



C H A P T E R 1

“Drinking . . . We Cannot Do without It”

RUSSIA'S FIRST VODKA MUSEUM OPENED IN ST. PETERSBURG on May 27, 2001, in anticipation of the 500th anniversary of vodka. Situated prominently between two of the city's most popular tourist attractions—the Bronze Horseman statue and St. Isaac's Cathedral—the museum rightly takes its place among Russia's historical icons. It is no accident that it has become one of the most visited places in the city: Russians have an almost mystical relationship to drink in general and vodka in particular. Legend has it that a thousand years ago, when Grand Prince Vladimir (r. 980–1015) pondered over which faith to adopt, he rejected Islam because it imposed restrictions on the consumption of hard liquor. Whether or not Grand Prince Vladimir actually said, “Drinking is the joy of Rus' we cannot do without it,” it is significant that these words are still attributed to him more than a thousand years later. Vladimir's proclamation highlights the reverence with which Russians regard alcohol and underscores the importance of drink to the Russian state and society. In the words of one commentator, “God, bread, water, and vodka were the mainstays of Russia.”¹

Indeed, alcohol has been central to the social, cultural, and economic life of the country from the first written accounts. As early as the fifteenth century, monasteries began producing grain alcohol. In the sixteenth century, the

first state-owned taverns (*kabaks*) were opened and became so profitable that by the seventeenth century the state established a monopoly over all commercial distilling. The Law Code (*Ulozhenie*) of 1649 made it illegal to buy or sell vodka except through government-owned taverns, and all revenues from the sale of alcohol were by law a part of the royal purse. By the beginning of the twentieth century, alcohol revenues made up a third of all state revenues. Despite vodka's fiscal importance to the state, the tsarist government instituted prohibition in 1914 as part of the mobilization of men and resources for World War I. The loss of such an important source of revenue during the war exacerbated Russia's economic crises and ultimately helped spark a revolution. After the October Revolution of 1917, the state reestablished a monopoly on alcohol production, and vodka once again became the single most important source of revenue. Because of social problems related to widespread drunkenness and moral issues surrounding government production and sale of alcohol, nowhere has the problem of alcoholism been more politicized.

This book examines one highly significant chapter in the history of the Russian state and society both before and after the revolution: how those in power in Russia have understood and represented drinking and the impact that has had on state policy and on Russia's working classes between 1895 and 1932. From the 1890s, Russia experienced a growth in industry and with it the expansion of dirty, overcrowded industrial neighborhoods, where decrepit housing overflowed with peasants newly emigrated from the countryside. The squalor and stench of these dismal districts, accompanied by a sharp increase in prostitution and the ubiquitous drunks swearing and brawling in the streets, produced among observers a perception of deep social problems. In the 1920s, when the new Soviet leadership launched a program of rapid industrialization, these problems intensified. Most social reformers before and after 1917 tied these problems to the issue of alcoholism.

Alcoholism and Social Control

A Swedish researcher, Magnus Huss, first used the term “alcoholism” in 1849 to describe a wide variety of symptoms associated with drunkenness.² He classified alcoholism as a physical illness and hence a medical problem rather than as a form of insanity or moral failing. Throughout the 1860s, Russian physicians, pharmacologists, physiologists, and psychiatrists built on Huss's theories and drew from concepts of alcoholism developed in French and

German universities. They sought physiological explanations for excessive drinking and adopted the term “alcoholism” (*alkogolizm*) as opposed to “drunkenness” (*p’ianstvo*) to connote the phenomenon of disease. Later, Soviet physicians also made this distinction.

Yet the professionals who aspired to enlighten and counsel reformers on the means of preventing or curing alcoholism could not reach a consensus on its causes or cures. Experts agreed on the danger of this disease, but what exactly it was, what caused it, why it seemed to be prevalent among certain groups, especially urban workers, and how to cure it were topics of heated debate. Consequently, various groups in Russia sought to define the causes of and cures for alcoholism. At the heart of this quest was a bid for political power and social control through the establishment of norms that would assert upper-class cultural authority over the lower classes.

The first sustained attack on working-class drinking and the state’s liquor monopoly had its roots in the reforms of the mid-nineteenth century. The Great Reforms of the 1860s lessened censorship constraints and created the rudiments of a modern civic order. This relaxation of censorship opened a field of public discourse and within it the expression of an emerging civic establishment made up of members of the professions.³ These professional strata, under the influence of Western liberalism (even when they rejected it), constructed alcoholism as a social and medical problem in their battle against the old order. They all agreed that drunkenness was one of the most pressing problems facing Russian society. However, they differed in their prescriptions on how to cure this problem. The different ideas about drunkenness advanced by members of the professions and others attempting to shape civic and popular culture expressed tensions between ideas imported from the West and countervailing cultural assumptions in Russia. Whether it was members of the clergy defining alcoholism as a moral failing, medical professionals declaring it a medical problem, liberals tying it to the failures of autocracy, or socialists decrying bourgeois exploitation, they all sought cultural hegemony over the working classes. Their subjective, emotional, and value-laden definitions of alcoholism reflect class and cultural conflicts in the chaos of the revolutionary era and underscore the struggle of the upper classes to establish power, authority, and legitimacy.

Focused attention on working-class drinking intensified in the chaotic years of fin de siècle Russia and reached a peak in the first decades of the twentieth century as revolutionary leaders tried to create a new socialist society.

Both before and after 1917, reformers tried to control the drinking behavior—and hence the social identities and cultural values—of the lower classes with little success. Moreover, important aspects of prerevolutionary bourgeois social reform influenced postrevolutionary construction of socialist culture. Yet traditional drinking practices firmly embedded in Russian popular culture thwarted temperance activists’ best efforts. Just as authorities devised strategies to reform working-class culture, so, too, the working classes devised strategies to maintain their traditional cultural practices—most notably drinking.

The prerevolutionary struggle for hegemony over definitions of alcoholism and its treatment came to an end with the tsarist government’s formal institution of prohibition in 1914. Nonetheless, the population found ways to distill illicit alcohol. In the disorders of World War I, the revolutions of 1917, and the resulting civil war (1918–1921), drunkenness among the lower classes reached epidemic proportions. The problem took on more urgency after 1920, as the Bolsheviks believed that the success of the revolution depended on the transformation of traditional Russian values in general and drinking practices in particular.

Toward a New Way of Life

Under new political conditions, Soviet leaders and health care practitioners revived the struggle for authority and professional legitimacy during the late 1920s over the issue of alcoholism. The so-called Stalin Revolution that coincided with the First Five-Year Plan (1928–1932) aimed at speeding up industrialization while modernizing the country. As with nearly all industrializing nations, modernization in the Soviet Union included changing people’s thinking and behavior. It necessitated inculcating new cultural norms and values that would make daily life for the general population orderly and productive. Efficiency, literacy, cleanliness, and above all sobriety gained attention from Soviet officials and public professionals. In these endeavors, Russians were not unique. Throughout Europe, social reformers launched nationwide campaigns to “civilize” the masses through literacy campaigns, sanitation drives, temperance movements, and the like.⁴

“Civilizing” the masses in Russia, however, was made all the more complicated by the legacies of war, revolution, and civil war, as well as the Bolsheviks’ insistence on subsuming all endeavors into a single ideology. As collectivization in the Russian countryside destroyed traditional communities and

structures, peasants migrated to Soviet cities in droves. Bringing their culture and traditions with them, the masses of peasant migrants transformed the urban Soviet workforce into a social unit comprising elements of both urban and rural culture. The simultaneous existence of different cultural modes, including different modes of drinking and sobriety indigenous to the working class, became fraught with profound political significance as Bolshevik leaders sought to eliminate “anti-Soviet elements” from the population. By the late 1920s Communist Party leaders initiated extensive political and cultural programs to transform recalcitrant peasants into loyal (sober) socialist workers. One of the more active and highly publicized campaigns was a nationwide temperance campaign that borrowed heavily from its bourgeois predecessors.

Yet the millions of peasants who entered Soviet industry, as well as the older hereditary workers, resisted official ideology and drew upon their preindustrial culture and traditions to structure social identities and relationships. Primary among these were drinking practices and rituals. At the same time, party visionaries and theorists constructed ideological edifices to extend their moral authority and to create a new socialist society with acceptable cultural values. Foremost among these was sobriety. Implicit in the conflict of cultures and traditions were the negotiation and struggle between the working class and Soviet officialdom, which helped shape important aspects of the emerging Soviet order. These aspects included establishing the parameters of public behavior, defining the spheres of public and private, creating social divisions within the working class, and interpreting forms of political expression and activity. In all of these, drinking and sobriety played a vital role.

Cultural Revolution

Clearly, the critical issue facing the Bolsheviks was not simply the seizure of power. They sought as well to establish cultural hegemony through, in their words, a cultural revolution.⁵ Over the last two decades, a number of histories have illuminated various aspects of the Soviet Union’s cultural revolution and are essential for an understanding of it.⁶ Many of these, however, do not place cultural transformation in the center of the Bolshevik project. Rather, they treat it as a fascinating, but secondary, goal of the revolution. The cultural dimension of Bolshevik state building, however, was of utmost importance to V. I. Lenin and other revolutionary leaders. At its core, Bolshevism intended

to transform the values of the Russian population and ultimately transform human nature.⁷

Recently, a few notable histories have taken great strides toward deepening our understanding of the centrality of cultural transformation to the Bolshevik project.⁸ They highlight some of the more important institutional and organizational devices used by the nascent state to effect a cultural revolution. Yet even these studies deal only tangentially, if at all, with one of the most troublesome and intractable aspects of what the Bolsheviks saw as prerevolutionary working-class culture—drunkenness.

Despite the centrality of drink and temperance to understanding Russia's industrial modernization and working-class culture both before and after the revolution, scholarship on the topic is remarkably thin. A few studies by Russian historians focus on the Soviet anti-alcohol campaign but do not place it within the context of cultural revolution or discuss its impact on workers' lives.⁹ Operating from the premise that drinking is problematic, most Western studies generally focus on prerevolutionary temperance and do not analyze the place of alcohol in the daily lives of Russians.¹⁰ One notable exception is a recent book by Laura Phillips that examines drink and working-class culture in St. Petersburg.¹¹ Treating alcohol consumption as a normal component of working-class life, Phillips has taken the first steps toward understanding the social utility of alcohol among workers. My study, however, challenges Phillips's argument that drinking behaviors among workers changed in important ways after the October Revolution. Since St. Petersburg was the heart of the revolutionary movement, Phillips's narrow focus on workers in St. Petersburg limits the importance of her study. As Phillips herself notes, workers in St. Petersburg initiated the revolution and were steeped in revolutionary culture more than anywhere else in the country.¹² As such, working-class life in St. Petersburg cannot be viewed as representative of workers in general. On the contrary, my study reveals that prerevolutionary culture, including drinking practices, continued to structure lower-class identities and socialization well after the revolution.

Filling in Some “Blank Spots”

In light of the substantial lacunae in the existing scholarship, the first goal of this book is to explore how those in power in Russia, both before and after the revolution, defined working-class drinking as problematic and how they

sought cultural modernization through addressing Russia's "drink problem." In this sense, then, I approach cultural revolution as a process tied to Russia's modernization that began before 1917. In doing so, two questions immediately arise: First, to what extent did prerevolutionary culture, society, and politics determine the nature of Bolshevism? Second, did the revolution ultimately fail because instead of inculcating the working class with new values and a new culture, the revolutionaries were overwhelmed by "traditional" values of drunkenness, suspicion of authorities, and passive forms of resistance? While no single study can claim a definitive assessment of these issues, examining them through the prism of drinking and temperance illuminates important aspects of how the revolutionary regime sought to establish power.

In addressing these two questions, the first chapters of the book deal with the prerevolutionary period. Here I revisit territory that others have already covered but with a different purpose and perspective. In tracing the evolution of Russian drinking culture as the country industrialized in the late nineteenth century, my work complements the earlier work of David Christian in his pathbreaking history of vodka.¹³ My study highlights the importance of alcohol in the daily lives of both workers and peasants as well as its tremendous fiscal importance to the state. Further, by recalling the place of drinking among Russia's lower classes, the book's first chapters underscore the tenacity of prerevolutionary practices despite the attempted imposition of revolutionary culture by state and party authorities after 1917.

A second theme I trace in the prerevolutionary period is the construction of alcoholism as a social problem from the 1860s to 1914 in order to examine the tensions between different conceptions of alcoholism: as an individual failing, as a social disease, and as a by-product of the social and cultural environment. The definition and treatment of alcohol became highly politicized in this period, as various professional groups sought to claim the moral authority to cure Russia's ills. The most recent histories of temperance organizations in Russia inform this discussion. Tracing some of the political implications of temperance, Patricia Herlihy covers a bit of the same ground.¹⁴ Her focus, however, remains narrowly fixed on problematic drinking and temperance and does not address the larger social and political processes occurring after the 1860s. My study reflects upon the larger struggle within the upper classes to appropriate and to redefine political power embedded in social relations, public institutions, and intellectual authority.

This book's second goal is to highlight the Bolshevik approach to social

modernization and cultural revolution. It seeks to do so through an examination of the institutional, organizational, and propagandistic devices used in the 1920s and early 1930s by state and party officials to inculcate the working class with Bolshevik-defined socialist values—in this case, sobriety. Under the auspices of the voluntary Society for the Struggle with Alcoholism (*Obshchestvo po bor’be s alkogolizmom*, OBSA), the leadership launched a nationwide temperance campaign that was quite representative of other mobilization campaigns in the early Soviet years. Here we must remember that throughout the 1920s, the fledgling revolutionary state was not the powerful dictatorship it became under high Stalinism (1937–1941). While the leadership assumed it had the moral authority and political legitimacy to transform society, mass political support for the new regime never materialized, and class antagonisms stubbornly persisted.

More important, despite the fact that the historical context changed from tsarist to Soviet times, the lower classes clung to their traditional cultural expressions. The typical worker altered his or her drinking patterns little, if at all, when he or she became part of the “workers’ state.” Indeed, individual workers and the party had very different ideas about what it meant to be a worker in the workers’ state. While party theorists imagined the creation of a socialist society made up of sober, disciplined citizens, workers refused to abandon their traditional modes of drunken camaraderie on the shop floor, in taverns, and in working-class neighborhoods. In many respects, the socialists who in 1917 claimed to be liberators of the workers and peasants became alien oppressors of the working class by the 1930s. Just as prerevolutionary liberal professionals and social reformers had enlisted temperance in their struggles for power, Soviet reformers enlisted temperance in their struggle for moral authority, cultural hegemony, and legitimacy in the 1920s. An examination of the Soviet temperance campaign reveals how the party conceptualized these problems and highlights two conflicting impulses in Bolshevik policy: revolutionary ideology and political expediency.

Finally, this project attempts to reveal and explain the various strategies used by members of the working class to cope with new realities. In doing so, it casts attention on various strategies the party employed in symbiosis with the working class to transform traditional cultural values. As Phillips notes, some workers did indeed adopt Soviet values or adapted them to serve their particular interests. More commonly, however, workers reacted to Bolshevik initiatives and class hierarchies with defiance, circumvention, and numerous passive strategies of resistance.

In an attempt to find a broad foundation for investigating the interplay between working-class realities and state social policy, I focus on four cities: Moscow, Kharkov, Saratov, and Tomsk. As the nation's capital for most of the period under consideration and the largest industrial center, Moscow is a logical choice. A city rich in institutions and traditions that predated Soviet industrialization, it continued to influence and shape events and behaviors during the period of rapid industrialization and cultural revolution. Huge new plants were constructed in Moscow, and existing factories doubled or tripled in size, attracting tremendous numbers of peasant migrants.¹⁵ Moreover, the most active Soviet temperance efforts were centered in Moscow, and sources from this region are quite rich. I chose Kharkov for many of the same reasons. At the time, it was the capital of the Ukrainian republic and the largest industrial center in Ukraine. Patterns of industrial development and the consequent in-migration of peasant laborers were similar to those of Moscow.

I included Saratov, a provincial capital far removed from the center, because in many respects it is more representative of urban Russia than either Kharkov or Moscow.¹⁶ Located at the tip of the black earth region, Saratov stood at the crossroads of industry and agriculture. It acquired large, urban-based industrial enterprises during the state-sponsored industrialization program of the 1890s, yet the local economy remained tied to agriculture. The working class, therefore, was predominately urban-based with ties to the countryside, a situation that was typical of much of provincial Russia.

The fourth city under study is Tomsk, in the Kuzbass industrial region of western Siberia. The Kuzbass formed the eastern anchor of the new Soviet Siberian industrial fortress and, like the well-known western anchor, Magnitogorsk, was the site of some of the most intense industrial construction throughout the 1920s. Tens of thousands of Soviet citizens and foreign Communists migrated to Tomsk to participate in huge construction projects.

This concentration on four geographical locations provides a broader picture of the process of cultural revolution. Because of the vagaries of Russian sources, however, this study cannot claim to be a true comparative history. The collections of various types of data are quite uneven and differ from region to region. Moreover, a tremendous number of archives were destroyed during World War II or subsequently lost owing to poor storage facilities, because of mismanagement, or in the chaos of restructuring following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1992. For example, OBSA's archives in Moscow were lost during World War II. Fearing the destruction of valuable documents

if Moscow were invaded, archivists at the Semashko Institute (where OBSA's archives were housed) loaded the archives on a ship to be sent down the Moscow River. The ship, unfortunately, sank and all the documents were lost. Additionally, the archives of the local branch of OBSA in Kharkov were among thousands of archival documents burned by the Nazis during their occupation of Ukraine. In Moscow, some of the archives from the Institute of Sanitary Culture simply disappeared when the archive was being reorganized in 1993. Despite these problems, enough overlapping materials exist to allow for generalizations about a broad spectrum of the working classes and the state's efforts to control them.

This study privileges male workers in heavy industry because that is what the Soviet regime did. Since it was precisely construction and heavy industry that were the focus of the Soviet industrialization drive during the First Five-Year Plan, both expanded greatly.¹⁷ Drinking among rural peasants, the intelligentsia, and the middle strata of white-collar workers does not factor into this study because these groups figured differently from industrial workers in the regime's plans for cultural revolution. Because of the focus on heavy industry, discussion of drinking centers on male workers, largely because few women were employed in this type of work. In fact, the shift to a more modern drinking culture in the nineteenth century excluded women from taverns as well as from the drunken camaraderie on the shop floor.

Specific statistical information regarding drinking behaviors of women does not exist, perhaps because female drinking was not thought pervasive enough to warrant special study. None of the sources suggest that drinking among female workers was problematic—women generally were not suspended from work for drunkenness, nor were they arrested or forced into treatment centers. This does not mean that women did not drink. Indeed, the paucity of evidence may indicate that cultural injunctions against women drinking were so strong that authorities did not see their drinking as problematic.¹⁸ Women, however, were the main producers and purveyors of illegal alcohol. In the 1920s untold thousands of women were arrested or fined for making moonshine.

The revolutionary state's construction of alcoholism as a petit bourgeois holdover from the tsarist past highlights problems the Bolsheviks encountered in trying to bring about a Marxist revolution in an overwhelmingly peasant society. By examining the context in which drinking became a problem before and after 1917, this study traces the state's failure to establish

cultural hegemony as it sought to inculcate social controls through legislative action, coercion, and voluntary societies. Having found themselves helpless to curb the flow of illegal alcohol, unable to generate acceptable forms of revenue to replace alcohol revenues, and utterly incapable of changing traditional drinking habits, the Bolsheviks attempted to school workers on correct drinking practices through propaganda. Yet the demise of the temperance campaign illustrates how workers' resistance forced party leaders to seek ideological retreats and accommodations. Whether in the form of a toast or as the subject of a temperance poster, alcohol has defined not only a stereotype of Russian culture but also a nexus of early-twentieth-century reform movements. This book seeks to uncover the various forms of control that crisscrossed Russian society and politics—control that *can* be found at the bottom of a glass.