

In Russia, Vodka and Autocracy Are Historically Linked

By [Richard Weitz](#)

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A newly published book highlights the critical role vodka has played in Russian history. The work, titled "Alcohol, Autocracy and the Secret History of the Russian State," sees an enduring connection between vodka and the autocratic political institutions and policies that have characterized Russia for centuries.

The work's author, Mark Schrad, an assistant professor of political science at Villanova University, deftly weaves sociological data into a rather alarming portrait of a country brimming with binge drinkers. Presenting the book recently at the Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars in Washington, DC, Schrad cited World Health Organization data to show that Russians' annual consumption of pure alcohol is roughly 15.7 liters per capita. Excluding children and abstainers, Schrad says that this figure boils down to the average Russian male

drinker consuming two bottles of vodka and 13 beers per week.

Placing Russia in a broader context, Schrad suggested that Russia bucks geographic trends. Generally, as one travels northward, wine consumption turns to beer consumption. But Russians, who readily admit that wine and beer taste better, favor vodka since "it is something you do to get drunk. You down it as quickly as you can" since it tastes "horrible."

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Noting how Stalin tried to get his colleagues inebriated in order to manipulate them, Schrad argued that Russia's rulers have applied this approach to their population for centuries. They see mass alcohol consumption as a means of keeping the population "discombobulated" and "off-balance" and "unable to mount a challenge to the government itself."

"It's not so much that they were foisting alcohol down the throats of Russians," he said of the government's approach, but "it was more about trying to stymie any effort at temperance."

Schrad also argued that a succession of tsarist and communist governments fell into a "revenue trap" concerning vodka sales. Since the tsarist era, the state has generated considerable revenue from taxes on alcohol, helping compensate for the lack of income taxes and other reliable income sources. Vodka revenues provided the tsarist autocracy with one-third of its revenue and the Soviet government with one-fourth of its revenue.

In Schrad's words, there was a financial interest in maintaining the alcohol dependence of the Russian people and opposing temperance "because any effort to do that would undercut the financial stability of the autocracy itself."

After the Bolsheviks came to power in 1917, they initially took ineffectual steps to curb the consumption of alcohol. Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin, while known to have a drink on occasion, saw alcohol as a tool of bourgeoisie oppression. According to Schrad, Lenin's views on the topic were in line with those of a number of writers, who "used alcohol as a symbol of the degeneracy of the autocratic system."

Josef Stalin and Leon Trotsky also both initially supported prohibition. But, after consolidating his authority, Stalin reversed his stance, allegedly remarking that "we had a choice between the slavery of western capitalism or the slavery of the bottle. We made our choice."

After Stalin, Schrad detailed the emergence of a sharp political divide within the ruling elite between those who tended to be heavy drinkers, and others who largely spurned alcohol. Mikhail Gorbachev's rise to power was made possible by those Politburo members who tended to drink less alcohol.

The early years of Gorbachev's tenure, during the mid-1980s, was marked by an unsuccessful anti-alcohol campaign, which ended up undermining his popularity and again creating economic and social problems.

Interestingly, Schrad defended Boris Yeltsin from charges that his alcoholism contributed

to Russia's collapse. Schrad commented that Russia's first post-Soviet president was not a heavier drinker than many earlier Russian leaders, such as Peter the Great, who, according to Schrad, "may have been the most drunken ruler in all of human history," Yeltsin was merely the most public of heavy drinkers.

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