

## BOOK REVIEWS

Stephen White, *Russia Goes Dry: Alcohol, State and Society*.  
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Another suitable subtitle for this interesting study might have been “The Soviet Union’s Last (Failed) Campaign.” Examining the accomplishments of the massive drive for sobriety under Mikhail Gorbachev, the author concluded that its results were mostly negative.

To set the scene, White describes Russia’s well-known penchant for alcohol, going back to the legend of the tenth century when Prince Vladimir supposedly chose Christianity for his people over other monotheistic religions because it allowed for drink. By the fifteenth century, when vodka had become well established in the Russian diet, foreigners were astonished by the quantity of alcohol consumed.

For the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the author relies more on statistics than travelers’ accounts concerning the quantities of alcohol consumed in Russia compared to other large industrialized countries. Russia lagged in per capita consumption, but, as the author pointed out, a good many of the Muslim, Jewish, and sectarian inhabitants of Russia drank little if at all, thus watering down the figures that reflected what most Orthodox Russians actually consumed.

As one might expect, much attention is given to the early years of the Soviet Union with regard to how people under the new regime were observing prohibition, a ban continued by Lenin from Tsar Nicholas II’s proclamation in 1914. White gives a mixed report. Observers sympathetic to the Revolution remarked on

the Bolsheviks' noticeable turn to sobriety, while contemporary physicians and other officials became alarmed over increased drinking of homebrew (*samogon*) and poisonous surrogates. In the mid-1920s recognizing that the state was losing revenue while the remnants of the capitalist system - such as alcoholism - were increasing, the regime gradually lifted prohibition and reintroduced a state monopoly of alcohol. To compensate somewhat for this permissiveness in a socialist society, the state in the late twenties subjected alcoholics to compulsory treatment, gave the local soviets the power to close down liquor stores and set limits to sales if they perceived problem drinking, and set up a "Society for the Struggle against Alcoholism" in 1928 that enlisted the participation of well-known military heroes of the Civil War as well as of poets and writers.

Under Stalin the Society did not last long, but was quietly merged with other organizations. All official anti-alcohol fervor then, such as it was, was somewhat illogically directed toward the stamping out of religion and illiteracy. Soon Stalin, no doubt in search for funds for his First Five-Year Plan, ordered a considerable step-up in vodka production. The author paints a grim picture in his second chapter, "A Drunken Society," of how rampant alcoholism, especially in the Brezhnev years, led to increased infant and adult mortality, the beginning, in fact, of that trend of foreshortened life expectancy that has continued to the present.

The well-known Brezhnev years of stagnation might well be described instead as the years of staggering. No amount of concealing statistics or denying the existence of crime could disguise the mammoth social and economic problems besetting the Soviet Union, so that even as early as the 1960s Nikita Khrushchev began to call for more anti-alcoholism education and quietly restricted somewhat the sale of alcohol in shops and restaurants. The reforming Khrushchev was not as enthusiastic over this project, however, as his craze for growing maize. In the 1970s Brezhnev gave lip service to creating anti-alcoholism

commissions and developing the field of “narcology,” while personally “lacing into vodka at a terrifying rate” (60).

The immediate predecessors of Gorbachev, Yuri Andropov (a teetotaler) and Konstantin Chernenko (an imbibler) admitted that public order and morality had not reached the level anticipated of a socialist society. Attempts to reduce alcoholism therefore were embedded in a broader campaign to instill labor discipline and obedience to laws in general. The idea of cracking down on drinking was on the table, so to speak, when Gorbachev became Chairman of the Communist Party in 1985.

Although he had never spoken militantly on the subject before, he had shown some interest in the matter earlier in his career. But his rise to power was immediately marked by the Politburo’s issuance of a resolution denouncing the problem of alcoholism and calling for the elimination of alcohol at public banquets and receptions. Party and state officials, managers, trade union and Komsomol leaders who abused alcohol were to be dismissed from their positions. Gorbachev mounted a gigantic movement on many fronts: not only curtailing the production and sale of vodka, eradicating vineyards, and shutting down distilleries, but also improving leisure facilities, whipping up media enthusiasm, and encouraging a barrage of letters from the public demanding action against alcoholism.

White gives a detailed account of how this top-down campaign represented itself as a grass-roots movement, enlisting ultimately fourteen million “voluntary” members in its huge temperance society. Long lines at the rare vodka shops became the subject of jokes while alcoholics were forced to receive “treatment.” Police sobering up stations multiplied and people were urged to create alcohol-free “traditions.” The drive was extensive, pervasive, and invasive into a sensitive area in the life of a Soviet - that of his home and occasions of sociability - his last refuge in a controlled society. Little wonder that Gorbachev was intensely disliked even before the collapse of the Soviet Empire and Union.

The campaign turned out to be a failure because confronted with shortages of vodka, the people turned to *samogon* and surrogates as before with the accompanying rise in deaths, divorce, crime, and absenteeism as well as a drop in births and life expectancy. Clearly, sobriety had not become a way of life despite all the hoopla and restrictions. This frenzied drive lasted at most three years. The objectives had not been clearly articulated since no one knew for sure if total abstinence or moderate drinking was the goal. As those in power who advocated “cultured drinking” began to lose their positions, the objective became clearer. Local officials either attempted to over fulfill the goals or merely ignored directives. Most importantly, although authorities claimed they were responding to popular demand for restrictions on alcohol, large segments of the population had not been consulted or co-opted into the program. While in the past this lack of mass support would not have mattered, the 1985 campaign coincided with Gorbachev’s promotion of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, which invited society to speak openly and critically.

The book is engaging because of the lively prose, numerous examples from life, and thirty amusing cartoons. One small correction should be pointed out: The All-Russian Temperance Conference in 1912 was not sponsored by the medical profession (15) but by Orthodox clerics. The author is convincing in his analysis of the failure of the 1985 campaign to sustain sobriety. While he perhaps minimized the very real positive results for at least two years of restricted consumption before homebrew went into full production, he makes a convincing case that a quick fix for a deeply imbedded problem was bound to fail. It is too bad that he skipped over the nineteenth century experience with temperance organizations. He would have found striking similarities in the organization of the tsarist State Temperance Society and in Gorbachev’s Society with the same negative results. Had Gorbachev known of Russia’s history with temperance and prohibition, it is doubtful he would have been so heedless in embarking on his campaign. Should any future temperance

zealot and leader appear in Russia, he would do well to read this instructive book before turning to radical measures.

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Nicholas O. Warner, *Spirits of America: Intoxication in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997.

Nearly fifteen years ago, at a convention of the Modern Language Association in San Francisco, Nicholas Warner and a few other English professors met over lunch to discuss how to advance their common interest in alcohol-related research. One outcome was the founding of the journal *Dionysos*, which published during its ten-year run a lot of the pioneering scholarship in literature and alcoholism. Warner, who was to serve on the editorial board of *Dionysos*, had already made a start on *Spirits of America*, one of several books that have explored the place of drinking in the work of major American writers. None of the other studies, however, has focused on the early and mid-nineteenth century.

Warner's objective is to examine "the varieties of intoxicated experience" among major figures of the American Renaissance - Emerson, Poe, Hawthorne, Melville - as well as in Cooper, Dickinson, and some popular female authors. All these writers reflect how the "literary and social discourses of intoxication mesh and diverge from one another" during the antebellum period, "when questions of intoxicant use, abuse, and abstinence reached unprecedented - and, to many modern readers, unbelievable - levels of intensity and influence." Only incidentally biographical, Warner's chapters investigate the literal and metaphoric apprehension of drinking as it arises from individual imaginative works.

In Emerson's poetry and essays, for example, Warner detects ambivalence toward drinking in "his various stances as Bacchic