

Vodka in the USSR

Alcoholism as a Means of Government

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Note: The following is an excerpt from an article, "The Regime and the Working Class in the USSR," by Viktor Zaslavsky which appeared in *Telos* No. 42, Winter 1979–80. *Telos*, "a quarterly journal of radical thought," is available at Box 3111 St. Louis MO 63160. Subscriptions are \$15 yearly; single copies, \$4.

At this point an ancient expedient has come to the regime's rescue: the state's vodka monopoly. In his time, Stalin had to present the vodka monopoly as a temporary and unavoidable measure for "procuring the necessary means to develop industry through our own efforts and thus avoid the foreign yoke."

This "temporary" measure has become one of the most stable of all Soviet Institutions. Vodka is the only commodity that can be found any day, in any quantity and any place in the country; according to some data, 70 percent of goods transported to the far northern cities is made up of alcohol products; a citizen risks not being served at a restaurant unless he orders vodka or cognac. By stimulating private consumption while unable to produce sufficient quantities of goods, the regime finds a way out in the development of an "illusory consumer good."

Hence, alcoholism in the USSR has become an indispensable element Of the Soviet way of life. Today, vodka is truly the country's No. 1 commodity.

In 1927, the consumption of vodka and samogon—the home-made kind—annually averaged 6 liters per capita; in 1960, according to data from the Moscow area, it had reached 23 liters. A study in another city from the same region verified that the average resident spends 105 rubles per year for state-produced vodka (compared to just over 4 rubles for books), which is equivalent to an overall per capita consumption of 30 to 36 liters of alcohol per year. These data suggest that individual consumption of vodka has increased at least 5 to 6 times over a span of 40 years. The USSR today has probably the highest hard-liquor consumption per resident of any country in the world.

As a result, many lower-echelon workers do not gain much from wage increases. They practically work for vodka, the production of which costs the state a few cents, even though it sells steadily at high prices. One of the less timid Soviet publications cites among the principal causes of drunkenness the "psychological and material leveling of work, the monotony of daily life and the high wages of the low-qualified industrial labor force."

This policy naturally ends up in a vicious circle: the sale of vodka must compensate for the lack of other necessary goods; but the ensuing violations in work discipline, absenteeism, the low quality of production and delinquency cause, in turn, a subsequent decline in productivity and a scarcity of many consumption items. Periodically, the CPSU Central Committee approves resolutions on the need for fighting alcoholism, while the press keeps publishing the latest research data (one of the studies, for example, shows that 50 percent of Moscow's salespersons are drunk on the job) and invites the public to combat alcoholism...

Hence, alcoholism is an important prop for preserving the status quo. Drunkenness guarantees a certain degree of satisfaction among some sectors of the population (especially for unskilled workers and peasants) as it lowers the level of their spiritual needs and of needs in general.

Indeed, the majority of the population does not realize that drunkenness is the result of a specific state policy and that, as a rule, the individual has no alternative mode of behavior. At the same time, by encouraging alcoholism, the state continues to concentrate resources in heavy industry, armaments and space programs.



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