Letter to the Editor

The Effect of Beverage Type on the Alcoholic Psychoses Rate in Russia

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Jargin (2015) reasonably argues that fortified wines might confound the strong positive association between vodka sales and alcoholic psychoses incidence in Russia reported by Razvodovsky (2015). Indeed, the pattern of fortified wine consumption in Russia has not received enough attention in the scientific literature. Cheap fortified wines with a relatively high alcohol content became especially popular among hard drinkers in the 1970s (Nemtsov, 2011). According to a survey conducted among alcohol-dependent individuals in this period, about 80% of them regularly consumed fortified wines (Lisitsyn and Sidorov, 1990). Fortified wines were generally consumed without meals in order to achieve a rapid intoxication effect. Some commentators believe that fortified wines were more harmful than vodka, causing deeper intoxication and a severe hangover, because the quality of the spirits added to fortified wines was generally poor (Treml, 1982; Jargin, 2015). Unfortunately, this speculation is not supported by scientific evidence, as no toxicological evaluation was carried out in order to determine whether fortified wine consumption carried a health risk.

Available evidence suggests that during the Soviet period the trend was away from low alcohol content table wines (dry and semi-dry with a 10, 5–11, 5% average alcohol content) in favour of stronger fortified wines (14,5% for dessert wine and 18,5% for strong wine) (Lisitsyn and Sidorov, 1990). According to Soviet statistics between 1970 and 1979 the supply of grape wine available for domestic consumption increased 7,9 times (from 461 to 3635 million litres), while the supply of fortified wines increased 17,8 times (from 130 to 2315 million litres) (Treml, 1982). It appears, however, that fortified wines made up a relatively small portion (about 8% in 1984) of alcohol consumed in Soviet Russia and consumption was falling by the early 1980s (Nemtsov, 2011). So, the phenomenon of fortified wine consumption mainly related to the Soviet period, thus limiting its influence as a potential confounding factor in the strong temporal association between per capita vodka sales and the alcoholic psychoses incidence rate in Russia for the whole period from 1970 to 2013 (Razvodovsky, 2015).

In contrast to Russia, the level of fortified wine consumption in the former Soviet republic of Belarus was relatively high comprising more than 30% in the early 1980s (Nemtsov, 2011). It should be noted that among the republics of the former USSR, Belarus occupied one of the leading positions in terms of per capita alcohol consumption (Stickley et al., 2007). The temporal pattern of beverage-specific per capita alcohol sales between 1970 and 1992 is shown in Fig. 1. As can be seen, fortified wines sales fluctuated sharply across the period: they increased steadily from 1970, reaching a peak in 1980, then started to decrease, before almost completely disappearing during Gorbachev’s anti-alcohol campaign. It is important to emphasize that between 1984 and 1987 the level of dry and semi-dry grape wines sales decreased by 46.8% (from

Fig. 1. Beverage-specific alcohol sales (in litres of absolute alcohol) in Belarus between 1970 and 1992.
2.5 to 1.3 l), the level of vodka sales decreased by 34.4% (from 3.2 to 2.1 l), while fortified wines sales decreased 262.5 times (from 2.1 to 0.008 l). These data indicate that fortified wine was the key beverage driving the sharp fall in recorded alcohol consumption in Belarus during the anti-alcohol campaign. The substantial drop in wine sales during this period resulted in the unfavourable shift in the structure of alcohol consumption from wine towards vodka in the 1990s, which was associated with a dramatic growth in the alcohol-related mortality rate (Razvodovsky, 2003).

One of the most intriguing aspects of Russian alcohol history is the substantial decline in alcohol consumption and alcohol-related mortality rates that occurred between 1980 and 1984 (Nemtsov, 2011). Nemtsov argues that this decline was most likely due to the creation of three new services: medical-labour dispensaries (Decree of 1 March 1974) and narcological and resuscitation services (resolution of December 1976) (Nemtsov, 2011). According to him, the impact of these measures only became visible after the passage of several years because of organizational difficulties. There is, however, an alternative explanation for this phenomenon. The new Soviet leader Andropov, who came to power in 1982, realized that mass drunkenness was a major threat to the Soviet system and saw a great opportunity to increase labour productivity by sobering up the nation. He took a number of steps in this direction using police methods to strengthen labour discipline and to fight against drunkenness in the workplace (Lisitsyn and Sidorov, 1990). It might be the case that this policy resulted in a decline in both per capita alcohol consumption and the alcohol-related mortality level. Paradoxically, against this background, Andropov also sanctioned the production of vodka, which was 10% cheaper than standard vodka, in order to make his policy more popular. This apparent inconsistency suggests that there are still many grey areas in Russian alcohol history which need to be examined.

REFERENCES