Letter to Editor

On the Causes of Alcoholism in the Former Soviet Union

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Alcoholism in the former Soviet Union has been a theme of extensive research and publication despite the difficulties of obtaining valid statistics (McKee, 1999) and other unbiased information. The fact that the state, at various times, encouraged alcohol sales is known to the international community (McKee, 1999). Propaganda of alcohol consumption was clearly visible during the 1960–1980s (before the start of the anti-alcohol campaign in 1985) and obviously took place also earlier. Some editions such as the extremely popular ‘Kniga o vkusnoi i zdorovoi pishe’ (The book about delicious and healthy food), re-edited several times since 1939, praised gustatory and medicinal properties of some alcoholic beverages, which was accompanied by hypnotizing illustrations with colourfully labelled bottles standing on a richly covered table, seen and admired by many children. The most efficient tool of the alcohol propaganda was the creation of an attractive image of a drunkard, suitable for self-identification: carefree, cheerful and manly. The carrier of this notion was, for example, the popular magazine ‘Crocodile’, whose feuilletons and caricatures were formally directed against alcoholism but, in fact, romanticized alcohol consumption and the reckless drunken atmosphere. The ‘Crocodile’ and other mass media created and poetized alcoholic stereotypes: vodka-i-seleiodka (consumption of vodka with salty herring), butylka-na-troikh (a bottle for three) etc. Association of harmless pastimes such as fishing trips or domino play with alcohol consumption was maintained by numerous pictures and cartoons. Some beautiful folk songs, for example ‘Shumel kamysch, derévya gnulis’ (The reed rustled, the trees bent, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y1QTYcx8zNQ&featu re=related) were proclaimed to be drinking songs and obtrusively used by mass media as a symbol of alcohol consumption. Paraphrasing a stanza from this song, ‘it was our youth that was rumpled...’ In the same way acted the most popular Soviet-time films with participation of the famous actor Yuri Nikulin, who personified the image of a charismatic drunkard. The short stories (so called anecdotes) were retold, some of them obviously spread with intention, where drunkards were presented triumphant over intelligentsia. Here is an example: An alcoholic and an educated person (with his glasses) are travelling by Metro. The intelligentsia man makes a comment about the drunkard’s dirty coat. The alcoholic vomits directly onto the educated one and says: ‘Look at yourself now!’ The majority is sympathizing with the drunkard, of course.

Alcohol consumption at working places was not only tolerated but taciturnly encouraged among workers, students and intelligentsia. Some Soviet festivals were associated with drinking, the best example being the New Year, which had replaced Christmas. The time schedule of the New Year festival has been the same everywhere: eating and drinking started well before midnight; then, at midnight, a sparkling wine called Soviet Champaign is drunk in standing, and then follows a continuation, until the daybreak in many cases. Prolonged sitting at the table before and after midnight contributes to intoxication of even individuals who drink less. Children participate until midnight at the earliest. Other festivals associated with alcohol consumption are the Women’s Day on March 8 and professional holidays such as the Builder’s Day on the second Sunday of August, when many people related to a corresponding profession become intoxicated with alcohol. Birthdays and other personal events have been systematically celebrated in many working teams. For example, early in 1985, shortly before the start of the anti-alcohol campaign, the 60th anniversary of the head of the pathology department Prof. Victor V. Serov was celebrated at the Moscow Medical Academy; there were over 50 guests, and there was enough cognac (dispatched from Armenia), vodka and excellent hors d’oeuvres for everybody. Today, we remember this event with nostalgia.

The drinking bouts at working places were often initiated or indirectly inspired by the management, which was also the case in medical, educational and scientific institutions. In such institutions, technical or medicinal alcohol was massively consumed, which was knowingly tolerated by the management. It was known and seen that the management purloined alcohol themselves. Moreover, in workers’ and other companies, the ringleaders called zavodila could be observed, who systematically manipulated others towards drinking in excess. Non-drinkers were often stigmatized as outsiders or aliné. Furthermore, mildly alcoholic beverages such as kvass (Jargin, 2009) or cherry must (sold sometimes warm from the kvass cisterns later in autumn or in winter: it was sweet, tasty and contained apparently more alcohol than kvass), consumed from childhood on, probably contributed to chronic alcoholism. Heavy binge drinking was started by a considerable percentage of schoolchildren from 14 to 15 years on (>50% according to the author’s estimate, boys more often, but girls as well). It was tolerated by the society and authorities: repeated detentions by militia and sojourns in the sobering-up stations (vytretzviti) had no serious consequences for many schoolchildren; it just went on.

Treatment and prevention of alcoholism were notoriously inefficient, while placebos and persuasion were the usual methods (Fleming et al., 1994). The correctional centres, so-called lechebno-trudovye profilaktorii (work-and-treatment preventoriums), were in fact a form of detainment for chronic alcoholics evading treatment, violating community order or working discipline, according to an official definition (after Wikipedia in Russian, http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Лечебно-трудовой_профилакторий); while loopholes were left for the inhabitants to obtain alcohol—over the fence or alike. Some alcoholics, after an episode of alcoholic psychosis, were treated in psychiatric hospitals; alcohol was
also more or less regularly available there with the help of nurses or visitors. The business flourished with tetram preparations for the implantation, having a placebo effect at best (Johnsen and Mørland, 1992; Wilson et al., 1984): the patients were assured of high affectivity and paid considerable amounts of money for an implantation. At the same time, ‘folk remedies’ or antidotes against the implanted medicines, which were in fact placebos, were known: for example, a Russian bath (sweating room) after eating a whole lemon, etc. As a result, many patients resumed drinking shortly after the implantation.

The anti-alcohol campaign instituted by Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985 was initially effective, but it ended up in failure and was accompanied, along with the temporary decline of alcohol-related mortality (McKee, 1999), by loss of life because of the massive consumption of surrogates, home-made alcohol, technical fluids and perfumery. In general, the quality of alcoholic beverages deteriorated at that time. In the 1990s, consumption of alcohol rapidly increased, while high-proof beverages—especially vodka—have enhanced their share in the total (Ryan, 1995). Only in the 2000s, as a result of the more responsible way of life under the conditions of market economy, did alcohol consumption appear to decrease at least in large cities such as Moscow.

This letter should end on an optimistic note. During the Soviet time, many people had no wide-ranging goals, and the life was somewhat monotonous. Alcohol helped some of us to overcome communication barriers, to find friends and partners. In fact, many precious remembrances are associated with alcohol consumption, adventures and experiences in connection with it. Moreover, we have received a cadeau from the Soviet state: imitations of the world-famous sorts of wine and spirits were manufactured in the Soviet Union (some of them are still in production): Cabernet, Sauvignon (which were different wine sorts in the Soviet Union, the first one being red and the second being white), Riesling, Port, Madeira, Jeres, Pinot, Tocai (Tokay), Champaign, Cognac and some sorts of liqueur such as Chartreuse and Bénédictine. Besides, good rum and liqueurs were imported from Cuba and other countries; cognac was imported from Bulgaria. Even domestic gin (‘Kapitanskiy’) and whiskey (a domestic sort and Club 99 produced in Hungary) were available in the 1970s; the author of this letter tried it, and it was whiskey indeed. Another example: imitations of the French red wine Cahors have been produced in Russia and other countries of the former Soviet Union (e.g. Uzbekistan) until today; Cahors imitations are broadly used by the Russian Orthodox Church as a sacramental wine. Today, after the fall of the iron curtain, we are experiencing déjà vu (or, more precisely, dé ja vu) and are recognizing the original products, the taste of which is familiar from childhood and adolescence. It has facilitated, in a sense, the reconnection of our country to the rest of the civilized world.

REFERENCES


Jargin SV. (2009) Kvass: a possible contributor to chronic alcoholism in the former Soviet Union—alcohol content should be indicated on labels and in advertising. *Alcohol Alcohol* 44:529.


