

Vodka, Culture, and Markets  
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Note to Havighurst seminar readers: I'm woefully deficient on sources for literature review. Any recommendations you have are especially welcome!

Around the world, Russia is known for its vodka and Russians for their affinity to drink vodka. Western media informs us that alcoholism is on the rise and is one of the leading causes of declining male life expectancy (cite?). This dire trend may not surprise everyone, but the statistics present an incomplete picture. Traditionally, the Soviet government had a monopoly on production and sale of vodka, making it central to the economy. Gorbachev's *perestroika* included a campaign to create a "dry" Russia by limiting the sale of vodka to Russian citizens through a coupon system. The ultimate goal of eradicating alcohol consumption failed. Illegal production of alcohol increased, a black market for vodka emerged, and the Soviet government lost its monopoly over vodka. Together, these contemporary realities demonstrate the pervasiveness of vodka as a social, economic, and symbolic factor in post-Soviet transformations in Russia. Examining the permutations of vodka in contemporary Russia reveals that vodka, particularly in Siberia, with its combination of indigenous populations and Russians, plays a complex role in social interaction and in market economic reform efforts. In this paper I will unpack the pervasive and multi-faceted role of alcohol in the Russian rural economy and examine how health, religion, subsistence, and meta-cultural dialogues intertwine.

Health and Alcohol

In 1996 the male life expectancy for Russians was 58 years (55 in East Siberia) (Russian Regional Database, 2000). According to federal statistics for the Republic of Buriatia, an autonomous region located in South Central Siberia, alcoholism and alcohol-related psychoses have actually declined in the region, while narcotics use and addiction have increased (see table 1). While these statistics would seem to suggest that concerns over alcoholism and life expectancy are over emphasized, I would hesitate to ignore the connection between alcohol abuse and health for several reasons. First of all, these statistics are based on reported cases in a country where rural hospitals are being shut down<sup>i</sup> and poor families can't afford basic medical treatments<sup>ii</sup>, so I believe a valid assumption is that cases of alcoholism are underreported. Further, if we look at mortality statistics for Buriatia, we see that the number of accidental deaths has gone up considerably since the mid 1980s. Looking closely we see a significant jump in the number of alcohol related deaths between 1990 and 1995 (in 1994 there were 29.2 deaths per 100,000 people), then again after 1998. Both of these jumps can easily be correlated to disruptive political and economic events in Russia. Under the general category of accidental deaths, both Irkutsk Oblast and the Buriat Republic list suicide and murder and Irkutsk Oblast also includes automobile accidents. In all categories, the number of deaths is on the rise. If my consultants in Tunka region of Buriatia, one of whom is an EMT for the local ambulance service, give an accurate portrayal, the growing number of murders, suicides, and other violent crimes can also be attributed the increase in alcohol consumption. Other illnesses, including heart disease and digestive disorders, can be related to the consumption of illegal alcohol, which is often unfiltered and contains harmful elements like lead (see Yudina, 2000). So, while the statistics are unclear about

the actual impact of alcohol consumption on mortality, it is safe to say that its influence is growing.

As in many other cultures around the world, alcohol serves as a means of relaxation and escapism from the difficulties of everyday life. The changing nature of work conditions are forcing people to work in unheated or cramped offices with bad lighting, poor or no plumbing, etc. Some of these conditions are not much different than what existed under the Soviet regime. However, most people, particularly outside of regional centers, receive their salaries infrequently or still await back pay from several years ago. They are disenchanted with the promises of “market reform” and “emerging democracy.” The correlation between major events, such as the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the devaluation of the ruble in 1998, and the increase in alcoholism (see table 2) highlight this disenchantment. These socio-economic changes, to some degree also explain the more frequent and liberal nature of women’s drinking in the workplace.

### Women and Alcohol

During my fieldwork in rural Buriatia, a Siberian region of Russia, numerous women lamented to me that alcohol consumption is on the rise, especially among women and young adults. I observed that drinking patterns among professional women have taken on a form reserved for men. While working at an English Department in 1994-95, I took part in the tradition of *chajpit'e* (formal tea) on the last Friday of every month. Around 3 PM, instructors who were not giving lessons or grading oral examinations would begin arranging and setting the table with cakes, appetizers, fresh fruit, and several bottles of wine, champagne, and vodka. This was a forum where the collective

recognized and celebrated all personal milestones (birthdays, marriages, births, these defenses). Outside of this forum, drinking on the job was completely unacceptable. On numerous occasions during my fieldwork in Buriatia in 2000 I was also around predominantly female collectives during the workday. As a norm, every personal milestone was celebrated in its turn. Furthermore, unlike the formal teas I took part in during 1994 and 1995 in 2000 women would run out to the store for a second or even a third bottle during the middle of the afternoon when the mood struck them. This is a type of behavior typically reserved for men in Russia, which helps them cope with the boredom and monotony of their everyday lives.

Women are also blamed for the rise in alcohol consumption and alcoholism. An article under the rubric "School for Survival" (shkola vyzhivaniya), a reporter answers the question: "I have come to hear from foreign guests that 'Russian men drink a lot only because Russian women allow it.' I was very surprised. Could this really be the case?" (Izvekova, 2000). The author answers with a series of responses from doctors who study various aspects of drinking and alcohol abuse. She ends with a table of advice to women, which seems to contradict the tone of her article that focuses on women as supportive wives and mothers. Izvekova lists six pieces of advice, starting with "Learn to cook well. A satisfied (man) is not drawn into hard drinking" (ibid, p 20). Not only does this advice reify traditional gender roles, it shifts blame for male drinking patterns onto women, who are not fulfilling their gendered obligations.

2. Don't encourage drinking at every occasion.
3. Listen to your husband! It's better for him to share his problems and troubles with you than in other company with a bottle.
4. Don't shame him when he's drunk. Wait until morning.
5. Don't blackmail him with sex.
6. Be happy with any hobby he picks up, even if it seems stupid to you.

(ibid.)

At the same time as these recommendations are supposed to aid women in combating excessive drinking, they imply that women are themselves responsible for the underlying cultural practices that are the foundation for excessive drinking.

#### “White foods” and alcohol consumption

In Buriatia, it is interesting to note the relationship between cultural practices and alcohol consumption. Vodka, in addition to being the quintessential Russian beverage, has also entered the pantheon of Buriat culture as “white” food, therefore an appropriate and necessary part of ritual life. Holidays, travel, and special occasions all require offerings of vodka to spirits to ensure safe passage, happiness, health, or general well-being. To partake in the festivities is to partake in the consumption of vodka. If done properly, the offering is done by the eldest male, with his head covered, pouring out vodka in the four directions from a fresh bottle. Driving through Tunka Valley requires a series of stops to make offerings at over ten different mineral springs, burial sites, and sites with historical spiritual significance.

Vodka, however, is actually a recent addition to the category of white food, corresponding to its introduction by Russians (cite). Traditional white foods included, milk, cheese curd and other dairy products, bread, white candies, rice, and tarasun (a milk brandy made from cow or horse milk). Women would also make morning offerings with milky tea. Other items that are used for offerings are grains, tea, tobacco, matches, and coins. The last three are also more recent and sometimes controversial additions.

Controversy arises out of the varying definitions of tradition (how traditional is vodka) and the consequences of questionable traditions on the health and stability of

society. In one interview in the national newspaper, Buriad Unen, a local author and reporter discusses the use of vodka in religious offerings.

“And what about tradition? It’s a sin not to make an offering at a holy place  
People go to the lama or to the shaman with vodka..”

“The Mongols, including Buriats, never had such a tradition of pouring out vodka at every ritual. Ask a lama which is better- milk, vodka, or arxi? There’s no difference. Milk is even better. The buriat’s gods are drunk [enough] as it is, he will answer. Everyone drinks. They even say that all normal people drink.”

(Buriad Unen, 1999)

One of the reasons why vodka is often preferred is because of the social tradition of drinking that has fused with religious traditions. Certainly, under the Soviet regime, people were continuing their religious practices, but they were often transformed into opportunities for social contact.

### Economics and alcohol

Though cultural factors are important to understanding alcohol consumption in general, economic factors are highly relevant in understanding recent changes.

Unemployment (and the accompanying sense of helplessness) is one factor driving the increase in alcohol consumption. While official figures are still under 20%, my estimation of unemployment for Tunka region of Buriatia, where I spent 9 months in 2000 is around 30%. At the same time, most unemployed people work informally for pay, which often include a few rubles or a hot meal, and more often than not, a bottle of vodka or spirit (grain alcohol or alcohol spirits). Spring planting, fall harvesting, and annual remodeling are the most common jobs for which someone might hire labor. My

friend's uncle would often come to her asking if there was anything he could do for her around the house. Frequently he would come back with tools and a friend, who she was expected provide with food and "bubbles" (as alcohol is colloquially referred to), which she would bring home around 4PM to guarantee that the work was mostly done.

Spirit is another element in the economics of alcohol. Spirit is technically illegal for sale, but it makes its way into the population in several forms. Vodka can be extracted from bottles and replaced with watered down spirit or fake labels are made for a combination of spirit and water. In villages, spirit abounds in its pure form, sold out of people's homes to be diluted with water before consumption. In villages, the consumption of spirit is a deliberate choice. It's cheap—those looking for an inexpensive way to get drunk can buy 200 milliliters for 10-15 rubles (roughly 30-50 cents) as opposed to a bottle of vodka for 45-60 rubles (one and a half to two dollars). One of the consequences of cheap alcohol spirits is that it is often of very low quality—unrefined ethyl alcohol or industrial alcohol spirits used for cleaning machinery. The result is that alcohol related deaths are on the rise, not necessarily because of excessive drinking but because of alcohol poisoning. "The market is flooded with alcoholic beverages, whose quality doesn't meet demands [standards], and rather frequently threatens people's health and lives. Drinking a single bottle of "false" vodka means a person takes two swallows of acetone" (Yudina, 2000).

For those who manage to bring spirit into the village, it also provides a supplementary, though illegal income. Getting spirit across the border into Tunka region is not always easy. One woman told me that her son once received spirit in lieu of his salary and rode home in a friend's car. The traffic cops at the regional border stopped

and searched the vehicle, pouring out the young man's entire "salary." Spirit merchants claim that they have no other way to supplement their income (they already sell what they can from their gardens and livestock) and that they need this income to pay for basic needs, such as tea, flour, or medicines. One woman told me that she recently gave up selling spirit because it was no longer profitable—you could buy spirit at every other house. She also expressed relief that she no longer had spirit in the house, therefore no longer faced the threat of being caught.

Ethno-political aspects of alcohol:

At a broader level, vodka, and in particular, spirit, also frames the little spoken of ethnic tensions between the "conquered" indigenous population (Buriats) and the "conquerers" (Russians) that parallels and sometimes references the introduction of alcohol to Native Americans by Europeans. This discussion is grounded in real socio-political tensions between regions, in this case Irkutsk Oblast' and Tunka Region of Buriatia. Wealth and poverty lie at the center of this dichotomy. It is, at a primary level, a discussion of the successful industrialization of Irkutsk Oblast' and its corresponding wealth in opposition to Tunka's agricultural and forestry base and its status as a protected area, which precludes industrial investment. Most of the grain alcohol, industrial spirits, and other forms of illegal alcohol that come into Tunka Region, flow in from Irkutsk. Leaders in Tunka frame this discussion in terms of Irkutsk's imperialist attitude toward Tunka, using it for recreation and raw natural resources, while keeping the locals sufficiently drunk on cheap liquor so they don't notice they are being taken advantage of.

Irkutsk Oblast' is certainly the source for most of the illegal vodka that floods Tunka region, but the commodity chain is not easily traced.



It's no secret that surrogatnye (false) beverages have flooded Russia and Irkutsk Oblast' to such a degree that quality alcohol which is produced cannot maintain a competition with them. People who consume surrogatnye beverages die almost like flies. But in order to prove that [illegal] spirits are reaching the consumer . . . is difficult. (Zvereva, 2000)

It is not entirely clear whether the illegal spirits originate in or merely travel through Irkutsk, however, there are several factories within the territory of Irkutsk Oblast that produce various forms of industrial alcohol. Indeed, throughout Russia, about half of the alcohol consumed is either industrial alcohol or samogon, home-made vodka (Zhelnorova, 2000). So the factual base for claims against Irkutsk Oblast exist.

However, it would be close to impossible to prove any connection between the import of illegal alcohol and an active economic or political domination of Tunka by Irkutsk.

Many people in Tunka valley talk about being victimized or exploited by neighboring, wealthier regions. Yet, in discussions with community leaders I heard a different attitude, pointing to the complicity of Buriats and Russians alike who not only allow, but perpetuate the cycle of exploitation (personal communication). In the local newspaper, a police inspector wrote about the health dangers of drinking illegal spirits and discussed the consequences of selling them. The article included a list of repeat offenders and the author ended with an appeal: "Why should some make a living off the sale of poison and other suffer from the consumption of undrinkable technical spirits?" (Yudina, 2000). [insert interview notes].

### Conclusion

I'm not ready to write a conclusion yet...

Table 1. Alcoholism and Narcotics Abuse in the Republic of Buriatia, 1990-1999.  
(Number of alcoholics and narcotics per 100,000 people)

	1990	1997	1998	1999
First diagnosis alcoholics	168.0	57.4	76.9	58.0
First diagnosis narcotics	9.4	10.2	13.2	9.2
Total diagnosis alcoholics	1452.1	1339.2	1287.8	1217.4
Total diagnosis narcotics	19.8	28.7	38.4	38.6

(from Goskomstat Rossia and Goskomstat Respublika Buriatia, 2000b.)

Table 2. Mortality rates related to alcohol abuse in Irkutsk Oblast and Republic of Buriatia.  
(Number of deaths per 100,000 people)

		1985	1990	1995	1998	1999
Irkutsk Oblast'	Accidental deaths (total)	na	na	na	221.7	248.8
	Deaths from alcohol poisoning (from total)	na	na	na	16.6	20.6
Republic of Buriatia	Accidental deaths (total)	190.4	172.7	269.8	224.8	266.4
	Deaths from alcohol poisoning (from total)	6.5	6.2	19.7	12.2	19.9

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Russian Regional Database: [http://www.cspp.strath.ac.uk/catalog11\\_0.html](http://www.cspp.strath.ac.uk/catalog11_0.html)

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<sup>i</sup> The rural hospital in Tory, one of the villages where I worked, was shut down for most of 2000 and 2001, only opening up in summer of 2001 when a doctor offered free medical exams in order to collect data for her doctoral dissertation.

<sup>ii</sup> In Buriatia it is still common for people to have to provide their own medical and pharmaceutical supplies in order to receive treatment.