

SOAPSTONE - Vodka in the Russian Revolution

Vodka played an important role in Russian history. By the late 1880s it was a major source of income for the Czar. Study the following sources to decide its role in the Russian Revolution.

Source 2



Unidentified Artist - from *Russia goes dry: alcohol, state and society* by Stephen White

Source 4

Drinking trend of Russian soldiers followed through their draft in 1878 until their discharge in 1883. (Russian soldiers were given a daily vodka ration)

Year	Refused the "Vodka Ration"	Drank ration and more on the side
1878	43%	10%
1879	17%	27%
1883	7%	50%

Cited from Russian Army General Butovskii's study in the late 1880s

Source 5

The major blow that affected the military, without a doubt, was the complete incompetence that was witnessed in the Russo-Japanese War in 1904-1905. It is widely believed that alcohol was one of the major reasons that the war was a disaster. There were immense amounts of alcohol sent to the war, one example is from a article in 1910 that talks about the subsistence of the Russian Army. The report claims "the official plan of subsistence for August 1904 contemplated 300,000 poods of vodka for an army of 400,000 men for eight months and an additional 255,000 poods for the following year." A pood is equal to 16 kilograms; this amounts to 4.8 million kilograms of vodka. That is about 12 kilograms of vodka for each of the 400,000 soldiers. It is not hard to understand that many of the soldiers may have been too drunk to fight. One account from the war that Chelysev used to promote temperance in the military says "the Japanese found several thousand Russian soldiers so dead drunk that they were able to bayonet them like so many pigs." This account seems very far-fetched, but another account from Dr. Veresaev who was a field physician claimed to have seen "masses of aimlessly wandering soldiers, red-eyed from alcohol, dust and exhaustion, surrounded an official from the quartermaster's office who ladled vodka from a huge barrel to anyone who wanted it."

Stuck in the Bottle: Vodka in Russia 1863-1925 by Bryce David Andreasen

Source 1

Vodka production was a great source of income for the tsarist government during the 1800s. Revenues from vodka were the major single source of government revenue, accounting on average for 30% of all ordinary revenues." The fact that alcohol sales from vodka made up 30% of the ordinary revenues hints toward its popularity among the people. In the years preceding the prohibition, from 1910-1913 liquor revenues ranged from 27.9 to 29.2 percent of total government revenues. In 1894 the government introduced a total state monopoly on the liquor trade. This drastically increased the amount of revenue that the government would receive now that it alone controlled the sale and distillation of vodka. From this point until 1913 the amount of revenue that the government received from liquor sales was incredible. ...After 1894 the amount of revenue from alcohol went from 297 million rubles in 1894 to 953 million rubles in 1913. The vodka that the Tsar produced was cheap, strong and of good quality and was the only product available. It is no wonder the Russian people believed that the tsar was becoming rich off the ruin of the people.

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Source 3

"At Samara I decided to do more than passively disapprove of Vodka. At this time I was an alderman, and many of the tenants living in my houses were workingmen. One night a drunken father in one of my houses killed his wife. This incident made such a terrible impression on me that I decided to fight vodka with all my strength.

"On the supposition that the government was selling vodka for the revenue, I calculated the revenue received from its consumption in Samara. I then introduced a bill in the City Council providing that the city give this sum of money to the imperial treasury, requesting at the same time that the sale of vodka be prohibited. The bill passed and the money was appropriated. It was offered to the government, but the government promptly refused it.

"It then dawned upon me that Russian bureaucracy did not want the people to become sober, for the reason that it was easier to rule autocratically a drunken mob than a sober people."

Michael Dimitrovitch Tchelisheff
Interviewed in the *New York Times*, November 19, 1914

Source 6

"The petty bourgeoisie, in order to defeat the workers, soldiers, and peasants, would combine with the devil himself!...No drinking, comrades! No one must be on the streets after eight in the evening, except the regular guards. All places suspected of having stores of liquor should be searched, and the liquor destroyed. No mercy to the sellers of liquor..."

Leon Trotsky, quoted in John Reed - *Ten Days That Shook the World*. (about 1917 Revolution)

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		1	2	3	4	5	6
S	Who is the Speaker (Artist)? Identification of the historical person who created the primary source. What do we know about this person?						
O	What is the Occasion? What is the time and place? The context in which the primary source was created?						
A	Who is the Audience? The readers to whom this document is directed. The audience may be one person or a group.						
P	What is the Purpose? What is the reason behind the text? Why was it written? What goal did the author have in mind?						
S	What is the Subject? What is the general topic, content, or idea contained in the text? Summarize in a few words or phrase.						
tone	What is the Tone? What is the attitude? Examine the words, emotions, and imagery used.						

1. According to Source 1, what percentage of Russia's income came from Vodka sales? What do you think would happen when vodka was prohibited (made illegal) in 1913?

2. Who is the figure sitting on the barrel? What does this tell us about his relationship to the people?

3. According to Tchelischeff (Source 3), why did the Russian government not want to change its policy to vodka?

4. Describe General Butovskii's study on alcoholism in the Russian army. What effect would this have on the military?

5. According to Bryce Andreasen, how did the Russian policy of a "daily ration" help contribute to Russia's defeat in 1904?

6. What does Trotsky's statement (Source 6) tell us about vodka in society when the Bolsheviks took control of Russia?
