Swallowing Suffering

The Duality of Drink

Russian 3355.99

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What is vodka? Is it merely a drink? A bottle on a table? A sacrament poured in silence? The silent architect of nations? Or is it something more…a distilled spirit, both literal and metaphorical? An essence of the Russian soul and a ghost that haunts its history, from the first tavern of Ivan the Terrible to the warm hands of a grandmother offering a toast? This term, I have sought answers through the lens of historians and the language of myth, listening to what culture mutters beneath the noise of institutions. Each reading whispered the same truth: vodka is not simply consumed; it consumes.

As each source builds upon the last, vodka tells the story of a culture that learned to swallow its suffering. From the tsars to the Soviet commissars, vodka has been wielded as both a social salve and a political weapon. In *Vodka Politics*, Mark Schrad dissects this duality with near-surgical precision, tracing how autocratic regimes commodified intoxication to pacify dissent and fill state coffers.[1] We have been sitting in the corner of the boardroom while leaders force their subordinates to drink as a display of their power.[2] We have ridden with the tsarina's guard past the drunken palace watch, grateful not to have spilled the blood of her people.[3] We have wandered from the fields to the kabaks as peasants became serfs, achingly warming the blood with every coin that trickled from the tax farms.[4] The people weren't just drinking; they were being drunk by a system that ritualized their dependence.

But how did this state-orchestrated addiction transform into a cultural tradition? Boris Segal's *Russian Drinking* offers an invaluable glimpse into the ritualized joy and despair of

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[1] Mark Lawrence Schrad, *Vodka Politics: Alcohol, Autocracy, and the Secret History of the Russian State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1-25
[2] Mark Lawrence Schrad, *Vodka Politics: Alcohol, Autocracy, and the Secret History of the Russian State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 6
[3] Mark Lawrence Schrad, *Vodka Politics: Alcohol, Autocracy, and the Secret History of the Russian State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 54-59
[4] Mark Lawrence Schrad, *Vodka Politics: Alcohol, Autocracy, and the Secret History of the Russian State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 79-91,

drinking in pre-revolutionary Russia.[5] Drinking at births, celebrating and welcoming the next generation of the Rus, drinking at weddings, in kinship and kind, celebrating the joining of families for all time, and drinking at funerals, raising a glass to honor those who have gone, who have been set free from their role in the cogs of the Soviet regime. These liminal spaces are rites of passage, as sacred as baptism. As Segal quotes, "...At any holiday or at the end of the working day, the Russian is drawn to the street, to other people; a community gathers, vodka is bought: conversation runs smoother and livelier over a drink. And so, vodka, vodka, vodka…an ocean of alcohol. The Russian spends his entire life, from cradle to coffin, bathing and swimming in this drunken sea."[6] Here, vodka becomes the sacramental fluid of Russian life. This simple, clear liquid winds its way through class, through rank, and through time.

This drama of drink, tales told over a table, toasts that summon the dead, songs that turn pain into poetry, surfaces again in Venedikt Erofeev's *Moscow to the End of the Line*. Our hapless, hilarious Venichka, drifting between Moscow and Petushki, is both a drunkard and a bard.[7] His journey echoes the liminal trickster figures of myth: neither wholly hero nor fool, yet somehow both, speaking sacred nonsense that reveals the unspoken truths of his world. His vodka-fueled odyssey satirizes Soviet absurdity, but also mourns the loss of meaning itself; a tragic folklore of modernity. What would we see if we saw through his eyes? Would we see pain, joy, fear, failure, or simply the realization that his addiction was predetermined based on the heritage of his birth?

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[5] Boris M. Segal, *Russian Drinking: Use and Abuse of Alcohol in Pre-Revolutionary Russia* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1987), 1-18

[6] Boris M. Segal, *Russian Drinking: Use and Abuse of Alcohol in Pre-Revolutionary Russia* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1987) xviii, credited to an anonymous speaker at the All-Russian Congress Fight Against Alcoholism.

[7] Venedikt Erofeev, *Moscow to the End of the Line*, trans. H. William Tjalsma (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1992), 13-15, Venichka takes on the role of a wandering antihero who narrates the story in an increasingly intoxicated state.

Still, addiction culture isn't exclusive to Russia. As Sam Quinones shows in *Dreamland*, America has its own mythology of chemical escape.[8] Where Russia has state-owned vodka, we have Purdue Pharma's white-powder gospel. Each culture simultaneously curses and worships at its altars. Both opiates and alcohol were peddled as cures for invisible pain. Both were touted as reasons for and solutions to economic collapse, social isolation, and spiritual void. The cultural myth of relief, "just one more," to silence grief and fill the void of loneliness or pain, crosses borders. The pain shared around a pint, a joint, a pill, a shot…Addiction is global folklore now.

Yet even with all its haunting, drinking also connects. In folk traditions around the world, sharing a drink is a gesture that invokes trust. It issues a silent contract of mutual vulnerability. It signals, "You are welcome here." It shares, "You are wanted." Sharing a drink with someone has become its own ritual. In religious sects, drink signifies the blood of Christ; in fraternities, the blood of the brotherhood. In *Russian Folk Belief*, Linda Ivanits describes age-old rituals in which the *domovoi* may be offered bread, salt, or small servings of vodka.[9] Hospitality, both sacred and profane, as Ivanits shows, is steeped in drink.

This duality, the binding joy and the breaking sorrow, runs through the heart of drinking culture. As a folklorist, I see the weight of its tradition; as a woman, I feel its tension. The tavern can be a hearth of laughter and legend, but also a crucible of violence. Alcohol has made and unmade families, forged brotherhoods, and fueled generations of abuse. I appreciated that our readings did not flinch from this, particularly in examining how gender, trauma, and power intersect through addiction.

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[8] Sam Quinones, *Dreamland: The True Tale of America's Opiate Epidemic* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2015), 11-184

[9] Linda J. Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1989) 51-63

With the words of warning on this page, I must admit that it would be dishonest to dismiss the pleasures of drinking outright. There is joy in clinking glasses with old friends, in the folk songs that rise from the bottom of a bottle, in the momentary warmth against a cold, indifferent world; even Quinones's grim narrative within *Dreamland* leaves room for human connection in the rubble.[10] It reminds me, however, that raising a glass is not always a celebration; it is often a coping mechanism.

So, my reflection? This course helped me see vodka not just as an intoxicant, but as a cultural agent; one that reflects and refracts the soul of a nation. As a folklorist, I see the myths and meanings people attach to their vices. As a scholar of religion, I see how the sacred and profane intermingle at the rim of a shot glass. And as someone committed to social justice, I cannot, in good conscience, ignore how systems have profited from poisoning their people. But, did we ever answer that question: What is vodka? Vodka, like any powerful symbol, is neither truly hero nor villain. It is a vessel filled with memory, manipulation, and myth. To study this is to study our very souls.

Works Cited

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Linda J. Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1989).

[10] Sam Quinones, *Dreamland: The True Tale of America's Opiate Epidemic* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2015), 333-345