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Soviet satire on drinking and drunkenness: An evidence-based humour?

It is well known that research into drinking patterns is an inexact science. Alcohol consumption is regularly underreported by drinkers, unofficial alcohol production is often widespread and always difficult to quantify, and given the sensitivity of the topic official information may not always be transparent. For these reasons, research in the field makes use of a variety of sources and methodologies, an approach especially important for a study of the Soviet Union, where the regime consciously sought to control the production and flow of evidence (Connor, 1972 p.35). In this paper I assess Soviet cartoons, published in a popular satirical magazine between 1964 and 1982, the years during which Leonid Brezhnev was head of the communist party, as a source of information about the drinking culture of the period, and compare and contrast this apparently unlikely source with more conventional types of data about alcohol consumption and its consequences.

The Soviet Union presented itself as a relatively temperate nation. Official documents stated that the USSR drank less and had fewer alcohol-related problems than non-socialist countries. According to a pamphlet published in the 1960s, 'In our country, which is creating a beautiful today and an even more wonderful tomorrow, there is no place for such a disgusting phenomenon as alcoholism' (Lubenets, 1962, p.5). The General Secretary of the CPSU declared that the victory of communism would bring victory over all social problems including addictions (Alkogolizm, 1972, p.3). Soviet publications, whilst full of grand statements about present virtues and further future perfectibility, were rather short on specifics. When post-war data contradicted the ideological prognosis of declining alcohol problems, the government response was to curtail the availability of statistical material. By the 1970s, nation-wide information on the volume of alcohol production and consumption, and

on its economic, social and medical consequences, was unavailable in the public domain (White, 1996, pp 33-37).

An alternative view to the regime narrative of successful struggle against traces of past alcohol problems came from 'outsiders', both external and internal. Russian émigrés and Western academics had the freedom to publish sensitive material about wide scale and heavy drinking and interpret the available Soviet data against the grain of Soviet propaganda (Panovsky, 1976; Turovsky, 1977; Treml, 1982b). Their work however was unavailable within the USSR. Dissident material was also by definition rarely accessible to the Soviet population, anecdotes were ephemeral, and in the pre-digital age the influence of the occasional film with scenes of drunkenness could be effectively contained (Krasikov, 1977, p. 105, Pesni, 1977; Erofeev, 2000; Ermochkine, 2003, p. 8). In this context cartoons on alcohol-related themes assume importance for researchers as the only published record on drink and drunkenness that was widely available to a domestic audience throughout the period in a sustained fashion. By the 1960s, *Krokodil*, founded in 1922 by the Pravda publishing house, was one of the most popular magazines in the country whose several million readers were exposed on a regular basis to items of alcohol-related humour.

In the period under study *Krokodil* was issued 3 times a month, and each issue contained 16-odd pages of editorial comment and short satirical essays, in addition to the cartoons which made up the lion's share of the content, and varied in size from a few centimetres square to whole-page spreads. Apart from the front and back covers of the magazine, which provided graphic comment on major domestic and foreign policy themes from the party point of view, the pages of *Krokodil* cast a gently satirical eye at aspects of everyday Soviet reality, including drink and drunkenness.

Methods

A database of cartoons on alcohol-related subjects for the years 1964-1982 was created that included description of image and text, as well as date of publication, details on artist and size of cartoon. Topics including consumption, drinking style and consequences were identified and further sub-divided: 'drinking professions' included plumbers, decorators (wall paper

hangers), construction workers and lumberjacks; vodka, home brew, surrogates, champagne, fruit-berry wine, wine and cognac were listed under 'beverages', and so on. Category occurrences were recorded for each year separately, and totalled for the 19-year period of the study.

Literature on Soviet medicine, welfare and other alcohol-related subjects, published both in the USSR and in the West during the period 1964-1982, were examined in libraries in London and Moscow. Statistical and analytical material relating to the same period that has become available since 1982 was also consulted. From the mid-1980s, the amount and range of information about drinking and drunkenness released by Soviet authorities increased considerably, as a result of two major campaigns, one against alcohol, and the second in favour of glasnost' (transparency), both part of the reform movement to 'restructure' communist society (White, 1996). In subsequent years, despite shifting policies on alcohol and freedom of information, a greater range of evidence on alcohol-related matters continued to be available, including evidence about earlier historical periods. The inclusion of contextual material in the study is designed to enable an assessment of the accuracy of the cartoon representations of drinking and drunkenness, and of the extent to which they were in line with official thinking or matched the alternative, 'outsider' view.

Results

This paper presents and discusses results on drinkers, location and occasion, beverage type, consumption amounts, and drunkenness and its consequences. Relevant category occurrences from analysis of the 548 alcohol-related cartoons that were published in the magazine between 1964 and 1982 are included in the text when appropriate, in square brackets. Since the focus is on the underlying features of the drinking culture over the whole period, total category occurrences rather than annual figures are provided.

Drinkers

The average drinker according to *Krokodil* is male, middle-aged, and urban, of Russian ethnicity and of no particular social stratum. While women are quite often shown, glass in hand, in large mixed companies, few cartoons have female drinking as the subject [4], and

young people feature relatively rarely [20], most often when alcohol consumption is a secondary theme.¹ In those instances where cartoons have a rural background, the drinkers are more likely to be tourists and hikers [22] than collective farm workers [5]. With only two exceptions, drinkers are white and European. There is no way of distinguishing in *Krokodil* cartoons by physical characteristics alone between Russians and other Slavs, or between Slavs and Lithuanians, Latvians or Estonians, but the Russian-language cartoon text suggests that the protagonists themselves are Russian.

The social roles and social status of the male protagonists are various: drinkers appear as friends and tourists, hunters and shoppers, motorists and football fans, and as members of families and of work collectives. Their clothes and other accessories mark their social status: ordinary folk are in cloth caps, workers are in overalls and carry the tools of their trades; sophisticated urbanites and members of the intelligentsia are in fashionable flares and fancy knitted jumpers; professionals and managers have hats of velour or astrakhan and carry document folders and briefcases. *Krokodil* drinkers sometimes drink alone [29], more usually they are in the company of colleagues, work-mates, friends, family or chance acquaintances. Very often the drinking group consists of three men who go equal shares on a bottle of vodka [29], the so-called 'troika', a cultural cliché, universally understood, and celebrated with literary quotes and classical allusions.²

Location and Occasion

Public catering establishments provide an important venue for the drinking encounters featured in *Krokodil* cartoons. Drinking takes place in restaurants [19], with smartly-dressed waiters and waitresses in attendance and starched white cloths on the tables, or in less aspiring, or even rather seedy, cafes and beer halls [20]. There is much drinking in the street, whatever the season; and in clement weather and sunshine there is drinking at the seaside [5], in woods and parks, and by rivers and lakes [22]. The work-place is another common site of alcohol consumption [49]: manual workers drink on the job, in their overalls, alongside

¹ V. Chizhikov, 'Eto ty ne prokhdil: Eto nam ne zadavali', *Krokodil*, 1970, no 35, p. 1.

² M. Vaisbord, 'Novinka', *Krokodil*, 1969, no 11, p. 9.

factory machinery or at a construction site; white collar workers, administrators, managers and members of the professions, on the other hand, tend to sit in comfort at banquet tables, restaurant style. The home, their own or the host's is another venue [39]. Occasions for drinking include holidays, birthdays, paydays, promotion, shady deals and even the successful completion of doctoral dissertations. Very often there are no visual clues as to the specific nature of the occasion, or all the clues suggest that there is no particular reason for the drinking episode and that no particular reason is required.

Beverage Type and Consumption Amount

A variety of alcoholic beverages are consumed in *Krokodil* cartoons, the type indicated by the colour, shape or size of the bottle or drinking glass. Vodka is the preferred beverage [95] by a wide margin for men of all social groups, and is also drunk by women. Cartoonists draw the distinctive neck of the standard half-litre bottle poking out of bags and pockets, sometimes adding a label marked '40°', the regular proof of legally produced vodka throughout the post-war period, or painting the bottle green, a reference to the tinted glass used in retail, and to the folkloric 'green serpent' (*zelenyi zmei*), a well-known symbol for spirits. Beer is also drunk by all social groups [19], especially in the summer months;³ champagne and wine [20] are drunk by both sexes, and feature often at celebratory occasions and as drinks for women; cognac [13] and fine wines are on display at the tables of management and members of the elite. Unofficial spirit, 'samogon', is a theme in 5 cartoons, all with a village setting. One cartoon refers to a drinker ministering to his hangover, courtesy of an eau de cologne bottle at a barber's shop; a handful of cartoons feature the use of technical or medical 'spirits' as surrogates.

Drunkenness and its consequences

Shopping bags and rucksacks full of unopened bottles, and floors and forest clearings strewn with empties indicate that cartoon protagonists are heavy drinkers. A bottle per drinker per drinking episode appears to be some kind of rule of thumb. 'I'm off for just the one day', a

³ A. Elizeev, 'Razreshite bez ocheredi, ya na rabote', *Krokodil*, 1976, no 25, p. 11.

tourist says to explain his purchase of a single bottle of wine.⁴ A man arrives home holding aloft two vodka bottles, now that he has Saturday off as well as Sunday.⁵ Flushed faces and poor motor control [65] are the other visual signifiers of the large volumes of alcohol consumed - drinkers have red cheeks and noses; and they sway and topple.⁶ The multitude of depictions of heavy drinking episodes [87] makes clear that the point of drinking is to get drunk, and the varied dress of the protagonists and locations of the episodes, from posh to down-at-heel, indicate that this intention cuts across social groups.

Drunken behaviour is shown to have a number of consequences for the economy and for personal life. The workers on cartoon construction sites and factory floors are often far too inebriated to meet production targets or the requirements of quality control. Even when still apparently sober, the number of bottles in their vicinity strongly suggests that this will not be for long. In addition to the negative impact that heavy drinking has on the common weal, the cartoons highlight the family conflicts that ensue. Women confiscate spouses' pay packets,⁷ keep them from going out with their mates,⁸ remove them forcibly from sites of heavy drinking, lock them out of matrimonial homes, and threaten them with rolling pins [20]. As well as frequent encounters with angry wives, drinking men come into contact with the law enforcing agencies, chiefly the militia whose job it is to collect drunks from the streets and deliver them to the sobering up stations [24]. Health consequences on the other hand receive infrequent mention. Between 1964 and 1977, the magazine published one cartoon on this subject, a host regretting his New Year invitation to a doctor friend, who has displayed a

⁴ A. Eliseev and M. Skovolev, 'A mne pozhaluista, odin butylka: ya edu za gorod tol'ko na odin den'', *Krokodil*, 1971, no 19.

⁵ V Goryaeva 'Ura, Manya! U menya teper' dva vykhodnykh', 1968 no 2, p. 1

⁶ Yu Cherepanov, 'Ulozhilis' v smetu', *Krokodil*, 1971, no 27, p. 8; 'Vy by seli', *Krokodil*, 1965, no 20, p. 9.

⁷ Yu. Cherpanov, 'Sleduyushchaya', *Krokodil*, 1969, p. 6; A. Tsvetkov, 'Do zavtra', *Krokodil*, 1969, no 14, p. 14.

⁸ A. Eliseev, 'Teper' moego-to v pivnyu ne tyanet!', *Krokodil*, 1974, no 19, p. 3; G and V Karavaevykh, 'A zhe zhena uzhe postel' prigotovila', *Krokodil*, 1974, no 34, p. 10.

O. Kornev, 'K Vas'ke nel'zya', *Krokodil*, 1974, no 22, p. 5; A. Tsvetkov, 'Net ne vyidet. On poluchil dvoe sutok!', *Krokodil*, 1976, no 18, p. 11.

poster of a diseased alcoholic liver on the party table, rather putting a damper on festivities.⁹ During the following five years there were 4 cartoons on the health risks associated with drink, one each in 1978 and 1982, and two in 1980, all bleaker in tone: in one of them a couple of men are introducing their new drinking partner to the man he has replaced, who lies sick in a hospital bed; in another, two corpses in a vodka bottle-shaped coffin, beckon with a bony hand to a passer-by to come and make up the third member of their drinking unit.¹⁰

Discussion

The Soviet Union has been described as a mono-organisational state, its economy, polity and society forming a single system (Rigby, 1990). Although the control imposed by the regime was never absolute, there were definite limits to what could be said and done. Government officials and professionals had to toe a line, which might be drawn a little differently from year to year, between the capitals and the provinces, for academics and journalists, but could not be crossed without risk. While Soviet ideology evolved over the 1960s and 1970s in a more flexible and pragmatic direction, it continued to link problems such as alcoholism with the remnants of older, less perfect social formations and expected these remnants to become smaller and more manageable with the progress of communist construction. It was necessary therefore for authors on alcohol-related topics to find that the Soviet situation was satisfactory and getting better, and by and large they succeeded. A study on 'Alkohol – the enemy of health', published in Odessa in the early 1970s, compared the low per capita consumption of alcohol in the USSR with the high rate in France - 1.8 litres as opposed to 21.5 litres. The Soviet people drank less than in capitalist countries, it was regularly asserted, and problem drinking was confined to a small and marginal group of 'alcoholics' (Alkogol', 1972; Alkogolizm, 1972).

⁹ Iu Fedorov, 'I dernulo menya priglasit' druga-medika', *Krokodil*, no 36 1964, p. 15

¹⁰ E. Shcheglov, 'Slushai drug, tret'em budesh'?', *Krokodil*, no 19, 1978, p. 5.

In challenging the view that Soviet drinking was a relatively small-scale problem-free activity, the Western and dissident 'outsiders' relied on field work,¹¹ personal observations and careful analysis of the published Soviet data. They made inferences and came to conclusions not permitted in official publications (Connor, 1972; Treml 1982, 75; Krasikov, 1977), calculating that per capita alcohol consumption in the USSR by the 1960s and 1970s was in fact in the region of 7-9 litres of absolute alcohol for the age-group 15 years and above. The accuracy of these calculations was confirmed by official Soviet data released later, toward the end of the 1980s (Ivanets, 1988, p. 21 Segal, 1990), and new statistical information for the early 1980s put consumption as high as 16 litres per capita (Treml, 1987, p. 1). The 'outsiders' argued further that while total annual consumption in the USSR under Brezhnev might be lower than in the wine-drinking countries of Europe, even if not by the margin presented in the Soviet literature, the use of strong beverages (spirits as opposed to wine or beer) was extremely high, 'far the highest in the world' (Treml, 1982a p. 487). According to the title of a work by a dissident academic, A. Krasikov, published in Russian in the West in 1977, vodka was 'The Number 1 Product'. The author described the ways in which drinking was embedded in the cultural, familial and work practices of everyday life, in both town and country, and amongst all social groups. The role of drinking in the formation of adult male identity and as a badge of masculinity was also noted (Dombrovski, 1981). Material published since 1985 has again confirmed these observations. Data show that alcohol consumption was indeed a predominantly male pastime, and the 30-50 age-group the biggest users (Ivanets, 1988, p. 24). The centrality of drinking rituals in the private and public life of the population as a whole, regardless of age and gender, has become something of a national cliché, immortalised in the popular retrospective designation of the Brezhnev as the 'era of *zastol'ia*', in preference to the government-sponsored label of 'era of stagnation' (*zastoia*), *zastol'e* being the Russian term for alcohol-laced conviviality.

¹¹ In the 1970s there were more opportunities for academics to travel to the USSR and 'exchange experience' with professionals who not infrequently provided information that was not otherwise available, and visit hospitals, courts, sobering up stations, schools and the like.

The low placement of the USSR in European global rankings of per capita consumption was attributed by Western and dissident authors partly to the high consumption of spirits and also to the large intake of unofficial spirits that was not included in public reporting. Production of homebrew, 'samogon', was firmly established in the post-Stalinist period especially amongst the rural population, and though against the law it contributed approximately one third of all alcohol consumed in the 60s and 70s. Surrogates - industrial alcohol, aftershave, varnish, anti-freeze, industrial cleaning fluids, shoe polish, etc – were thought to be widespread, though not as significant in overall consumption (Zhukov, 'pp. 67-69; Treml, 1982; Erofeev, 2000). Their use became a popular topic in the Soviet press during the anti-alcohol campaign of the mid-1980s and was discussed in more detail in Western academic writing as previously inaccessible data became available, indicating that in the final years of the Brezhnev regime, work-place theft of technical alcohol was adding as much as a litre to per capita consumption (Treml 1985, p. 56; 494 Treml, 1987, p. 6).

Western and dissident writing drew attention not only to the health hazards of samogon and surrogates and to the high levels of acute alcohol poisoning in the USSR, but also to the connection between the style of Russian drinking and high levels of chronic alcohol-related disease and high male mortality (Krasikov, 1977; Treml, 1982a, p. 488). In this case too, the fuller information that became available in the second half of the 1980s confirmed the earlier analysis (Treml, 1985, p. 55; Treml, 1987, p. 3).

In the final years of perestroika and the early years of post-communism, the range of themes identified by the pioneering 'outsiders' was taken up by the official 'insiders', just as these categories of differential access to information and its dissemination were losing their force. The sociologist, GG Zaigraev, was one of the first Soviet researchers to move from a position of regime apologist to impartial academic. As well as providing per capita consumption figures for the late Brezhnev years, which were broadly in line with those proposed earlier by A. Krasikov and V Treml (Zaigraev, 1992, p. 56), his work at that time placed Soviet drinking patterns in an international perspective for a domestic readership and summarised Western writings on alcohol consumption in the USSR. The journal, *Voprosy narkologii* (Questions of

Narcology), played a crucial role in demolishing old myths and introducing new facts to a Russian-speaking audience. A researcher from the Moscow Research Institute of Psychiatry, A. Nemtsov, made a big impression on international scholarship with his evidence and arguments about the impact of alcohol policy on mortality rates in the late Soviet and early post-Soviet eras. The existence of a specific and damaging Slav drinking pattern became widely recognised and was referred to in WHO publications. The debate about mortality rates attracted demographers as well as alcohol and health writers outside the ranks of Sovietology (Murray, 1997; Rehn, 2001, pp35-7; Rehm, 2003, p.150)

The age, gender, ethnicity and social status of the cartoons are a good match with the statistical and sociological material that is now available. The locations and occasions mentioned in academic studies from the 1990s do not appear to have changed significantly from those illustrated in *Krokodil*. The prevalence of heavy drinking and the centrality of the drinking culture in national life, so graphically illustrated in the magazine during the period under study, are now, as mentioned, universally acknowledged (Simpura,1997).

Cartoons did not always achieve such a perfect fit in every respect. They did not set out to represent aspects of drinking in a numerically proportional or even-handed, objective fashion. Selection and representation were shaped by several factors, including the inherent limits of the satirical genre, the preferences and prejudices of the artists, their editors and censors, and the perceived preferences and prejudices of the readership. The themes of samogon and surrogates, which attracted less attention from cartoonists than adherence to the principle of realistic chronicling would warrant, illustrate these points. In these two cases the reason for relative neglect does not lie in the genre: the few published items in *Krokodil* demonstrate that humorous treatment is possible. Rather since samogon had ceased to figure prominently in the drinking culture of the metropolitan social circles to which the artists belonged it was, like rural themes in general, only occasionally selected as a cartoon subject; surrogates were associated with down-and-out, marginal drinkers, and were not therefore suitable material for *Krokodil* cartoonists who took ordinary, average drinkers as their protagonists.

Sobering up stations, like samogon and surrogates, had a higher profile in the everyday life of ordinary average drinkers than their category frequency in *Krokodil* might suggest. Two American visitors to a Moscow sobering up station in the 1970s were told that less than 5% of the clientele were addicts, the rest were men who had just happened to get drunk.¹² Between 1960 and 1970 the number of sobering up stations in the USSR tripled, and a decade later, 16-18 million persons, 12-15% of the adult urban population, were processed through the stations annually (Keller, 1974, p.268; Treml, 1985, p. 59). Though the cartoons on sobering up stations are light-hearted enough, it may be that the official reticence that delayed publication of data on the number of stations and their visitors until the mid-1980s was also responsible for the low profile the subject enjoyed in *Krokodil*.

The cartoon coverage of the health consequences of drinking is so dramatically tiny that the reasons for it cannot fail to be substantial. Neither the upgraded and expanded addiction and rehabilitation services, nor their increasing numbers of patients (Connor, 1972, p. Babayan, 1985, p. 47) were referred to in a single cartoon. The constraints of the genre must in this instance be part of the explanation: though drunkenness can be portrayed in a humorous light, its long-term consequences are less easy to laugh at. But these constraints are not the only reason. An emphasis on the negative impact of alcohol on health would have blunted the force of *Krokodil's* satire of government anti-alcohol measures.

During the 1970s, despite the continuing official silence on medical statistics, there was an increase in the volume of government propaganda linking alcohol abuse to morbidity and mortality. Lectures, pamphlets, books, slides and films identified alcohol as 'the enemy of people's health', and made much of the 'ruin' that it wrought to arteries and internal organs, and of the collateral damage done to families and careers (Connor, 1972, p. 70; Alkogol', 1974; Grubbe, 1974). Anti-alcohol literature mapped out the rapid and inevitable path through the stages of addiction and criminality that awaited those who drank even small amounts of alcohol. The tone adopted was didactic and alarmist, the medical evidence vague but

devastating in prognosis, the figures and percentages selected for maximum impact rather than scientific exactitude, and plucked very often from unidentified sources. Medical professionals stated with evident conviction that 'one drink a day would bring about total disintegration of health and social well-being' (Keller, 1974, p. 264).

Without the disciplinary measures that had served the Stalinist state as back-up, campaigners had to lean heavily on scare tactics and moralising. Alcohol and its allegedly inevitable side-effects - drunkenness and alcoholism – were described as shameful and evil, to be rooted out and eliminated. Pamphlets entitled 'Alcohol and the struggle against it' were published at regular intervals across the country (Gamburg, 1974). The public, more educated and urban than ever before, was potentially more open to arguments about healthy living, but apparently resented the hectoring tone of the anti-alcohol campaign, unleavened as it was by promises of the modernisation of alternative leisure activities or the introduction of user-friendly, confidential, alcohol services. The right to drink became a contested issue between the rulers and the ruled. The unwritten social contract between the Soviet regime and its citizens during this period allowed to the latter a certain small space - the kitchen, the circle of friends – within which a degree of freedom and choice could be exercised (Connor, 1972, p. 44) and the public for the most part considered the drinking culture to be part of this private sphere, beyond the reach of government intervention.

Krokodil did more than maintain tactful neutrality in this matter. Cartoons took the view that government anti-alcohol policies were ineffective and provided clear-sighted explanations as to why this was the case: firstly, the individuals responsible for presenting the official temperance message were, themselves, part of the drinking culture, and secondly, those responsible for implementing anti-alcohol measures were half-hearted in their efforts. *Krokodil* lampooned the anti-alcohol lecturer who had a bottle of vodka in his inside pocket for afterwards, the heads of alcohol outlets who would do anything to increase sales and the factory bosses keen to keep workers on their books however excessively they drank on the job. By the end of the 1970s, the shortcomings of the Soviet economy were increasingly apparent and arguments in favour of tackling 'alcoholism' once and for all were made with

greater urgency, but the benefits of improved productivity had to be set against the loss of revenues from the sale of alcohol, which meant, as *Krokodil* judged correctly, that the bark of government anti-alcohol propaganda would remain worse than its bite.

The USSR was uniquely placed amongst industrialised nations to collect data on the drinking culture and shape its evolution (Miroshnichenko, 1991, p. 29). There was no shortage of Soviet statisticians, the monolithic character of the political and social system provided unprecedented access to personal information, and control of alcohol production and distribution, and health policy. But despite this, the record of Soviet alcohol policies on harm prevention was a 'dismal one' (Treml, 1985, p. 62). The regime was less secretive and more flexible than under Stalin, but still poorly equipped to generate and circulate appropriate information, and increasingly uncertain that it possessed blueprints for successful change. The USSR was a superpower with an inferiority complex, incapable of assessing clearly the problems it faced or of developing policies to deal with them.

Cartoons provide an economical and remarkably accurate visual record of many aspects of drinking practices in the 60s and 70s, that only now, some 30-40 years later, are being fully understood and recognised, both at home and abroad. Their representations of drink and drunkenness are selective and some are more truthful than others. Humour has no obligation to be realistic, nor can it be expected to take upon itself unaided the role of society's moral compass. But the deviations from objectivity can be as instructive as the carefully mirrored image. Silences and distortions in the cartoons reflect the uneasy relationship between rulers and the ruled, the narrow options of the latter and the extent to which freedom and identity for the male of the species came to be invested during this period in a self-destructive relationship with the 'green serpent'.

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