

C. S. Walton. *Ivan Petrov: Russia Through a Shot Glass*. New Orleans: Garrett County Press, 1999. viii + 241 pp. \$12.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-891053-83-2.



Reviewed by W. Arthur McKee

Published on H-Russia (November, 2000)

(Hair of the) Dog Bites Socialism!

The Soviet regime was christened and anointed for its last rites with alcohol. In October 1917, with the cheers greeting Lenin's "Decree on Power" still resounding in Smolny, the ragtag band of workers and soldiers who had "stormed" the Winter Palace expropriated the former tsar's choicest treasures: his immense stocks of wine and vodka. And despite setting out machine guns to protect the tsar's wine cellar and other storehouses of spirit throughout the capital, despite appointing ad hoc committees to investigate the counterrevolutionary conspiracy that "must" have been behind the drunken riots, Bolshevik leaders could not stop the month-long "festival of the oppressed" that greeted the Revolution.[1] Still, they and the "conscious workers" who made the revolution -- virtual teetotalers all -- eventually managed to take the less "cultured" population in hand and begin to build the first socialist society.

In August 1991, the men cast as Lenin and Trotsky in the farcical re-enactment of the October coup, Vice President Gennadii Yanaev and Prime Minister Valentin Pavlov, were so drunk

that reporters and subordinates alike all but laughed in their faces as they announced Gorbachev's incapacitating "illness." Not surprisingly, the coup plotters did not share their illustrious predecessors' views on the political function of alcohol in a crisis: item 3 of their "program" specifically called for "easing up on alcohol laws" to pacify the population. [2] The coup plotters ultimately gave way before the leader of Democratic Russia, "First" Russian President Boris Yeltsin -- sober at the time, but no doubt able to drink Yanaev and Pavlov under the table given half a chance.

Alcohol's role in 1917 and 1991 go deeper than the relative sobriety of the victorious leaders. Nicholas II's precipitous decision in July 1914 to extend prohibition beyond mobilization -- and thereby deprive his government of a quarter of its annual revenues -- was the first spur to the galloping inflation that would eventually help bring down his regime. And the spread of *samogon* (moonshine) production in the Russian countryside during World War I gave peasants the means to hold onto their grain surpluses and sever the

cities' food lifeline.[3] Drink corroded the socialist system far more insidiously, however. Since the early 1970s, the life expectancy of Russian men has declined to below 60, and demographers blame alcohol for much of this unprecedented fall. Drinking has stunted Russia's birthrate as well, insofar as habitual drunkenness is one of the most oft-cited reasons women give for filing for divorce.[4] Locked in a death struggle with the west, and committed to a model of development demanding ever greater amounts of labor to increase output, the Soviet Union was more vulnerable than most societies to the long-term demographic damage that widespread heavy drinking can cause. Though the initiators of the 1980's anti-alcohol campaign were misguided if they thought that they could save socialism by simply drying out the country, they were right in identifying drink as a major threat to the country's long-term viability.[5]

Confronted with this ongoing tragedy, some are inclined to throw up their hands and claim that Russian drinking habits are an ineradicable legacy of the past. Did not Saint Vladimir declare in 986 AD that "drink is the joy of the Russes -- they cannot exist without it?" Yet history's legacy is not so clear-cut. Yes, the Russian drinking style has long been much "harder" than that of most other European nations. Where the French drink wine, the Russians drink vodka. Where the Germans take (or used to take) nips of beer or schnapps throughout the day, Russians tend to drink deeply, to the point of intoxication.

Nonetheless, a seventy-four year course of socialist treatment and almost a decade of on-again, off-again capitalist shock therapy have greatly strengthened Russians' fatal attraction to drink. For much of the nineteenth century, Russians per-capita alcohol consumption was among the lowest in Europe, for they could only afford to go on the occasional spree. In 1913, the average Russian consumed roughly one-fifth of a bottle of vodka a week; today, the average Russian consumes

around one bottle of vodka a week.[6] Moreover, Russians resorted to alcohol surrogates and samogon only rarely before the Great War. Today, some experts estimate that some forty-five percent of the alcohol that Russians consume comes from untaxed and therefore untested beverages. [7] So perhaps the most fruitful point of departure for discovering the roots of Russia's present-day alcohol problem is Russia's traumatic twentieth century.[8] And a good "first-person" source for such an investigation would be Ivan Petrov's memoirs of his life as a drunkard and a tramp in the post-Stalin Soviet Union.

I put first-person in quotation marks because this book is actually Ivan Petrov's memoirs as told to -- and no doubt substantially shaped by -- C. S. Walton between 1996 and 1998. Walton seems to be even more of a vagabond than her subject, having lived and worked in Germany, California, Canada, Brazil, and Russia. In 1995, Walton published *Little Tenement on the Volga* based on her two-year stint in a *kommunal'ka* in Samara in the early 1990s. Her experiences in provincial Russia served her well as she transcribed, translated, and arranged Ivan Petrov's reminiscences, for her text accurately captures the crudeness and cruelty of the Soviet lower depths. Her anglicisms may bother the American reader (I did not figure out that a "dog end" was a cigarette butt until I had nearly finished the book), and her device of opening every chapter *in media res* becomes somewhat tiresome after a while. On the whole, though, *Ivan Petrov* is a straightforward and unsentimental account of the subcultures of beggars, petty thieves, and drunkards in a country where such people were not supposed to exist. With Petrov's testimony, one can begin to discern how the Soviet environment strengthened the virulence of indigenous drinking habits to the point where they became a threat to society itself. A bracing chaser of an epilogue set in present-day England jolts the western reader out of any smug conclusions.

Merely building capitalism in Russia will not tame the national thirst.

Ivan Petrov was born in 1935 in a bleak industrial town not far from Samara. His mother, a middling party member, seems to have been a typical social climber of the time, albeit more dense than most. So intent was she on grasping the trappings of elite status --fashionable dresses, high-heeled shoes, even a second marriage into a more "cultured" family -- that she failed to recognize how silly her aspirations appeared to her fellow inhabitants of the provincial backwater. Petrov's father, people whispered, was a "Chekist" who was apparently swept up in a purge and executed. Petrov's stepfather was a cruel fraud who overcame his noble origins --indeed, parlayed them in high Stalinist Russia into respectability -- and beat his stepson with a studded belt until the local party committee intervened.

Such childhood experiences might incline anyone, anywhere to find comfort in the bottle, but they acquired particular force in the context of Stalinist Russia. For one thing, as the son of an enemy of the people, Petrov was denied entrance into Arkhangel'sk Naval Academy. Now, a sailor's life is hardly a sober one, but one could imagine that naval service might have partially satisfied his wanderlust and integrated him into society. Moreover, his parents' respective fates, hardly unique at the time, gave him a cynical perspective on one of the great engines of Soviet society, upward social mobility. Why grow up to be a defender of socialism when the revolution regularly eats its children? Why become a bigwig in a no-account town when everyone will laugh behind your back? Vagabondage appeared positively honorable.

Petrov was no natural-born alcoholic. He had not been drunk more than a dozen times before he was fifteen -- a number high by American standards, perhaps, but certainly within European norms --and he had not felt the appeal of intoxication. That all changed, strange as it may seem to

westerners, when a friend handed him *Spirol*, an alcohol-based remedy for dandruff. Though he had trouble keeping the stuff down, its potency made him feel invulnerable and gave him a life-long love for alcohol in any form. Still, he did not become a drunkard for some years yet. After a brief tour around the White Sea as a deckhand, Petrov journeyed to Riga to get training as a radio operator. But just before he graduated, his refusal to divulge who had lent him a banned book on atavistic memory made him an object of suspicion and the butt of ridicule. In a drunken rage he jumped out of a window and ruined his right leg. His pain, his permanent handicap, and his bitterness at being punished for doing the right thing all predisposed him to seek comfort in the bottle thereafter.

Of course, his being posted in an Udegei village north of Vladivostok as a radio operator did not exactly incline him to sobriety. Here in the taiga, the Stalinist state had perfected the colonial tactics first developed by Muscovy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For the state monopolized all forms of trade, not just the fur trade. So the money the state disbursed to the trappers once a year could be recouped by the state liquor store within a week. Given the wreckage of the cultures of the "little peoples" of the north, and the propensities of the Russians who lived among them, there was little to stop the inhabitants of Petrov's village (and hundreds like it) from centering their lives around drink. Petrov manages to save up 120,000 rubles during his three-year posting, but blows all but 68 rubles and a return ticket to the Volga in a two-week champagne drinking spree. The Siberian wastes are apparently too harsh for any Protestant work ethic to take root.

Back in his home town, Petrov began his slow descent into the lower depths. What might strike the western reader as remarkable, even a western reader acquainted with Imperial Russia, is how few obstacles Petrov encountered on his way down, and how few reasons Petrov could find to

stay sober. His wife constantly scolded him for his drinking but, perhaps because of the endemic housing shortage, did not threaten him with divorce for many years. As a married woman, she was barred by long-standing custom from joining him in his drinking bouts. Able to open up only when drunk, Petrov became increasingly alienated from her and immune to her imprecations to stop drinking. The factory management and the local government began a campaign against drunkards -- which, judging from Petrov's description, included a significant fraction of the male workers of the town. But the authorities had only punishment to offer, for Petrov and his drinking buddies had no interest in climbing the social ladder into "respectability." Incarceration and public humiliation thus only hardened Petrov's heart against the system which he blames for not giving him any outlet for his talents.

Tsarist Russia hardly provided a wealth of opportunities to the insulted and injured. But it did wrap most of its subjects in networks of dependence that made it difficult (at least in comparison to Soviet Russia) for them to become regular heavy drinkers. Moreover, "conscious workers," who often demonstrated their *kul'turnost'* by refusing to drink, gave rank-and-file workers a sober and sometimes appealing model of comportment. There was also a growing, if still small, temperance movement at the turn of the century that strove to wean drinkers from the bottle and give them cultural alternatives to alcohol.[9] Socialism swept all these controls away. Rapid urbanization during the first-five year plan diminished the individual's absolute dependence on the village commune. Conscious workers became bosses, and as such no longer saw as much value in abstaining from the universal social lubricant. After Stalin demanded "the greatest expansion of vodka production possible for the sake of a real and serious defense of our country" in 1930, any large-scale temperance movements were ruled out of bounds.[10] And after Stalin died, labor discipline was slackened enough that even drunk-

ards like Petrov could find at least a temporary place in the vast Soviet industrial complex.

After a few years as a "worker" in Toliatti, Petrov's wife finally reported him for hooliganism and got him sentenced to a labor camp near Astrakhan. Thus begins the cycle that takes up much of the rest of the book: Petrov does some time in a corrective facility (either penal or "curative-labor"), he is released and starts wandering in search of a makeshift job, he makes enough money to work himself into a progressively more drunken state, and is then caught again by the authorities. Looking back over his life, Petrov believes that his life as an alcoholic vagabond allowed him to "b[reak] through barriers that confine the normal human being" (p. 238). But the monotonousness of his reflections and feelings about his plight make it hard for the reader to agree with him. He strikes out at the corrupt party officials and their stoolies among the population for trapping him in a boring existence but cannot come up with any better way of passing the time than finding more drink. He nurses a permanent grudge against his wife for turning him in but evinces no sign of regret for the suffering he caused her. He repeats the now hoary line that there was no difference between the camp "zone" and the "big zone" outside the barbed wire even though his dislike of the camps shows that he does not really believe it. So consumed was he with slaking his immense thirst that it is only in the West that he had a chance to re-examine the axioms of his life. It is safe to say that he still has a long way to go.

But if Petrov learned nothing, the reader can at least be grateful that he forgot nothing. Where else could we learn about plantations run by Koreans (!?) in Kyrgyzia in the 1960s. Or how to be a card-sharp grifter on the Soviet rail system? Or the numerous small outbreaks of social unrest that disturbed the seemingly placid surface of "really existing" socialism? Or the surprisingly peaceful relations between hardened criminals and

pseudo-intellectual small-timers like Petrov in Brezhnev's shrunken Gulag? Petrov (and Walton) wisely give room to the diverse cast of characters that he met on his travels. Soviet reality may have been grim, but Petrov demonstrates that it was not gray.

Petrov finally hit bottom in Tbilisi in the 1980s. For much of his career he refused to "lower" himself to the level of begging, fearing that it might be too easy to support his habit. Despite everything, he seems to have imbibed a little of the socialist state's productivist ethos. But his creeping decrepitude and a false revelation delivered to him by a "good" beggar broke down his inhibitions. No longer needing to make himself periodically presentable, he slides inexorably to a near-death experience in a city dump. He is miraculously saved, and even more miraculously ends up in Britain a few years later. Here he finds that the Communists did not lie about capitalism: it is indeed "decadent" -- imagine women drinking water directly from a bottle! -- and turns the lives of its denizens "into an endless scramble for money" (p. 236). He remains an incorrigible drunk, albeit no longer a semi-dissident one.

His surviving drinking buddies back in Russia -- and millions of other hard-drinking Russian men -- are in much the same pickle. Creating the rudiments of a free labor market, as Russia has done over the past decade, is not enough to entice drinkers to sober up. If anything, it only helps feed the despair and desperate poverty that gives them a reason to drink. Independent cultural organizations -- some primarily temperance-oriented, some with a broader purpose -- will have to emerge to inculcate the extra-economic value of sobriety if Russia is to have a hope of reining in its thirst. If President Putin does attempt to engineer a state-led revival of "values" as he promised before his election, he may wish to take heed of the lessons his tsarist models never quite learned: trying to do the work of civil society for it and de-

priving associations of their autonomy is a sure-fire way to doom any cultural campaign to failure.

Petrov's memoirs shed much light on the ultimate fate of the Soviet cultural revolution. Recently, scholars have begun to expand the notion of cultural revolution beyond the "class war" during the early stages of the first five-year plan to include the complete *mission civilatrice* -- the war on illiteracy, the struggle with unhygienic popular practices, the instilling of proper forms of comportment, and so forth -- of Bolshevik and non-party activists during the first two decades of Soviet power. Sheila Fitzpatrick, who virtually originated the concept of cultural revolution, has objected to this expansion, though largely on methodological grounds.[11] But one might go further and ask just what impact the cultural revolution had *after* World War II. Draw up the ladder of rapid social mobility (as the "new elite" began to do after 1932), cease to apply terror as a form of social prophylaxis (as the regime did for good in 1953), and the incessant demands for *kul'turnost'* become for the majority of the population mere background noise or, at best, a set of cues for which mask to wear for a given situation. [12]

Of course, as Ivan Petrov's testimony makes clear, the alternative was not much better. Born as he was into an industrialized country, Petrov and his cohort could not get as excited as young male peasants might at the prospect of becoming bosses. And the use of terror only compromised the goals of the civilizing mission in the eyes of Petrov and others.[13] The post-Stalinist system, as Petrov makes clear, made it all but impossible for its inhabitants to imagine an alternative to it. But the system's inability to inculcate an ethic of hard work -- on the contrary, from Petrov's memoirs, it seems to have inculcated an ethic of drunkenness -- turned out to be one of its main weaknesses.

When historians of the Soviet Union begin to study the post-Stalin period in earnest, Petrov's

memoirs will probably become a valuable document of social and cultural decay. In the meantime, much of the book could be profitably assigned to undergraduates who want to learn more about the texture of life under Khrushchev and Brezhnev.[14] And, one way or another, scholars and policy-makers will have to grapple with the legacy of despair described so vividly by Petrov.

Notes

[1]. Details of the drunken aftermath of October are from Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: A History of the Russian Revolution* (New York, 1997), pp. 494-5. See also Stephen White, *Russia Goes Dry: Alcohol, State, and Society* (Cambridge, England, 1996), pp. 16-18.

[2]. See David Remnick's brilliant account of the coup in *Lenin's Tomb: The Last Days of the Soviet Empire* (New York, 1993), pp. 463-5, 470-3.

[3]. See my article, "Sukhoi zakon v gody pervoi mirovoi voyny: prichiny, kontseptsii i posledstviia vvedeniia sukhogo zakona v Rossii, 1914-1917 gg.," *Rossia i pervaiia mirovaia voina* (St. Petersburg, 1999), 147-60.

[4]. See the figures and comments cited in Brian Whitmore, "House Calls for Hangovers: Russian doctor tries to help sober up her nation, one patient at a time," *Boston Globe*, June 14, 2000 and White, *Russia Goes Dry*, p. 166.

[5]. See White, *Russia Goes Dry*.

[6]. See my dissertation, "Taming the Green Serpent: Alcoholism, Autocracy, and Russian Society, 1881-1914" (University of California at Berkeley, 1997), chs. 1 and 11 and Amelia Gentleman, "Putin Thirsts after Vodka Empire," *The Guardian*, June 11, 2000. A bottle in these calculations equals three-quarters of a liter. Concentrations of alcohol in various beverages have been converted to "absolute alcohol" for comparative purposes (e.g., a bottle of vodka is considered the equivalent of 6.75 bottles of wine).

[7]. On the rarity of *samogon* in pre-revolutionary Russia, see David Christian, "Prohibition

in Russia, 1914-1925," *Australian Slavonic and Eastern European Studies* 9, no. 2 (1995).

[8]. Some solid work has already been done on this subject. In addition to the Christian article cited above, see, inter alia, Laura L. Phillips' excellent, *Bolsheviks and the Bottle: Drink and Worker Culture in St. Petersburg, 1900-1929* (Dekalb, IL, 2000); Boris Segal's encyclopedic, *The Drunken Society: Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism in the Soviet Union* (New York, 1990), and Vladimir Trembl's classic, *Alcohol in the USSR: A Statistical Study* (Durham, NC, 1982).

[9]. See Patricia Herlihy, "Strategies of Sobriety: Temperance movements in Russia, 1880-1914." (Woodrow Wilson Center, Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies, 1990) and McKee, "Sobering Up the Soul of the People: The Politics of Popular Temperance in Late Imperial Russia," *Russian Review* 58 (April 1999).

[10]. Lars T. Lih et. al., eds., *Stalin's Letters to Molotov* (New Haven, 1995), p. 209.

[11]. See Michael David-Fox, "What is Cultural Revolution?" and Sheila Fitzpatrick's response, "Cultural Revolution Revisited," *Russian Review* 58 (April 1999). One might also mention Amir Weiner, "Nature, Nurture, and Memory in a Socialist Utopia: Delineating the Soviet Socio-ethnic Body in the Age of Socialism," *American Historical Review* 104 (October 1999) as an example of trying to explain mass terror in the Soviet Union as an outgrowth of the Bolsheviks' unique "civilizing" mission.

[12]. Similarly, one might say that if handbooks on manners had spread widely through early modern Europe, but there had been no "rising bourgeoisie" nor "centralizing monarchies" intent on monopolizing violence, the "civilizing process" would not have gotten very far. See Norbert Elias' *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners and State Formation and Civilization*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford, 1994). Elias' work has become a touchstone for those studying

the transformation of everyday life in the Soviet Union.

[13]. Stephen Kotkin also makes this point about the use of terror in *Magnetic Mountain* (Berkeley, 1995), pp. 353-4.

[14]. Certainly it would be a better choice for undergraduates than the similar, but much more complex and allusive book by Venedikt Yerofeev, *Moskva-Petushki* (St. Petersburg: 1991), first distributed in 1969 as *samizdat*.

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-russia>

Citation: W. Arthur McKee. Review of Walton, C. S. *Ivan Petrov: Russia Through a Shot Glass*. H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. November, 2000.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4695>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.