classes as among the peasantry before [WWI]. Russian literature is full of the implications of excessive drinking, and the descriptions by Gorki or Dostoievski of the part played by alcohol in the bleak, desolate life of rural Russia before the war can hardly be challenged. The conception of Russians as 'the dark people,' made popular by the Slavophiles and their critics, was based directly on Russia's religious mystics, its bearded peasant philosophers, and its incurable drunkards.<sup>116</sup>

The Russian love of vodka had become internationally known, if not admired. It had reached epidemic levels over a century ago and would go pretty much unchecked for generations until severe demographic consequences would drop on Russia's head like an anvil.

In summary, the crown had greatly contributed to the popularization of vodka in Russia. From the tax-farm decades, where generations of Russians developed the love of vodka, to the law that monopolized government vodka production and distribution (1895), ensuring that cheap, homemade stuff was no longer worth the effort, as inexpensive, high quality vodka was made available all over the empire—the government mitigated any possibility of curbing alcoholism based on cost alone, and cemented a long and sad national addiction.<sup>117</sup>

The church was the second biggest contributor. The numerous holidays, all mandated to be celebrated with vodka provided ample opportunity to drink, especially when days before and after the holidays were also mandatory drinking periods. The fact that the peasant honored God with each drink did not help matters. Vodka was a good control method over the population, which was eager to do anything for the promise of free alcohol. Thanks to the church, the peasant spent over one third of the year drinking just for the religion, in addition to all other reasons they had.

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116 Joseph Barnes, "Liquor Regulation in Russia," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* Vol. 163 (1932): 227.

117 Herlihy, "Joy of the Rus': Rites and Rituals of Russian Drinking," 146.

*Pomosch*, was one of the reasons that made certain the love affair with vodka persisted. As the peasant urbanized, *pomosch* made its way into the cities, reassuring the workers with its ever present promise of vodka, just as the Russian social habits had. These social habits/customs mandated vodka for almost all occasions. Borne out of the 19<sup>th</sup> century tax-farm, the social, religious, governmental and psychological need for vodka prepared future Russian generations for life long addictions to alcohol.

Just before WWI the crown had finally stepped in to curb drinking in an effort to mobilize an effective fighting force. This simply resulted in illegal distilling and continued alcohol consumption, as well as in obvious revenue losses for the government. While the Russian grain production decreased before and during the war years, the illegal distillation flourished—the levels of available alcohol never decreased.<sup>118</sup> To understand the just how much vodka mattered to the state of the nation at the start of WWI we must look at the effects of this first prohibition.

The annual state income from distilled spirits averaged 500-600 million rubles per year for several decades prior to the prohibition, in a budget that averaged two billion rubles.<sup>119</sup> In essence, one quarter of the government revenue disappeared. The spirits monopoly in the 1900-13 period provided approximately 75 percent of all indirect taxes and 25-30 percent of all state revenues.<sup>120</sup> While prohibition saved the peasants roughly one billion rubles per year, the grain market became greatly destabilized, as much of it became dedicated to illegal distillation.<sup>121</sup> Illegal profits rose and corruption, somewhat subdued for a few years, came back with a vengeance. The steep decline in revenue due to a dependence on a single commodity caused great budgetary deficits.<sup>122</sup> The czarist prohibition played a significant role in the demise of the Russian economy prior to the communist revolution.

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118 Barnes, "Liquor Regulation in Russia," 229.

119 Ibid., 228.

120 Vladimir G. Treml, "Alcohol in the USSR: A Fiscal Dilemma," *Soviet Studies* Vol. 27 No. 2 (1975): 166.

121 Ibid.

122 Ibid.

## V. COMMUNIST ERA

### A. POST 1917 REVOLUTION

When the communists took over in 1917, they initially continued with the prohibition. Lenin compared the resumption of vodka sales to returning to capitalism—he had better ideas for the grain—to feed the people.<sup>123</sup> The peasant could not disagree more. Large amounts of grain were dedicated to the illegal distilling, enough that by 1919 the government gave up and slowly legalized alcohol. “The abandonment of prohibition [was] forced by the attitude of the peasantry.”<sup>124</sup> In 1919 the government began producing beverages with up to 8 percent alcohol content; in 1920 beverages with 12 percent alcohol content were introduced; 14 percent and 20 percent in 1921 and finally 40 percent in 1925.<sup>125</sup>

Bolsheviks were quite aware of the massive income the czarist government derived from alcohol. Moreover, the ever-present illegal distillation nullified the prohibition—alcohol consumption per capita did not decrease—why not make money on something that is produced anyway, regardless of legality. Financial motive was the main reason for repealing prohibition. “‘One cannot build socialism in white gloves’, Stalin told the XIV Congress in 1925”<sup>126</sup>—it was either the vodka monopoly or slavery to Western European capitalists. “And a spokesman for the finance commissariat explained it in similar terms a year later: ‘the Soviet government took the path of collecting revenue from the sale of vodka because it became convinced that in practice it was impossible to combat alcoholism by simple prohibition.’”<sup>127</sup> By 1928 vodka resumed its rightful place in Russian economy—it generated almost 50 percent of all

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123 Barnes, “Liquor Regulation in Russia,” 229.

124 Ibid.

125 Daniel Tarschys, “The Success of a Failure: Gorbachev's Alcohol Policy, 1985-88,” *Europe-Asia Studies* Vol. 45 No. 1 (1993): 9.

126 Ibid.

127 Ibid.

excise taxes and 12 percent of overall state revenue.<sup>128</sup> By 1930 alcoholic beverages made up more than 28 percent of the state tax revenue.<sup>129</sup> The importance of vodka in the Russian society never faltered despite the change of regime.

## **B. 1960-1980 USSR**

Soviet-induced social misery did not help matters much. The backward economic system with its emphasis on capital goods and complete disregard of the consumer market developed generations of apathetic workers mainly interested in alcohol as there was little to no opportunities for upward mobility. This is of course a generic categorization. Intelligentsia survived and even flourished, and the communist elites enjoyed standards of living few could complain about. However the vast masses of blue collar workers in industry and agriculture existed in quiet desperation. Vodka was the one outlet that provided the much needed relief from the state hegemony and micromanagement of everyday life. It is during the Cold War years that the generational consumption of alcohol began to show its effects.

In the late 1960s the USSR ranked first in the world in terms of per capita consumption of distilled spirits—six liters per person, per year average. The nearest competitors were France and the U.S. with about 4.5 liters each. By 1970s per capita consumption of distilled liquor in the USSR was highest in the world by a factor of 1.5; illegal home production consumed about 5 percent of national crops; government required 3 percent of the net grain, 6 percent of potatoes, 6 percent of sugar beets, and 60 percent of molasses to churn out vodka; up to 12 percent of state revenue was derived from alcohol; and finally up to 7 percent of GDP was lost simply to alcoholism.<sup>130</sup>

From the late 1960s into the mid 1970s legal sales of distilled alcohol averaged about 1.5 billion liters per year, increasing at about a 5 percent rate annually; illegal distilling, mainly in the countryside, produced another 500 million liters or *samogon*

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<sup>128</sup> Daniel Tarschys, "The Success of a Failure: Gorbachev's Alcohol Policy, 1985-88," *Europe-Asia Studies* Vol. 45 No. 1 (1993): 9.

<sup>129</sup> Barnes, "Liquor Regulation in Russia," 230.

<sup>130</sup> Treml, "Alcohol in the USSR: A Fiscal Dilemma," 164.

(home made alcohol; literally means 'self-distilled') per year.<sup>131</sup> By late 1970s this drinking began to take its toll. "During Brezhnev's last years the working population was actually in a state of biological decline: in a case that was without precedent in the history of developed countries the life expectancy of males fell from sixty-eight to sixty-four years, while the rate of infant mortality increased from three to seven percent."<sup>132</sup> A closer examination revealed that between 1939 and 1964 mortality based on age was decreasing every year. However, starting with 1964 the mortality rate for males ages 30 and up began to rise. By mid 1970s the life expectancy advantage females had over males grew from eight years to ten.<sup>133</sup>

### C. 1980-1990 USSR

By the time Gorbachev ascended onto the throne of the USSR, the effects of alcohol on the nation were profound and obvious. Gorbachev's first priority was to attack alcoholism, which he did within a few months of become the General Secretary. He introduced much stricter laws and banned alcohol from public functions, as well as closed down a significant number of state liquor stores. He also introduced such novel concepts as prohibition of alcohol in restaurants before 2 PM, much higher prices for alcohol in the stores that were allowed to operate, and encouraged the emergence of a teetotaler movement, which at its height had over 12 million members.<sup>134</sup> As noble as his goals had been, it was a shortsighted attempt as the Soviet dependence on alcohol revenue was not any different from what the czarist dependence had been.

Almost 30 years earlier, Khrushchev had tried to curb vodka consumption, an effort that was hugely unsuccessful. In 1958 he ordered the price of all alcoholic beverages except beer to be raised by 21 percent. His other prohibitions (Copied by Gorbachev 30 years later) included prohibition of sales of vodka before 10 AM, banning vodka from many types of stores, and limiting restaurant service of vodka to 100 grams

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131 Trembl, "Alcohol in the USSR: A Fiscal Dilemma," 164.

132 Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy, A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917-1991* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 368.

133 Trembl, "Alcohol in the USSR: A Fiscal Dilemma," 165.

134 Tarschys, "The Success of a Failure: Gorbachev's Alcohol Policy, 1985-88," 7-8.



per person. These measures resulted in only a 5.4 percent drop in vodka sales. Khrushchev himself admitted in his memoirs that his measures actually hurt families as men simply spent more of their budgets on vodka, forgoing more important commodities their families could have used.<sup>135</sup> In addition to more spending, *samogon*, an ever present commodity, simply replaced the more expensive vodka, thus ensuring the per capita consumption never faltered, while the official sales dipped.

*Samogon* is tough to control. Unlike the U.S. moonshine makers, who produced their products on a large-scale, and therefore easier to thwart, the Russian method is small-scale, limited to individual homes in the villages. Most of the time *samogon* is sold by the makers or by an enterprising individual who simply buys up reserves from these home distillers. Therefore, the only viable way of controlling *samogon* is via effective law enforcement.<sup>136</sup> One must not forget that the police forces are also mostly males, the very consumers of spirits, legal and illegal. Price increases also affected them, making *samogon* tempting and almost necessary. After all, vodka consumption is culturally necessary and not a crime. The undesirable effects are a burden to the system, not to the drinker.

In 1979 23 billion rubles were paid in income tax and some 65 billion rubles in turnover taxes on consumer goods. Of the latter, alcoholic beverages accounted for 25.4 billion rub. Indirect taxes on alcohol thus yielded more than all income taxes. The financial interest in alcohol consumption was not confined to the central institutions concerned with budgetary balance. Receipts from this source also played an important role in the funding of Soviet government at the republic, provincial and local levels. Many such bodies were known to have coped with more or less short-range liquidity problems by bringing huge volumes of spirits onto the market. Conversely, the new alcohol policy left yawning holes in provincial and local budgets.<sup>137</sup>

Some estimates of the costs of Gorbachev's policies arrived at a figure of 37 billion rubles lost by the economy due to the stricter alcohol laws within the first three

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135 Trembl, "Alcohol in the USSR: A Fiscal Dilemma," 167.

136 Ibid., 169.

137 Tarschys, "The Success of a Failure: Gorbachev's Alcohol Policy, 1985-88," 10.

years.<sup>138</sup> If not for alcohol revenue and energy exports, the Russian (Soviet) economy would have actually been in a steady decline from 1965 to 1985.<sup>139</sup> Gorbachev's decree to convert wine and vodka plants to juice-making facilities was short-sighted to say the least. There was not equipment for conversion, or money to purchase the equipment. Entire national distribution sectors stood to lose revenue, jobs, and salaries. Restaurant industry stood to lose not only revenue from sales of vodka but also almost all customers as the availability of vodka was the main reason customers went out to eat in the first place. A typical restaurant saw an 87 percent decline in daily receipts after Gorbachev's policy.<sup>140</sup>

While all republics took a deep cut in revenue as almost all industries were tied to vodka in one way or another (distribution, transportation, catering, restaurant, vacations/travel, retail) the consumers themselves largely opposed the new prohibition as well. An average family spent 10-15 percent of their income on alcohol. In a 1982 survey, only 5 percent of men and 10 percent of women favored prohibition.<sup>141</sup> *Samogon* came to the rescue once more. Industries needed it for worker morale and lost revenue; consumers for the distilled alcohol content. "The number of [*samogon*] producers prosecuted rose from 80,000 in 1985 to 150,000 in 1986 and 397,000 in 1987. In addition, large volumes of wine and spirits distributed through the state trading organizations were diverted to the private business activities of their employees."<sup>142</sup> In the end, long lines for alcohol became longer, trade and fiscal losses grew out of control, and illegal production and marketing flourished.<sup>143</sup>

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138 Tarschys, "The Success of a Failure: Gorbachev's Alcohol Policy, 1985-88," 10.

139 Tarschys, "The Success of a Failure: Gorbachev's Alcohol Policy, 1985-88," 10.

140 Ibid., 11.

141 Ibid., 12.

142 Ibid., 19.

143 Ibid., 22.

## D. SOCIAL COSTS

Urban drinking patterns were quite similar to those of the countryside, although even more intense. While seasonal drinking mirrored that of the peasant, the spring and fall alcohol lulls of the farms did not take place in the cities. Also, the city workers were not as cash-poor as their peasant counterparts—this enabled them to drink all year long. The mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian cities were populated by newly urbanized peasants with deep countryside roots to include alcohol and religious customs and habits. Now, the workers drank pretty much all the time—religious holidays, days off, after work and seasonally when celebrating farms’ spring and fall rituals.<sup>144</sup>

Of course the blue-collar set was not the only vodka addict. Russian intelligentsia indulged in vodka quite heavily, often on par or worse than the peasant. Both St. Petersburg and Moscow had several holidays when the educated and the noble would drink themselves sick (Anniversaries of respective Universities’ founding, *Maslenitsa*, etc). Moreover, the newly urbanized workers developed new traditions for drinking: getting hired required the new person to treat all; *pomosch*-like city hires were pervasive, where workers or craftsmen would work for weeks just for vodka alone; and finally, reversed order drinking when employers would treat new hires for coming on and existing workers for sticking around were quite common and often expected.<sup>145</sup>

This is where the social cost of vodka comes in. A pre-revolution, 1911 estimate put the social costs of vodka consumption at “three times the budgetary revenue.”<sup>146</sup> In 1928 the social cost was estimated to be almost 4.5 percent of the Soviet gross national product (GNP). By the early 1970s that figure had grown to 7-8 percent; and by the end of that decade to 10 percent, thanks largely to “increase in alcohol consumption, adverse changes in mortality associated with alcoholism, [the] sluggish growth of Soviet national income, [and] alcohol [related] absenteeism.”<sup>147</sup> Some Soviet sociologists claimed that

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144 Herlihy, “Joy of the Rus’: Rites and Rituals of Russian Drinking,” 143.

145 Ibid.

146 Tarschys, “The Success of a Failure: Gorbachev’s Alcohol Policy, 1985-88,” 14.

147 Tarschys, “The Success of a Failure: Gorbachev’s Alcohol Policy, 1985-88.”

the social costs by the late 1970s may have been just under 200 billion rubles, or four times the estimated alcohol revenue of about 45 billion rubles.<sup>148</sup>

The clear affects of alcohol on health cannot be ignored. From the earlier-mentioned per capita consumption of six liters per person (15 years and older) of the 1960s, the consumption had ballooned to 15 liters per person by the 1980s, of which *samogon* comprised a healthy three litters. Some counties in southern Europe had a higher pre capita consumption of alcohol; their alcohol was in the form of wine, while the Russian consumption was two-thirds distilled spirits.<sup>149</sup> Soviet forensic medical statistics show that in the mid 1960s about 12,000 people died per year from alcohol poisoning. By 1978 that figure had increase to 51,000, or 19.5 deaths per 100,000 compared with a rate of about 0.3 deaths other 19 nations surveyed in the 1970s.<sup>150</sup> “The total number of deaths resulting from alcohol in the late 1970s has been estimated at between 370,000 and 400,000 persons per year, or between 140 and 150 per 100 000.”<sup>151</sup> That included alcohol poisoning deaths, as well as other factors such as traffic accidents, domestic violence, and general crime.<sup>152</sup>

Poor quality of the Russian alcoholic beverages, especially that of samogon greatly contributes to the health problems, more so than the quantity consumed. In 2001, almost 38,000 people died of accidental alcohol poisoning, mainly due to having drunk contaminated vodka.<sup>153</sup> In 2000 the number was 34,000, and in 2002, that number had risen to almost 40,000.<sup>154</sup> These numbers are especially sobering when one considers that in the United States just several hundred people die each year from similar causes, a

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148 Tarschys, “The Success of a Failure: Gorbachev's Alcohol Policy, 1985-88.”

149 Tarschys, “The Success of a Failure: Gorbachev's Alcohol Policy, 1985-88,” 16.

150 Ibid.

151 Ibid.

152 Ibid.

153 Dale Roy Herspring, *Putin's Russia: Past Imperfect, Future Uncertain*, (Rowman & Littlefield: New York, 2004), 108.

154 Ibid.

nation of over 300,000 million people, compared to Russia's 140 million.<sup>155</sup> It is estimated that one in three bottles of alcohol consumed in Russia today are of the homemade variety.<sup>156</sup> "Travelers to Russia should beware of alcohol that is sold in the street kiosks at bargain-basement prices. That bottle with the authentic looking label may not be genuine, and may be bad for your health."<sup>157</sup> Alcohol also contributes to Russia's very high rate of fire deaths; more than 17,000 in 2006, which is 10 times the rates of the West.<sup>158</sup> These deaths, coupled with absenteeism conspired to literally create an epidemic in the USSR.<sup>159</sup>

To give Gorbachev credit, while the alcohol restriction was a fiscal and a political disaster, it did show that just within a short span of time reduction in alcohol consumption can have clear health benefits.

While causal relationships are notoriously difficult to establish with any certainty, it is nonetheless remarkable that the long fall in Soviet male life expectancy—from 66.1 years in 1964-65 to a low of 62.3 in 1980-81—was broken in the mid 1980s and rose from 62.9 years in 1984-85 to 65.1 years in 1987. This increase by more than two years, which far surpassed the simultaneous increase in female life expectancy, cannot be convincingly explained by changes in nutrition, health, or environmental standards, but could with a greater degree of probability be linked to the decline in alcohol consumption. As far as morbidity is concerned, Soviet statistics show no reduction in the total number of in-patients with a diagnosis of alcoholism or alcoholic psychosis in the period 1984-88, but the number of new such diagnoses went down from 206 to 154 per 100,000 inhabitants. Substantial reductions were also recorded in the rates of work-related and traffic-related accidents and deaths.<sup>160</sup>

Once this latest prohibition was rescinded, the demographic woes resumed their prior course—on Jan 1, 1992 Russia had an estimated population of 148.7 million; by

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155 Dale Roy Herspring, *Putin's Russia: Past Imperfect, Future Uncertain*, (Rowman & Littlefield: New York, 2004), 108.

156 Yale Richmond, *From Nyet to Da: Understanding the New Russia*, (Intercultural Press: Boston, 2008), 106.

157 Yale Richmond, *From Nyet to Da: Understanding the New Russia*, 106.

158 *Ibid.*

159 *Ibid.*

160 Tarschys, "The Success of a Failure: Gorbachev's Alcohol Policy, 1985-88," 23.

2003, the number had dropped to 144.5 million.<sup>161</sup> “During its first eleven and a half years of post-Communist independence, Russia’s population had apparently declined by over four million people, or about 3 percent.”<sup>162</sup>

## **E. DEMOGRAPHIC DECLINE FACTORS**

Many factors conspired to create this stunning statistic. High infertility rates, widespread abortions used as a form of birth control, explosion in STDs, marriage rates down due to initial economic decline after transition to free-market economy, subsequent increase in crime, and so on. However, “at the end of the day [it] is impossible to overlook the deadly contribution of the Russian love affair with vodka to this record.”<sup>163</sup> A sobering statistic: “In 1994 [the] estimate of pure alcohol consumed by the population aged 15 and older amounted to 18.5 liters per capita—the equivalent of 125 cc. of vodka for everyone, every day.”<sup>164</sup>

How have the cultural and the fiscal factors affected the way Russians drank vodka in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the subsequent demographic decline? The Russian traditional mode of drinking is quite different from those of the west, making Russians exceptionally vulnerable to alcohol poisoning and eventual alcohol-related death. Russians prefer distilled spirits to wine and beer, and drink those spirits in large quantities within a very short time, often on empty stomachs. The government’s attempts to restrict vodka availability in stores, restaurants and workplaces, coupled with already crowded conditions in communal apartments forced drinkers to drink in the streets, parks, and in entrance hallways of the apartment buildings. Since drinking outside increased the chance of getting arrested, people were forced to drink as fast as possible, thus increasing

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161 Nicholas Eberstadt, “Russia’s Demographic Straightjacket,” SAIS Review Vol XXIV No.2 (2004): 9.

162 Ibid.

163 Ibid., 17.

164 Ibid., 18.

their rate and chance of alcohol poisoning.<sup>165</sup> “In the early 1970s a surprisingly high 40 percent of drunks picked up by the police [had] been drinking in the open air.”<sup>166</sup>

Cultural consumption is a strong factor. “All of life’s significant events are celebrated with drinking, and to refuse to drink, especially by males, is considered rude and even arrogant.”<sup>167</sup> It is also a great escape that numbs the pain when life is hard; satisfying on so many levels that it is easy to understand why it is abused.<sup>168</sup> Drinking is a social activity for Russian men, uniting them in a brotherhood of spirits. Being a drunkard is seen as a philosophical approach to life and a type of escapism.<sup>169</sup> Alexander E. Voiskounsky, a prominent Russian professor of psychology at the Moscow University “believes that [alcoholism] reflects the hopelessness and powerlessness that many [pre-Revolutionary] Russians and Soviets felt and contemporary Russians still feel. When people consume alcohol, they often gain self-confidence; they believe they are wittier, more confident and more popular than they are when they are sober.”<sup>170</sup>

Cultural conditioning for vodka consumption starts at an early age and is done subconsciously, inadvertently creating future generations of alcoholics. A sad but nevertheless an amusing illustration of the cultural training:

The acceptability of alcohol consumption is learned by Russian children at a very young age. It is quite typical in many households to include children in celebrations, where the child is given a glass of some nonalcoholic beverage such as lemonade, which is labeled the “kids’ wine”. The ritual of the toast and clinking of the glasses, the praise for the child who participates in these rituals, and the child’s perception of the jovial occasion are part of the learning process. The probable quarrels and fighting that follow long bouts of drinking are also observed by the child who comes to see them as a natural and accepted part of family life. In a 1970s study of the way young children learn about social events,

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<sup>165</sup> Vladimir G. Treml, “Death from Alcohol Poisoning in the USSR,” *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 4. (1982): 491.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>167</sup> Diane F. Halpern and Alexander E. Voiskounsky, *States of Mind: American and Post-Soviet Perspectives on Contemporary Issues in Psychology*, (Oxford University Press US, 1997), 163

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

preschoolers were asked to play at “a wedding party”, “a birthday”, or “a visit.” The adults were horrified to see that the children mimicked with great accuracy the drinking, followed by unsteady and aimless walking, the drunklike kissing, and other typical scenes that accompany inebriation. In general, these sorts of make-believe are popular with young children and their parents, who frequently ask them to show off their imitations of being drunk for visitors and family members. Typical requests to children might include, “Show how Dad (or Grandfather) sings when he gets drunk.” These behaviors are encouraged in even the most remote regions of the former Soviet Union. [A 1972 survey] of 100 boys in a kindergarten in Perm, a city in the Urals, [found] that 97 percent could realistically portray the behaviors of alcoholic intoxication.<sup>171</sup>

An American dad may take the kid to the ballpark or fishing; a Russian dad may make the kid pretend to be drunk. While these comparisons are stereotypical, and America has her share of alcoholics and dysfunctional families, one cannot argue with the fact that 97 percent of Russian young boys can flawlessly mimic drunken behavior. A recent Russian Health Ministry substance abuse survey revealed that alcoholism in Russia is getting younger, “with teenagers being introduced to alcoholic beverages at the age of 13-14, on average, and with three in every four fifteen- to sixteen-year-olds consuming alcohol on a regular basis.”<sup>172</sup> Seventy five percent of Russian teens consume alcohol on a regular basis. As a contrast, roughly 30 percent of U.S. teenagers engage in binge drinking.<sup>173</sup> Having said that, the American teenagers do not face a dire future, a miserable stint in the armed forces or social pressures to continue drinking—all the factors that the Russian teens face. Social and cultural factors are strong indeed.

Another factor was the way that the Soviet government inadvertently contributed to the already sad state of affairs by promoting other alcoholic beverages such as wine to diminish the consumption of vodka. Instead of perhaps replacing vodka with these wines, they introduced fortified wines, as regular strength wines did not sell. Wine with

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171 Boris S. Bratus, “The Enemy Within” in *States of Mind: American and Post-Soviet Perspectives on Contemporary Issues in Psychology*, ed. Diane F. Halpern and Alexander E. Voiskounsky, (Oxford University Press US, 1997), 202

172 Dale Roy Herspring, *Putin's Russia: Past Imperfect, Future Uncertain*, (Rowman & Littlefield: New York, 2004), 107

173 Steven Reinberg, “Drinking Teens Eschewing Beer for Hard Liquor,” *US News and World Report*, July 7, 2007, <http://health.usnews.com/usnews/health/healthday/070730/drinking-teens-eschewing-beer-for-hard-liquor.htm>, (Accessed November 12, 2007)



7-12 percent alcohol content was replaced with wine containing 17-18 percent alcohol. Thus, a liter of cheap wine was as intoxicating and lethal as a bottle of vodka.<sup>174</sup>

Russian purity standards were low, if not criminal. Besides premium vodkas, all other distilled spirits contained low quality ethanol, often in dozes considered dangerous in the west. What is worse, starting in the 1960s and through the 1970s synthetic ethanol was known to be used in state-produced vodkas as the demand was too great to be met otherwise.<sup>175</sup> Generational consumption of poison inevitably led to demographic declines.

The vast amounts of *samogon* Russians drank also contributed to this decline. The primitive production techniques leave a lot of impurities such as toxic fuse oils. Also many additives such as tobacco, sulfuric acid, kerosene, gasoline, and bird droppings are added to either cover up the taste or to increase potency.<sup>176</sup> It is no surprise that such large-scale consumption of a virtually toxic substance has the population in a demographic downslide. Moreover, as the various anti-alcohol decrees went into the effect in the 1960s and 1970s, *samogon* only became more prominent, further exasperating the national health statistic.

Besides *samogon*, other, legally available and seemingly innocent products contributed to the death toll. Alcohol was used in solvents, thinners, cleaning agents and many other commercial chemicals. Faced with high vodka prices, the Russian drunk turned to the industrial alcohol to fill the void. Industrial alcohols was either drunk at work, stolen after work, or what is even worse, distributed by management as payment or bonuses in lieu of cash or vodka.<sup>177</sup> “A partial list of substances used by drinkers as substitutes for alcohol [includes] medicinal alcohol, medicine based on alcohol, aftershave and other lotions, perfume, shellac, varnish, antifreeze, de-icing fluids, brake fluid, industrial cleaning fluids and solvents, denatured alcohol, glues, gasoline, kerosene,

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174 Trembl, “Death from Alcohol Poisoning in the USSR,” 492.

175 Trembl, “Death from Alcohol Poisoning in the USSR,” 493.

176 Ibid., 494.

177 Ibid., 495.

tooth powder, vinegar, and shoe polish.”<sup>178</sup> Other liquids, such as industrial cleaning fluids and solvents, were procured after having been used and thus contained additional impurities.<sup>179</sup> In 1970 the USSR was estimated to have suffered 25,607 alcohol-related poisoning deaths; 19,559 were ethnic Russians from the RSFSR, or 76 percent of all deaths.<sup>180</sup> The second biggest group was the Ukrainians with 3,409 deaths.<sup>181</sup> When the USSR broke up, the subsequent decline in population only happened in Russia, as she already had the vast majority of alcoholics, and for the first time faced her national tragedy alone, without the surrogate statistical help of the former republics.

The Soviet propaganda constantly used American alcoholics and drug abusers as an example of the “decadence, despair, and decline in moral values caused by market economy systems.”<sup>182</sup> The Soviets labeled the Western substance abuse as social problems, turning a blind eye to own endemic condition. But the treatment of alcoholism is another factor that contributed to the demographic decline, as the Soviet medicine simply could not handle alcohol poisoning beyond pumping of the stomach, if that was even done in the first place. Treatment of alcoholics was a task officially designated to the militia, who administered military treatment comprised of mandatory stays in harsh facilities, as well as some experimental treatment with aversion therapies.<sup>183</sup> The poisoning from industrial toxins was not dealt with at all. Soviet cities were full of overnight police sobering stations with no medical personnel present. Large numbers of drunks were processed through these nightly holding cells. Some estimates conclude that 12-15 percent of Russian adult population had been processed through these stations—millions served and hundreds of thousands died there instead of being treated at a hospital.<sup>184</sup> In 1981 a Soviet sociologists suggested that the government simply wanted

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178 Trembl, “Death from Alcohol Poisoning in the USSR,” 493.

179 Ibid.

180 Ibid., 497.

181 Diane F. Halpern and Alexander E. Voiskounsky, *States of Mind: American and Post-Soviet Perspectives on Contemporary Issues in Psychology*, (Oxford University Press US, 1997), 162.

182 Ibid.

183 Ibid.

184 Trembl, “Death from Alcohol Poisoning in the USSR,” 498.

to kill off unproductive drunks. While there may have been a government-led conspiracy to murder drunks, it is understandable how their demise could have been welcome—medical treatment of advanced alcoholism is expensive and recidivism is high; consumers of industrial chemicals are already too far gone to help; alcoholics are not productive during the short period of time they are sober; and finally their early demise is a relief to the society.<sup>185</sup> “Such reasoning may have lead to the adoption of an attitude of 'benign neglect' towards the problem of fatal alcohol poisoning.”<sup>186</sup> The tragic demographic decline may have been the result of such neglect, and was certainly caused by a never-before seen national affinity for distilled spirits. There may have also been a political reason for the lack of institutionalized treatment facilities for any kind of addiction—having such programs meant the Soviets had to admit that communists abused alcohol and other drugs. “Such an admission was unthinkable, or at least unspeakable, because it would show communism to be imperfect.”<sup>187</sup>

Russia’s demographic trends have negative implications for economic development and security, and her lingering health and mortality crisis promises to be an anchor against rapid economic development, frustrating the effort to move Russia onto a path of swift and sustained material advance.<sup>188</sup> Shrinking numbers of males will impact the military in the long term. Economically, there will be fewer young people to replace the retirees, which will lead to decreasing skill levels and qualifications of the economically active population. Finally, since younger people tend to be associated with discovery, innovation, and entrepreneurship, a pronounced lack of young blood could have real long-term consequences.<sup>189</sup>

Alcohol has another dark effect on the human mind—“age standardized suicide rate in Russia in 2000 of about 38 per 100,000 persons was second only to Lithuania and was two to three times higher than the European Union average and in the United

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185 Trembl, “Death from Alcohol Poisoning in the USSR,” 499.

186 Trembl, “Death from Alcohol Poisoning in the USSR,” 499.

187 Diane F. Halpern and Alexander E. Voiskounsky, *States of Mind: American and Post-Soviet Perspectives on Contemporary Issues in Psychology*, (Oxford University Press US, 1997), 162

188 Eberstadt, “Russia’s Demographic Straightjacket,” 19.

189 Nicholas Eberstadt, “Russia’s Demographic Straightjacket,” 10.

States.”<sup>190</sup> During the 1990s violent death, to include suicide, was one of the main causes of death for Russian males.<sup>191</sup> Studies have shown that suicides increase as binge drinking increases.<sup>192</sup> A study done in the late 1990s showed that more than one third of Russian males had admitted to binge drinking (more than five drinks in one sitting) more than once per month.<sup>193</sup> Studies have also shown that heavy episodic drinking can lead to acts of violence and suicide and can disinhibit people, pushing suicide-prone or simply disaffected individuals over the edge.<sup>194</sup> In the end, “both male and female suicide rates [in Russia] were positively and significantly associated with heavy drinking.”<sup>195</sup>

Another study done in the early 1990s showed that St. Petersburg alone, a city of almost five million people, had 80,000 substance abusers, most alcoholics, and 60,000 alcohol related suicides.<sup>196</sup> In addition to that, there were 19,000 deaths from acute alcohol poisoning, and of the 22,000 murders, 80 percent were alcohol related.<sup>197</sup> Moscow, a city of ten million people, had 145,000 patients registered in the city’s largest “narcological (alcohol and drug abuse) hospital during 1992.”<sup>198</sup> Of the 145,000 patients, 137,000 or 95 percent had the most severe stage of the disease; women and teenagers represented 10 percent each of the latter group.”<sup>199</sup>

Despite such alarming numbers of male alcoholics, women are expected not to behave in such a manner. While drunken men are frequently seen in public, there is little tolerance for female alcoholics, even though many prominent Russian families have many male alcoholic members. This inequality exists because women are expected to be

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190 William Alex Pridemore, “Heavy Drinking and Suicide in Russia,” *Social Forces* Volume 85 Number 1 (2006): 413

191 Ibid.

192 Ibid., 414.

193 Pridemore, “Heavy Drinking and Suicide in Russia,” 415.

194 Ibid.

195 Ibid., 421.

196 Shulamith Lala Ashenberg Straussner, *Ethnocultural Factors in Substance Abuse Treatment*, (Guilford Press: New York, 2003), 258

197 Ibid.

198 Ibid.

199 Ibid.

good mothers and wives; why men are not expected to be good fathers and husbands no one knows.<sup>200</sup> But alcoholism has been and still is a great problem for Russian women. Female alcoholics abandon their children into numerous Russian orphanages, which are filled with kids displaying obvious fetal alcohol symptoms. And of course women suffer from alcoholic male family members; fathers, siblings, or husbands who often become violent once drunk, or lose jobs and cause various other legal, medical and social problems, not to mention their own premature deaths.<sup>201</sup>

## **F. A DYING NATION**

Are things really as bad as they seem? The answer is, yes, they are, if not worse. Russia is undergoing a never before seen crisis that is difficult to explain without attributing some, if not most causes to alcohol and concurrent illegal drug abuse and sexual promiscuity. The three percent decline in population in 12 years is not unprecedented on European soil or in the Caucasus—Bosnia experienced a 10 percent drop due to war and Armenia, Kazakhstan and Georgia had a similar drop due to emigration. Russia had neither war nor emigration. In fact, between 1989 and 2002 Russia had absorbed a net 5.5 million immigrants.<sup>202</sup> However, starting in 2002 influx of foreign immigrants and emigration by Russians have slowed down quit a bit—“the net inflow of migration to Russia totaled less than 80,000 in all of 2002, and a mere 25,000 in the first seven months of 2003.”<sup>203</sup> Political, economic and social trends forecast this decline to continue, as Russian crime, racism and economy become less and less palatable to foreigners.

Since immigration is diminishing, Russia must maintain population numbers through births alone. Again, Russia is not the only European nation with a negative population growth—currently eighteen European states report decreases in population. However, those decreases are nominal. As an example, Italy has approximately 103

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200 Diane F. Halpern and Alexander E. Voiskounsky, *States of Mind: American and Post-Soviet Perspectives on Contemporary Issues in Psychology*, 162

201 *Ibid.*, 162.

202 Eberstadt, “Russia’s Demographic Straightjacket,” 9.

203 *Ibid.*, 10.

deaths for every live 100 births, with similar statistics for the remaining 17 nations.<sup>204</sup> Russia, on the other hand reports over 170 deaths for every 100 births.<sup>205</sup> This was not the trend up until 1987, when births began to sharply decrease. By 2002 “Russia’s death total was over 50 percent higher than in 1987 (2.3 million vs. 1.5 million), while its birth level was over one million lower (1.4 million vs. 2.5 million).”<sup>206</sup> In the last several years the total population has dwindled by about 0.7 percent annually; “if this rate of loss continues, then the population will be cut in half within the next seventy years.”<sup>207</sup>

As more people die, the overall population becomes older. “The 2002 census revealed that the average age in Russia was 37.7 years old, an increase of three years since the last census was taken in 1989. Children under the age of sixteen comprised only 18 percent of the population.”<sup>208</sup> This dire decline has produced some rather depressing population projections by the government itself. In March 2002 Goskomstat (State Statistics Committee) “predicted that by the end of 2050 the population would shrink by 30 percent from 143.6 million to 101.9 million. This, Goskomstat said was ‘the most probable forecast’ of the country’s demographic situation.”<sup>209</sup> In the spirit of balance Goskomstat also “offered ‘best case’ and ‘worst case’ scenarios: according to the former, the population will fall to 122.6 million by 2050, while the latter projected to drop to 77.2 million, a reduction of almost 50 percent.”<sup>210</sup> Political upheaval alone cannot explain the change. Something else does.

Russia’s childbearing trends have been well below the 2.15 children per woman rate necessary to maintain the population levels. With current negative growth rates extended indefinitely each new generation of Russians would be over 40 percent smaller

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204 Eberstadt, “Russia’s Demographic Straightjacket,”9.

205 Ibid.

206 Eberstadt, “Russia’s Demographic Straightjacket,” 10.

207 Dale Roy Herspring, *Putin's Russia: Past Imperfect, Future Uncertain*, (Rowman & Littlefield: New York, 2004), 89

208 Ibid., 90.

209 Ibid.

210 Ibid.

than its predecessors.<sup>211</sup> However, just as in the previously mentioned alcohol related deaths, this trend is again mainly focused on ethnic Russians. Fertility actually exceeds the 2.0 mark in Dagestan and Ingushetia. Other four minority areas hover just around 1.95. Unfortunately for Russia these six areas represent only three percent of the population. The rest of the ethnic Russia sits at barely 1.5, while major metropolitan areas such as St. Petersburg have an index of 1.3.<sup>212</sup>

Russia's male and female infertility rates are double those of Europe and the U.S.. Russia's abortions in 2002 were at a level of 120 for every 100 births. Syphilis rates are several hundred times higher than in Europe. A 2003 survey revealed that 15 percent of St. Petersburg college students have some form of sexually transmitted disease (STD), and a whopping 25 percent of college females had one of more STDs. Untreated or poorly treated STDs certainly lead to both male and female infertility.<sup>213</sup>

While fertility rates are an important factor in sustaining populations, Russian statistics are not much different from those of her European counterparts. Indeed Austria, Greece, Spain and Italy have lower birth rates than Russia. In fact Russia has Europeanized in terms of child birth rates as Germany and other leading European nations have similarly low numbers. It is not the birth rates that scare Russian demographers; it is the mortality rate of their citizens that worries them.<sup>214</sup>

Russia's long-term health decline is unusual for an industrialized nation. The alarming aspect of this decline is the fact that is it difficult to raise general life expectancy just by a year—drastic changes have to take place within a society to affect this statistic. For Russian males over the last 40 years life expectancy at birth fell by five years while age-standardized mortality rate rose by over 40 percent.<sup>215</sup> If we account for women, then overall Russian life expectancy had dropped by three years since 1962.<sup>216</sup> What are

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<sup>211</sup> Dale Roy Herspring, *Putin's Russia: Past Imperfect, Future Uncertain*, (Rowman & Littlefield: New York, 2004), 12.

<sup>212</sup> Eberstadt, "Russia's Demographic Straightjacket," 12-13.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-14.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>216</sup> Eberstadt, "Russia's Demographic Straightjacket," 12-13.

even more frightening are the figures for the working age set. In the last 30 years women ages 20-59 experienced 30 percent increase in death rates, while males ages 40-59 suffered a 60 percent increase.<sup>217</sup>

In a general sense, Russian mortality rates can be attributed to the sudden increase in cardiovascular disease (CVD), instances of which have soared since 1965—25 percent for women and 65 percent for men. To put these numbers in perspective, Russian CVD rates are four times those of Ireland, which in turn has the highest CVD rate in Europe. England, Sweden, Italy and France, all have CVD rates that 12-20 percent those of Russia—up to one eighth less.<sup>218</sup> "Contemporary Russia's CVD death rates, in fact, just may be the very highest ever suffered by any national population in all of human history."<sup>219</sup>

Besides CVD, deaths caused by injuries are even more staggering. Murder, above-described suicides, traffic accidents, and all sorts of poisonings take their toll on Russians at never before seen or imagined rates—age-adjusted death rates for both sexes have doubled over the last 40 years.<sup>220</sup>

Among contemporary societies at peace, Russia's level of violent deaths places the country practically in a category of its own. For men under 65 years of age, Russia's death rate from injury and poisoning is currently over four times as high as Finland's, the nation with the worst rate in the European Union. Russia's violent death rate for men under 65 is nearly six times as high as Belgium's, over nine times as high as Israel's, and over a dozen times that of the United Kingdom. As is well known, men are more likely than women to die violent deaths—but in a gruesome crossover, these death rates for Russian *women* are now higher than for virtually any Western European *men*.<sup>221</sup>

What is the cause of such epidemic-like peace-time demographic declines? The answer is poor health caused by and sustained by vodka.

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217 Eberstadt, "Russia's Demographic Straightjacket," 16.

218 Eberstadt, "Russia's Demographic Straightjacket," 17.

219 Ibid.

220 Ibid.

221 Ibid.



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## VI. FUTURE

### A. CURRENT CONDITION

As mentioned before, by the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Russians consumed an average of 125 cc of vodka per person, per day; a figure three times as high as was in 1913, just before the Czarist prohibition.<sup>222</sup> The new market economy has no liquor sales restrictions. One can now buy single-serving plastic cups of vodka on most street corners. The vodka is prepackaged in small cups covered with foil, like single-servings of juice or other beverages.<sup>223</sup> Most men drink it on the spot, satisfying the need without having to buy a whole bottle at once.<sup>224</sup> People can drink at home, at work and in-between, which only leads to more disasters. “Heavy drinking is directly associated with Russia’s appallingly high risk of deadly injury—and Russia’s high drinking levels also seem to be closely associated with death through cardiac failure.”<sup>225</sup> A recent study done in Russia on postmortem blood alcohol levels in males shows the role of alcohol in the deaths of her citizens: “over two-fifths of those who died of CVD or injury/poisoning were determined to have been drunk at the time of their death.”<sup>226</sup> And since vodka is so directly involved in Russian death statistics, there is little reason to expect any kind of improvement in the years to come.<sup>227</sup> Coupled with high curable STD infection rate, and a possible future endemic HIV presence, Russian seems to be on a sure course of long-term demographic decline. 2002 estimates credit Russia with over 2 million HIV cases, or 1.3-2.5 percent of the adult population.<sup>228</sup> Given the already dismal health care

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222 Eberstadt, “Russia’s Demographic Straightjacket,” 18.

223 Diane F. Halpern and Alexander E. Voiskounsky, *States of Mind: American and Post-Soviet Perspectives on Contemporary Issues in Psychology*, 163.

224 *Ibid.*

225 *Ibid.*

226 *Ibid.*

227 *Ibid.*

228 *Ibid.*, 19.

system, illegal drug usage and high alcoholism with its subsequent alcohol-related deaths, Russian demographic future looks dim indeed.

## **B. MILITARY TODAY**

To understand the effects of the demographic decline and of alcoholism on the Russian military we must first assess the state of the Russian armed forces. The Soviet military had been affected by alcoholism in the same way the society was. “Alcoholism was both a cause and an effect of low morale.”<sup>229</sup> Alcohol provided an escape for the Soviet servicemen from the hardships of the military life. Already in 1974 Soviet press had pointed out that 33 percent of all military infractions were caused by alcohol. For the same period, the Rand Corporation had estimated that well over one third of the Soviet military had suffered from alcohol dependence. By comparison, the U.S. figure at that time was approximately 18 percent.<sup>230</sup>

Alcohol dependence affected all ranks, even the conscripts who were not allowed to drink. To obtain alcohol, conscripts either traded military equipment off base, pooled their resource to simply buy it (a bottle cost more than a conscript’s monthly pay), or just got alcohol from home in the mail. Alcohol abuse was more rampant in the Army than the Navy. The Navy did not allow alcohol on ships, but abuse still took place once in port. Navy Senior NCOs always demanded their troops bring them a bottle once they returned from leave home. The military especially liked samogon. It was readily available outside the bases and was significantly cheaper than store-sold liquor. Often military mess leftovers were be traded to local farmers in exchange for samogon.<sup>231</sup>

When samogon was not available and money had run out, just as their civilian counterparts, the soldiers consumed anything that had any amount of alcohol in it. Shoe polish was filtered through black bread and then consumed for the alcohol content. Base stores could never keep cologne in stock for more than fifteen minutes, as it was freely

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<sup>229</sup> Gregory Young and Nate Braden, *The Last Sentry: Valery Sablin and the True Hunt for Red October*, (Naval Institute Press, 2005), 76.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 77.

drunk for its alcohol content.<sup>232</sup> Alcohol based cleaners used to clean equipment were drunk on a regular basis. This fluid was considered too precious for its intended use. Instead, men would use kerosene and gasoline to clean sophisticated equipment, leading to excessive equipment breakdowns.<sup>233</sup> As an example, the Mig-25 needed half a ton of alcohol for a daily mission. Much of the alcohol was consumed by the ground crew, inspiring the nickname ‘flying restaurant’ for the plane and gravely limiting its operational readiness. Soldiers also consumed aircraft gun coolant, vehicle antifreeze, and vinegar concentrate.<sup>234</sup>

Today, Russia’s military is overwhelmed by manpower and morale problems, aging equipment and tremendous underinvestment—in 2007 the annual defense budget was equal to just six percent of the U.S. DoD budget.<sup>235</sup> A November 2006 report by the Moscow’s Institute for National Strategy (MINS) and two other independent research groups concluded that after allowing for inflation adjustment, the military budget had grown just 15 percent since late 1990s.<sup>236</sup>

The report pointed out that Russian military is still mired in the Cold War mentality, instead of focusing on real geo-strategic threats such as China and Islamic Terrorism. A good example of that was the 2007 resumption of strategic bomber flights. The aging Tu-95 turbo-prop bombers resumed flights after a 15-year break.<sup>237</sup> While this may seem to have revived the Cold War glory of the Russian strategic forces, the reality is less glamorous. The Tu-95s were limited to one flight per week and carried no nuclear weapons; budget constraints and seriously aged equipment made even those flights dangerous to the airmen involved.<sup>238</sup> Of the fighter planes, only 30 percent are thought

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232 Gregory Young and Nate Braden, *The Last Sentry: Valery Sablin and the True Hunt for Red October*, 77.

233 Ibid.

234 Ibid.

235 Ken Fireman, “Putin’s Military Might Fails to Keep Pace With His Ambitions,” *Finrosforum*, December 23, 2007, <http://www.finrosforum.fi/?p=840>, (Accessed November 12, 2008)

236 Ibid.

237 Ibid.

238 Ibid.

to be combat ready<sup>239</sup>, lack of pilot training notwithstanding. The Air Force pilots are lucky to get 10 percent of the required flying hours, all due to lack of funds to both operate and maintain the equipment.<sup>240</sup> Instead of focusing on the real problems inside the armed forces, Russian leaders are too concerned with outward appearances. This may be symbolic of the need to drink—escape life reality in alcohol and escape military reality by flying useless aircraft.

The Russian Navy is in no better shape. It is now down to just one active carrier in the face of 12 U.S. carrier groups. Her fleet of strategic submarines is practically non-existent as her aging vessels are not being replaced and spend most of the time in port under repair.<sup>241</sup> Russia's most modern submarine is 12 years old and was designed to carry an SLBM which has yet to survive a single successful test launch, making the utility of the submarine itself a moot point.<sup>242</sup> After the 2000 sinking of the Kursk submarine and subsequent sinking of the K-159 nuclear submarine the Soviet Navy rarely ventures into open oceans. Lack of operating funds, and poor maintenance, have turned the once blue-water Navy into a coastal defense service barely able to stay afloat.<sup>243</sup> As in all the services, the Navy has acute housing shortages, with officers and their families living in old, dry-docked submarines and other vessels. Moreover, the drug and alcohol abuse is so rampant that the Navy had even asked the U.S. for sobriety testing kits.<sup>244</sup>

A recent assessment concluded that despite the fact that the Russian defense industry produces modern and capable equipment, it is immediately sold overseas; the armed forces have been operating the same equipment that was procured during Gorbachev's rule.<sup>245</sup> The only thing impressive is the sheer number of the nuclear weapons Russia still has—4,237 warheads deployed on 875 missiles and bombers, a

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239 Ken Fireman, "Putin's Military Might Fails to Keep Pace With His Ambitions."

240 Knight Rider Newspapers, "Russian Military Withering, Violent, Without Training, Support," The Russia Channel, March 8, 2004, <http://www.russia.com/forums/russian-politics/20593-russian-military-withering-violent-without-training-support.html>, (Accessed November 12, 2008)

241 Ken Fireman, "Putin's Military Might Fails to Keep Pace With His Ambitions."

242 Ibid.

243 Knight Rider Newspapers, "Russian Military Withering, Violent, Without Training, Support."

244 Ibid.

245 Ibid.

number second only to the 5,914 warheads on 1,225 missiles and bombers the U.S. has.<sup>246</sup> Having said that, well over 60 percent of the Russian missiles are beyond their service life and 50 percent require major overhaul.<sup>247</sup> Adding insult to injury, the MINS assessment concluded that if nothing is done to the missile inventory (repairs, replacements), within the next ten years the Russian ICBM arsenal will whittle down to between 100 and 200 functional missiles.<sup>248</sup> Ironically, the Bush administration's decision to base missile defenses in Poland may spur the Russian government to actually spend money on their missile command. In a late 2007 interview the head of the Russian Strategic Missile Command, Colonel- General Nikolai Solovtsov said that Russia is now compelled to invest into her nuclear arsenal due to the U.S. decision to place missile defenses in Eastern Europe.<sup>249</sup> And while the oil boom has enriched the Russian treasury allowing Russia to allocate 15 percent of government spending on the military in 2007 (U.S. at 21 percent in 2007, a number inflated by the Iraq and Afghanistan wars), Russia still can't find enough funds to both update the equipment and to take care of the people.<sup>250</sup>

The conditions are so bad that the military is pretty much a national embarrassment.<sup>251</sup> The Russian servicemen are woefully underpaid, often being forced to work several jobs just to make ends meet. More often than not they resort to extortion, corruption or theft just to survive.<sup>252</sup> The huge Russian army has seemingly insurmountable problems. The conscription-based service is struggling to attract qualified personnel mainly due to the brutal hazing, which has now morphed into institutionalized torture.<sup>253</sup> The low quality of the recruits, mostly alcoholics, drug addicts and criminals spend their compulsory two years in the army assaulting each other,

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246 Ken Fireman, "Putin's Military Might Fails to Keep Pace With His Ambitions."

247 Ibid.

248 Ibid.

249 Ibid.

250 Ibid.

251 Knight Rider Newspapers, "Russian Military Withering, Violent, Without Training, Support."

252 Ibid.

253 Ibid.

drinking and further degenerating into inhumanity—upon their second year in the army, they become the senior soldiers and administer torture upon new recruits in a never ending cycle of violence. This leads to rampant desertions, suicides and alcohol and drug abuse.<sup>254</sup> It is no wonder that after several well publicized deaths the former deputy minister of defense, Andrei Kokoshin had said, “[we] need a completely new army.”<sup>255</sup>

His sentiment is easy to understand. In 2003, 40 percent of the recruits were high school drop outs, 7 percent were felons and only 30 percent were physically qualified to attend training.<sup>256</sup> In 2007, as many as 90 percent of the eligible men in the 18-to-26 years-old group evaded service. One U.S. analyst concluded that, “If you’ve got 90 percent draft evasion, those who show up are just too stupid to evade it. Imagine what kind of military you can put together with that.”<sup>257</sup> With 90 percent draft evasion, mainly through bribes, only the poorest and unhealthiest fill the ranks. In 2007, according to Russia's Air Force commander, 55 percent of his recruits had either drug or alcohol problems, “malnutrition or ‘mental instability’, while many could not read or write.”<sup>258</sup> The generals, in turn, exploit the draftees as slave labor or hire them away to companies for fees.<sup>259</sup> The reluctance by the generals to professionalize the enlisted corps, the hazing, the torture, the poor pay and the lack of housing, all have conspired to make military service very unattractive to whatever sober young men are left in Russia.

Alcohol related demographic decline will greatly affect the military. Within the next 15 years the number of Russian 18-years old males is expected to drop by 50 percent.<sup>260</sup> “This approaching population decline requires significant structural reform within the Russian military, [yet] Russia’s military leadership has been slow to act and

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254 Knight Rider Newspapers, “Russian Military Withering, Violent, Without Training, Support,” The Russia Channel, March 8, 2004, <http://www.russia.com/forums/russian-politics/20593-russian-military-withering-violent-without-training-support.html>, (Accessed November 12, 2008)

255 Ibid.

256 Ibid.

257 Ken Fireman, “Putin’s Military Might Fails to Keep Pace With His Ambitions.”

258 David Eshel, “Putin's Power Play - Bluff or New Global Strategy.”

259 Ken Fireman, “Putin’s Military Might Fails to Keep Pace With His Ambitions.”

260 Colonel Jeffrey Holachek, “Russia’s Shrinking Population and the Russian Military’s HIV/AIDS Problem.”

has not taken the kinds of steps required to prepare for this coming change.”<sup>261</sup> As the military wallows in inadequacy, the pool of eligible males slowly dries up as the years pass. The poor quality of the armed forces, the low budgets and poor equipment has forced Russia to review her nuclear policy.<sup>262</sup> A nation that once had disavowed first-use of nukes has now made first-use “an essential part of military doctrine, because Russia knows it can't defend itself conventionally.”<sup>263</sup> Many west European nations also face population decline, albeit not on this scale. However, those nations either belong to NATO or have the funds to substitute technology for people. Russian has no such money or alliances; it has to rely on her weapons of mass destruction in lieu of qualified and able personnel.<sup>264</sup> Any branch of the military at almost all levels has is a very small amount of skilled cadre left. <sup>265</sup> Soon there may be no one to replace them.

The woeful state of the Russian military today is not a direct result of alcoholism. However, generations of soldiers reared under the communist umbrella had developed apathy for the state equipment and had such bad drinking habits that they routinely destroyed expensive materiel, providing a further burden on the communist economy. The horrible socialist work ethic and civilian wastefulness easily translated to the military, all culminating in the Afghanistan War disaster. The glory of the WWII Red Army is long gone, destroyed by decades of apathy. Over the years, the civilian world, soaked in vodka and steeped in general indifference for the state resources, greatly contributed to the dilapidated condition of the military today. The hideous quality of the Russian recruits, the nightmarish treatment, pay, and living conditions, the demographic decline, and the government's misguided strategic vision will ensure that the Russian military will continue in its downward spiral. And while the oil wealth has helped, the recent pull back in oil prices will further contribute to the military being greatly under funded for years, if not generations to come.

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261 Colonel Jeffrey Holachek, “Russia’s Shrinking Population and the Russian Military’s HIV/AIDS Problem.”

262 David Plotz, “The Russian Military; Not Mighty, Not Red, and Barely an Army,” Slate, 7 January 2000, <http://www.slate.com/id/68304/>, (Accessed November 13, 2008)

263 David Plotz, “The Russian Military; Not Mighty, Not Red, and Barely an Army.”

264 Policy Brief, “Dire Demographic Trends Cast a Shadow on Russia’s Future,” RAND 106 (2002): 4.

265 David Eshel, “Putin's Power Play - Bluff or New Global Strategy.”



### C. DIMINISHING POPULATION

By 2020, some estimates put Russian population at 130 million, approximately 16 million less than today, and with a higher median age than today.<sup>266</sup> The median age is a significant factor—by 2015 Russia is projected to have a ratio of just four workers for every three nonworkers, with a dramatic shift among the nonworking population toward the elderly.<sup>267</sup> “The aging of the population and the increase in the dependency ratio suggest that domestic public and private capital available to refinance new investments may decline over the next two decades, underscoring and increasing the importance of creating the necessary conditions to attract investment from abroad.”<sup>268</sup> To attract these foreign investments Russia needs a labor force and social conditions conducive to business. A diminishing labor force and a deteriorating social order stand in the way of progress.

Not all is lost within the Russian demographic decline. The Russian female population is not as affected and may become the predominant source of labor in the near future. A smaller, younger population means fewer dependents to support and a reduced demand for daycare and health care as women will be preoccupied with work.<sup>269</sup> Still, a smaller population also means a less productive population and will most likely experience a labor shortage, even if the potential female population is fully employed.<sup>270</sup> In the less populated areas of the Far North and the Far East Russia will definitely see a significant population decline. The less developed parts of the nation can only rely on males for economic development, and their numbers are declining. And since Russia is no longer investing into the infrastructure of the far away lands, the population there will

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<sup>266</sup> Conference Report, “Russia’s Physical and Social Infrastructure: Implications for Future Development,” National Intelligence Council, December 2000, [http://www.dni.gov/nic/confreports\\_rusfuturedev.html](http://www.dni.gov/nic/confreports_rusfuturedev.html), (Accessed March 15, 2008)

<sup>267</sup> Ibid.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid.

decline if the areas prove to be less than self-sustaining.<sup>271</sup> This is especially true in the Eastern areas where Chinese immigrant workers already outnumber available Russian male labor force—both an economic and a security concern for Russia.

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<sup>271</sup> Conference Report, "Russia's Physical and Social Infrastructure: Implications for Future Development," National Intelligence Council, December 2000, [http://www.dni.gov/nic/confreports\\_rusfuturedev.html](http://www.dni.gov/nic/confreports_rusfuturedev.html), (Accessed March 15, 2008).

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## VII. CONCLUSION

Russian history is soaked in vodka. The czarist regimes discovered the lucrative nature of alcohol and institutionalized distilling and marketing of alcohol, making the entire Russian economy depend on it. Communists ended up doing the same. The backward agrarian economic system of the czars was replaced by the backward communist economic structure—both ended up greatly depending on vodka. Both also failed miserably at temperance efforts because their respective incomes were so dependent on alcohol.

Early Russian mysticism and Orthodoxy further exacerbated the problem by promoting drinking for any and all occasions. Peasant cultural consumption simply migrated to the cities when Russia finally embarked on industrialization. Even the czarist industrialization process was not set forth until the government was able to extricate itself from its vodka-centered, extremely corrupt tax farming system.

Generational consumption of alcohol resulted in an unprecedented demographic decline, bordering on catastrophic. According to the 2003 World Health Organization study, Russians consumed 8.67 liters of distilled alcohol per person, more than Germans did beer and Italians did wine and beer combined. Even Ireland, with her notoriety of affinity for alcohol only consumed half or a liter more of beer per capita than Russians did of spirits.<sup>272</sup> This is per capita consumption, which includes infants and the elderly in its formula, a group that consumes little to no alcohol.

Russia is facing a drain of young blood to replace the old. Russian military is in shambles and her demographic future looks bleak. Being largely dependent on one commodity—energy, Russia needs to invest into private industry, private schooling, private medicine, and professionalize her military. Decreasing demographics and lack of long-term investment may develop an economically desperate Russia ready to deal with

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<sup>272</sup> Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse, “Global Status Report on Alcohol 2004,” World Health Organization, [http://www.who.int/entity/substance\\_abuse/publications/globalstatusreportalcohol2004\\_alconsumpt.pdf](http://www.who.int/entity/substance_abuse/publications/globalstatusreportalcohol2004_alconsumpt.pdf) (Accessed March 15, 2008).

parts of the world that do not like us. Russia still has a nuclear arsenal, regardless of the state of her military. As long as she possesses those arms it is in the U.S. interest to help Russia along within any and all spheres.

Generosity with vodka is a strong Russian tradition. U.S. military members, who will have regular dealing with Russian counterparts, must be prepared for the vodka onslaught and must be aware of cultural sensitivities if they plan on refusing the vodka offered to them. There is a glimmer of hope, however. The new generation of Russian capitalists models itself on its western counterparts and has shown tendencies to drink far less than their progenitors. The Russian government is keenly aware of the demographic decline and is officially working on remedies. The Russian military will continue to suffer the worst possible conscripts until it is professionalized, the hazing is eliminated and they pay is raised enough to attract others besides drug addicts and criminals.

Russia is far from solving her social problems. Her population is an inadvertent victim of state greed and religious control, both of which resulted in a nation addicted to vodka. As long as Russia continues on its path of capitalism and does not nationalize industry and much of the commerce, she has a chance of beating this addiction. Economic development will lead to a healthier bottom line, which will slowly trickle money to every aspect of the society. If economic development stagnates or is centered on only one industry, Russia has no chance of beating her disease and will face increasingly worse social and health demographics that will only lead to more problems for the west. The task for the United States is to reverse our seemingly antagonistic policy towards Russia. We can help Russia with her insecurities towards the west. Changing our posture may ameliorate her ethnic problems, which in turn may open her to improved U.S. foreign investment, which in turn can create more jobs, improve the economy and hopefully develop a new generation of people not so dependent on vodka. Russia's rich natural resources alone warrant our involvement in her future. "A Russia that is wealthy from energy resources but weak from social decline can become a dangerously resentful spoiler instead of a partner in building a peaceful world order."<sup>273</sup>

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<sup>273</sup> Globe Editorial, "Russia's Dangerous Decline," The Boston Globe, May 4, 2008, Editorials Section, [http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial\\_opinion/editorials/articles/2008/05/04/russias\\_dangerous\\_decline/](http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/editorials/articles/2008/05/04/russias_dangerous_decline/) (Accessed October 10, 2008).

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