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**Satan Blood, Czars Ink, Rural Alcoholism in an
Official Publication For the People, 1881-1917
and Russian Books and Periodicals Intended For
Peasant Readers**

James H. Krukones, *John Carroll University*



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JAMES H. KRUKONES (Cleveland, OH, U.S.A.)

*SATAN'S BLOOD, TSAR'S INK:
RURAL ALCOHOLISM IN
AN OFFICIAL "PUBLICATION
FOR THE PEOPLE," 1881-1917*

As a true peasant who knows the liquor business first-hand, since that is my current line of work, I would like to speak frankly about the harm that this business has caused our villagers. The harm is great, and it weighs on us more heavily than crop failures or taxes. Our village, which has a thousand souls, pours nearly seven thousand rubles [a year] into its only tavern. . . . And compared with neighboring villages, ours is not considered one of the wildest when it comes to drinking. . . . In our village the tavern serves as the most convenient haunt for all of the good-for-nothings and libertines. . . . There they tell all kinds of stories, boast about their secret adventures, and use bawdy and foul language without end. It disgusts any honorable and God-fearing person. . . . Our teenage boys and girls have stopped doing round dances on holidays . . . [instead] they pool their resources in order to buy a *shtof* [1.3 quarts] and drink it in the backyard. Even little children nine years old swarm like locusts around the tavern and pretend to be intoxicated. In short, drunkenness has come to permeate our lives.¹

So wrote a tavern owner in *Sel'skii vestnik* (Village Herald). This newspaper had an abiding interest in rural alcoholism, for it counted among the "publications for the people" (*izdaniia dlia naroda*), the books and periodicals intended for peasant readers. Such literature began to appear in increasing volume after the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, most of it the work of private publishers. By 1881, the tsarist government, concerned about the spread of this material and also of revolutionary

1. *Sel'skii vestnik* (Village Herald) (St. Petersburg) (hereafter referred to as "SV"), 27 Oct. 1881, 73, letter no. 43.

propaganda—especially in the wake of Alexander II's assassination—decided to create its own newspaper for the *narod*. *Sel'skii vestnik* was the result. At first a weekly, it emphasized practical subjects such as agronomy and handicrafts. Gradually it expanded in size, content, and readership. By 1917, its last year of publication, *Sel'skii vestnik* had become a daily newspaper, featuring much of the topical and international news characteristic of big-city gazettes. It printed several supplements and operated its own press, book-publishing company, and book-distribution outlets all over Russia. Its circulation peaked in 1905 at about 130,000, which included a private subscribership of 115,000, hefty by Russian standards. The 1905 Revolution seriously diminished readership, but editorial reforms and the popular thirst for news of the Great War enabled the newspaper to regain a large audience by the time of the tsar's overthrow early in 1917. At best, *Sel'skii vestnik* enjoyed only limited success, hampered as it was by the government's suspicion of a mass press, even one operating under official auspices. Nevertheless, it represents tsarism's major attempt at courting public opinion via the printed word.²

While trying to keep the peasants loyal to altar and throne, *Sel'skii vestnik* urged them to forsake their bad habits. In the view of the newspaper, none was worse than alcoholism, long a plague on the Russian land. Accordingly, temperance became one of its recurring themes. In this respect (as in many others), *Sel'skii vestnik* took its cues from the earlier "publications for the people."³ However, whereas their warnings about strong drink had reflected their moralistic, semi-religious character, the anti-alcohol position of *Sel'skii vestnik* reflected above all state interests, which was true of everything in the newspaper. And here it found itself sitting on the horns of a dilemma because, in the case of peasant drinking, state interests were vested ones.

2. James H. Krukones, *To the People: The Russian Government and the Newspaper Sel'skii vestnik ("Village Herald"), 1881-1917* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987). Because of its identification with the late tsarist regime, *Sel'skii vestnik* did not fare well with Soviet historians of the prerevolutionary Russian press, who generally gave it short shrift. For example, an uninformative and partially inaccurate sketch of the newspaper appears in the reference work *Russkaia periodicheskaia pechat' (1702-1894)—Spravochnik*, edited by A. G. Dement'ev, A. V. Zapadov, and M. S. Cherepakhov (2 vols.; Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1957-59), 1:632-33.

3. See, e.g., the article by "Razin," "Kak byt' s dorogoi vodkoi," *Narodnoe chtenie*, no. 3 (1859), 70-78; also, the short story "P'ianstvo do dobra ne dovodit," *Mirskoi vestnik*, no. 2 (1880), 103-16.

Since 1863, the liquor business in Russia had been in the hands of private entrepreneurs from whom the government collected an excise tax.⁴ So, while excessive drinking threatened the physical and economic well-being of the peasantry, it also enriched the state. The more the *narod* drank, the more the state profited. This article examines the coverage of rural alcoholism in *Sel'skii vestnik*, as it tried to juggle the potentially conflicting demands of the state and its subjects.

* * *

During the thirty-six-year run of the newspaper, the issue of peasant drinking appeared in a variety of guises. Like all of *Sel'skii vestnik*'s contents, this material breaks down into two categories. One includes articles by the editors and other "authoritative" writers who set forth the official positions of the newspaper, which, by extension, were those of the government. The other category consists of stories about, and letters from, the designated audience of *Sel'skii vestnik*, that is, peasants. Though distinct, the two categories complement one another. The authoritative articles explain the lessons that peasant readers were supposed to apply to their own lives, whether in agronomy, hygiene, or handicrafts. The peasant material describes the benefits of heeding these lessons and the harmful consequences of ignoring them. If the authoritative material is equated with theory, the peasant material represents practice. Peasant stories and letters lent the official positions a human dimension, making them more real and convincing. In addition, these slices of rural life, especially the negative ones, kept reinforcing the idea that the peasants needed the firm and constant supervision of the government. Correspondents from the countryside became unwitting accomplices in foisting the newspaper's paternalistic message on the *narod*. Thus did an official "publication for the people" reflect state policy during the era of the "counter-reforms." The numerous links between the authoritative and the peasant articles in

4. Prior to 1863, the alcohol business was in the hands of liquor farms, but the increasing corruption of this arrangement—and consequent loss of revenue to the government—brought about the reform of 1863, which imposed a uniform excise on the distilling of liquor. A useful summary of the Russian liquor trade can be found in R. E. F. Smith and David Christian, *Bread and Salt: A Social and Economic History of Food and Drink in Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984), 288-326.

Sel'skii vestnik made it uniform, predictable, and at times even tedious, but that did not bother its editors. Iurii M. Bogushevich (1835-1901), a ministry bureaucrat-cum-journalist who ran the newspaper for its first seventeen years, once instructed a contributor that "It is never redundant to dot the *i*'s for [our] readers."⁵

The editors broached the subject of alcoholism for the first time in the third issue, which appeared in mid-September 1881. An authoritative article entitled "How Can We Reduce Alcoholism?" singled out drinking as a principal cause of peasant poverty; the average peasant, it reported, spent as much each year on liquor as he did on all of his taxes. The article also contained a message that the newspaper would never tire of repeating: just as the peasants had created their own problems, so too would they have to find the solutions. This absolved the government of responsibility; in fact, over the years *Sel'skii vestnik* would extol the autocracy for doing more than its share to alleviate peasant misery. An even more noteworthy feature of the article is its attitude toward liquor. Reflecting official policy, it carefully refrained from advocating total abstinence.

The use of liquor is not harmful; in modest amounts, it sometimes is even useful for the health of the working man. But too much liquor is harmful when it causes a person to lose his reason, stop working, pawn the basic necessities of life for drink; in short, surrender himself to drunkenness, even if only for a short time.⁶

For *Sel'skii vestnik*, as for the government that published it, the problem was not alcohol itself, but rather the immoderate consumption of it, the binge drinking, especially of vodka, that accompanied every event of major and minor significance in the Russian countryside.⁷

The authoritative articles in *Sel'skii vestnik* always appeared toward the front of the newspaper, making them analogous to the feature stories in a conventional big-city gazette. Rather

5. Letter, Iu. M. Bogushevich to S. S. Sharapov, 3 March 1896, Gos. publ. biblioteka im. M. E. Saltykova-Shchedrina, Rukopisnyi otdel, f. 129, op. 1, d. 480.

6. "Kak umenshit' p'ianstvo," SV, 15 Sept. 1881, 14.

7. Boris M. Segal, *Russian Drinking—Use and Abuse of Alcohol in Pre-Revolutionary Russia* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Center of Alcohol Studies, 1987), 138-42; Smith and Christian, *Bread and Salt*, 316-17.

than trumpet the day's breaking news, however, they emphasized themes and issues, in the tradition of Russian journalism. A topic such as alcoholism found a natural home among such material. Moreover, the treatment of the issue helped link it with the other subjects that surfaced in this part of the paper, such as religion, agronomy, health, and peasant self-government (or the lack of it). This, in turn, made clear that the government objected to alcoholism for a variety of reasons, including the loss of economic productivity, the disruption of social order, and the undermining of public morality. Consider, for instance, the articles that periodically attacked some of the most common instances of binge drinking. Their targets included religious holidays, about which there was "nothing Christian; rather, they are observed in a purely pagan manner, in that people surrender themselves to various vices."⁸

These holidays damaged the welfare of the *narod* because they ate up valuable working time; according to the newspaper, they accounted for some 125 to 150 days of the year in the southwest of Russia. Another example of excessive drinking was the traditional spree of the new recruit prior to leaving for the army. One writer wondered why the custom had persisted into the post-emancipation era, when terms of service were no longer twenty-five years but only three, and when a soldier could easily visit his family by using the railroad. Nevertheless, he insisted that friends and relatives could help the draftee celebrate without going overboard:

Make merry; it's not necessary to grieve. Rejoice in the fact that you are sending a young recruit into the ranks of the Russian army, that you are contributing a defender to the tsar and the Motherland.⁹

Equally scandalous was the consumption of liquor at village and township (*volost'*) assemblies, where peasants elected local officials or considered a merchant's bid for a tavern license — often while under the influence of alcohol provided free of charge by the candidates or the applicant.¹⁰

8. "O sel'skikh prazdnikakh," SV, 27 May 1890, 235-36.

9. M. Domanskii, "Novobrantsy i p'ianstvo," SV, 2 Nov. 1913, 3.

10. "Protiv vina v skhodakh," SV, 6 March 1888, 106.

Other authoritative articles on alcoholism dealt with laws and legal commentary, which constituted a regular feature in *Sel'skii vestnik*. The newspaper published all of the rules that governed the liquor business, sometimes taking up many pages of an issue. This information was of special interest to rural tavern owners, such as the one quoted at the beginning of this article. Many taverns lacked licenses altogether, and *Sel'skii vestnik* castigated these *shinki* for denying the government its necessary and rightful income. In case this patriotic bid failed to keep peasants away from illegal saloons, the newspaper also appealed to their self-interest by warning that the *shinki* often watered down their goods. Excessive drinking posed medical risks, too, as indicated by statistics about the higher mortality rates of tavern operators and habitués. Every year the newspaper also used data compiled by the Ministry of Finances to present a general picture of liquor consumption in Russia.¹¹ Finally, printed sermons hurled divine thunderbolts at strong drink. In 1885, for example, Father Peter Zatvornitskii, an Orthodox priest from Poltava Province, wrote an entire series of brief homilies, which appeared in three successive issues. They tried inspiring in alcohol abusers a sense of both shame and hope.

Christ the Savior fasted for forty days, maintaining silence and isolation, without any bread or water. But on their most holy days Christian people make noise, talk loudly, gossip, lose their temper, and at their communal assembly demand "Open a *shinok* [illegal tavern]! Take bribes from the *shinkari* [illegal tavern operators]! Let them sell vodka! We'll drink and profit from it!" . . .

. . . Lord, renew Thy strength and come to save us again from the impious infections of our intemperate life. Give us the strength and courage to bear your cross in spirit and truth; save us all from evil; bring peace to our

11. On laws, see, e.g., "O vzyiskaniakh za narushenie postanovlenii o piteinom sbore," SV, 21 Aug. 1883, 351-54; "Ob izmenenii deistvuiushchikh pravil o torgovle krepkimi napitkami," SV, 30 June 1885, 285-97; on illegal taverns (*shinki*), see "Pochemu shinki osobenno vrenye," SV, 18 Sept. 1883, 390-92; on the higher mortality rates of alcohol abusers, see "Smertnost' ot alkogol'nykh napitkakh," SV, 13 Nov. 1888, 512-14; on annual liquor consumption, see, e.g., "Potreblenie vina v Rossii v 1886 godu," SV, 6 Dec. 1887, 499-501; "Potreblenie vina v Rossii v 1889 godu," SV, 2 June 1891, 251-53.

lives; Lord, pray for us and save us from the temptation and ruin of alcoholism.¹²

As numerous as the exhortations of the editors and other authoritative writers were, material by or about peasants kept the issue of alcoholism on the pages of *Sel'skii vestnik* on a more frequent basis. This second category of material had its debut at the same time as the first. When the editors published the article "How Can We Reduce Alcoholism?," they asked readers to submit answers to that question and promised to publish "everything worthy of attention." Within one month 147 letters arrived at the offices of the newspaper (at that time it had a total circulation of about 15,000 copies, 14,000 of which were sent free of charge to the township offices). At this point the editors, already with a trace of weariness, requested that readers stop writing because they had begun to repeat the same suggestions.¹³ Too late! Three hundred more letters poured in. Between September and December of 1881 the editors published, in whole or in part, 84 letters, which they claimed to be the most representative. They also printed lengthy breakdowns of all 448 letters. One dealt with their place of origin, another with the social or occupational status of the writers, and a third and by far the most detailed with the content of the proposals.¹⁴

Readers' letters on alcoholism filled nearly 30 pages (out of a total of 198) in *Sel'skii vestnik* during the first four months of its run. Never again did the issue enjoy that kind of visibility over so extended a period of time. Moreover, this correspondence foreshadowed a regular letters column, which had its debut in the middle of 1882 and which continued to highlight the drinking problem. For these reasons, the original body of letters deserves extended examination.

About three-quarters of the contributors came from rural Russia; of them, approximately two-thirds are peasants

12. "Poucheniia o trezvosti," SV, 5 May 1885, 199; see also "Dukhovnyiia besedy i isucheniiia. O nekhristianskom prepovozhdenii mestnykh prazdnikov Sviashchennika Nikolaia Rumiantsova," SV, 15 Dec. 1881, 168-69.

13. SV, 20 Oct. 1881, 64.

14. SV, 22 Dec. 1881, 186-92. The eighty-four printed letters were numbered and parceled out among the following issues, all from 1881: letters 1-5, 29 Sept., 33-35; letters 6-19, 6 Oct., 41-44; letters 20-33, 13 Oct., 49-53; letters 34-42, 20 Oct., 64-66; letters 43-53, 27 Oct., 73-76; letters 54-59, 3 Nov., 87-89; letters 60-65, 10 Nov., 102-4; letters 66-71, 24 Nov., 132-33; letters 72-73, 1 Dec., 148; letters 74-80, 8 Dec., 160-63; letters 81-84, 15 Dec., 175-76. Subsequent references to these letters are by number.

(*krest'iane*), the remaining one-third consisting of township officials, that is, the elders (*starshiny*) and clerks (*pisari*), who themselves were of peasant origin. The classes and occupations making up the other quarter include *meshchane* (the urban lower middle class), teachers, priests, merchants, bureaucrats, police, soldiers, cossacks, and the one tavern owner quoted earlier. As for the geographical distribution of the letters, most came from the Great Russian-inhabited provinces of the empire. (This was true of the newspaper's readership and correspondence throughout its run, as it appeared only in the Russian language.)

All of the 1881 letters denounced strong drink, sometimes in Biblical terms. One peasant described liquor as the "blood of Satan"; according to a township elder, most *muzhiks* awaited the decline of alcoholism "like the Second Coming."¹⁵ Nevertheless, while 6 percent of all writers advocated strict temperance—one peasant proclaimed that "taverns must be destroyed for all time"—the vast majority espoused the government's position and put their faith in limited reform. Logically, they focused on the tavern (*kabak*), the mainstay of the liquor trade. A businessman had to seek the permission of the communal assembly in whatever village he wished to open a tavern. With assembly approval, he paid the cost of a license and set up shop. Starting with the question of tavern management, a few writers thought that each village assembly or *obshchestvo* should take the distillation and sale of liquor under its own control. Many more correspondents, however, believed that village assemblies should have nothing to do with the business and that even their current authority to grant licenses be taken away. These writers knew that village assemblies sometimes accepted and even solicited bribes in exchange for a license. The bribe helped to diminish the taxes of local residents, who thus acquired a vested interest in maintaining this source of revenue. Expecting the assemblies to reform the business, observed a peasant from Tver' province, was like expecting a sick person to cure himself. To stop this practice, writers proposed that licensing powers be vested in disinterested agencies, such as the *zemstvos*, the organs of local self-administration created by Alexander II. Some proposed that the government take charge of the trade. According to a peasant from Mogilev province, for instance, the government would limit the scale of operations so as to derive only needed profit from them.

15. SV, 1881, letters 42 and 77; letter 30.

As he trustingly said of the autocracy: "It knows that the wealth of the State Treasury is in the wealth of its subjects, and that the wealth of its subjects is in the wealth of the State Treasury."¹⁶

No matter who had the authority to open taverns, most writers urged reducing their number. This, in fact, was by far the most common proposal, appearing in nearly three-quarters of all letters submitted. The idea was to cut back on drinking by making it difficult, if not impossible, to procure liquor close at hand. Many proposed a minimum distance between taverns, usually in the range of seven to ten miles. Others thought that the size of a community should be the determining factor; only settlements meeting a minimum population requirement could have a tavern. The location of drinking establishments was another important consideration. A township clerk from Tver' Province suggested banning them from areas of retail trade, so as to prevent shoppers from bartering away their purchases for a bottle. Others insisted on a reverential distance from churches. Most, however, demanded the exclusion of taverns from villages with a township seat or administrative office. This, it was hoped, would reduce the instances in which a peasant went to the village on business, only to end up spending hours in besotted revelry with local officials. This also promised an end to the rip-roaring drunkfests that customarily followed meetings of the township assembly.¹⁷

Conditions inside the tavern elicited concern, too. Tavern owners, some correspondents stipulated, must be good, thrifty householders who were known to the community. A resident of Novgorod Province stressed that an individual be allowed to own only one shop and warned against those who tried to circumvent this restriction by using front men. A couple of writers complained that taverners watered down their goods, which led to increased drinking by their customers. Several contributors proposed limiting the size of the tavern to a single room so as to discourage unsavory activities in the back, such as drunken brawls, the stashing of bartered or stolen goods, and the hiding of wanted criminals. A peasant from Khar'kov Province suggested that sales transactions be removed from within the tavern and conducted through a special opening, like that of a bank teller's cage.

16. SV, 1881, letters 6 and 62; letters 28 and 29; letter 64; letters 6, 10, 32, and 76; letter 72.

17. SV, 1881, letters 1, 2, 5, 6, 10, 31, 54, 58, 61, 70, 74, 78, and 81; letters 7, 15, 18, 20, 26, 29, 34, 38, 48, 49, 56, 68, 71, 73, 75, and 79; letter 12; letter 82; letters 24, 48, 70, 71, and 82.

One of the most common proposals with regard to tavern policy was the shortening of operating hours, for example, by opening no earlier than 8 A.M. and closing no later than 10 P.M. In winter an earlier closing time would enable a workingman to reach his home safely. Most letters proposed the closing of taverns on holidays and Sundays, at least until after Church services. One township elder thought it simpler to abolish some of the Church holidays, and thus the carousing that accompanied them. Similarly, a few people urged a Sunday ban on village fairs, with their heavily patronized vodka booths. About 20 percent of all respondents thought that liquor sales should be by ticket or stamp, that is, some form of authorization issued by local officials or the police. This would be especially important in cases of large purchases, as for a wedding or baptism. It also would prevent sales to young people and known alcoholics.¹⁸

Nearly one-half of the contributors to the 1881 campaign suggested raising the cost of liquor by means of a hike in the price, the excise tax, or the license fee. The size of the proposed increases varied, but they all sought to make liquor so expensive that a *muzhik* would have to sacrifice several days' wages for a binge. These ideas, like others, had their critics, who maintained that cost would not hinder the determined drinker. Others feared that raising the license fee might turn the liquor trade into the preserve of the rich, who would be able to fix prices and run things as they pleased.¹⁹

A large number of correspondents wanted to prohibit the consumption of liquor on tavern premises. Indeed, after the proposal to reduce the number of taverns, this suggestion appeared most often, in 40 percent of all letters. Whereas a man enjoyed drinking and socializing in a tavern, the reasoning went, he was either too embarrassed or uninterested to imbibe in front of his wife and children at home. Thus, prohibiting the consumption of alcohol in a tavern would reduce overall intake. Some hedged on the scope of this ban, calling for its enforcement only during Lent or only in villages with a church or township office. Others took the proposal to its logical conclusion, demanding the replacement of taverns by liquor warehouses, which would sell alcohol in spe-

18. SV, 1881, letters 11, 64, 67, and 69; letter 6; letters 32 and 48; letters 29, 31, 68, and 81; letter 44; letters 5, 11, 53, 55, and 62; letter 63; letters 29, 58, 59, 60, and 68; letter 20; letters 52 and 60; letters 9, 15, 23, 34, 35, 36, 38, 66, 75, 77, and 80; letters 27 and 41; letters 5, 8, and 26.

19. SV, 1881, letters 3, 16, 24, 29, 56, and 76; letters 35 and 60; letters 19 and 20.

cially stamped and sealed bottles of modest size. All of these suggestions prompted one *muzhik* to point out that peasants forbidden from drinking in or near a tavern simply would take their liquor elsewhere, as they now did anyway.²⁰

As enforcers of these new laws some writers suggested the local police. Others thought special officials necessary. A township clerk from Novgorod Province proposed that tavern spotters prevent weak-willed customers from drinking themselves into oblivion. A peasant entrusted the job to government excise agents, whose carefully rehearsed folksiness would enable them to remain inconspicuous while carrying out their undercover mission. More popular was the idea that local officials keep things legal. Respondents themselves, however, acknowledged an implicit risk, as officials on the village and township levels had acquired a reputation for dishonesty. Some had pocketed bribes from license seekers and given them approval to open a tavern, even after the local assembly had voted down their request. Other officials had gone into the tavern business for themselves, again either in violation of the community's decision or without a license.²¹

Indeed the illegal trade was the *bete noire* of most writers. Do everything possible to keep the liquor business on the up and up, they lamented, but unlicensed operations would continue to flourish in private homes. Moreover, most correspondents blamed the illegal trade on the Jews. Several letters contained virtually the same line about the poor ragged Jew who settled in a community, only to amass a quick fortune through his unlicensed gin-shop. Worse still, Jews allegedly exploited the drinking habits of Russian customers, with absolutely no regard for their physical or financial well-being. Ten percent of all missives demanded

20. SV, 1881, letters 4, 5, 15, 16, 20, 28, 35, 37, 44, 54, 55, 62, 64, 65, 80, and 84; letter 56; letters 6, 10, and 29; letters 14, 16, 22, 29, 30, 33, 38, 40, 41, 51, 69, 75, 78, and 79; letter 46.

21. SV, 1881, letters 8, 19, 32, 63, and 65; letter 61; letter 64; letters 5, 9, 43, 52, 57, 64, 70, 73, and 79; letter 51; letter 44. Criticism of peasant officials, both in the original letters on alcoholism and in the subsequent "letters to the editor" column, was so common that they came to regard the newspaper as their enemy. As a result, they hindered its circulation and even withheld issues from paying subscribers. The editors reminded peasant officials of their obligation to disseminate the newspaper and instructed provincial governors to keep an eye on them, to no avail.

the exclusion of Jews from the liquor trade, a proposal that the government itself was considering at the same time.²²

Many writers suggested punishments for scofflaws, including fines, jail sentences, temporary exile, loss of license, and occasionally some combination of these. According to several contributors, punishments should fall not merely on the owners of unlicensed businesses but instead on the entire community, especially the local officials. Knowing that the seizure of an illegal operation meant a fine of several rubles apiece would keep peasants on the lookout for shady activity. Several correspondents even proposed a monetary reward for whistle-blowers. Apprehended drunks would be treated like guilty tavern owners, with fines for disorderly conduct and for swearing with "mother" expressions while under the influence. One peasant envisioned a special lock-up, fitted out with a grating, right in the township office. After drunks had to spend a night in this pokey, "you would not be able to drive them into a tavern with a stick." A stick, however, is precisely what 5 percent of all respondents opted for. They suggested that local authorities be empowered to birch drunks, without having to seek court permission. A more enlightened approach came from a lone peasant in Moscow province. Place the problem drinker under supervision, he suggested, so that he could not receive cash in hand, get a job, or sell any of his possessions without the permission of local authorities. A guardian, appointed from among his neighbors, would be responsible for handling his income and expenses. As a result, neither he nor his family ever would go hungry or otherwise be in need.²³

One-fourth of all writers cited alternatives to drinking. Books had their supporters, as did sermons, although the inevitable doubting Thomas questioned the efficacy of the latter. Others proposed temperance societies, agricultural clubs, singing groups, and public readings. But the most frequently cited substi-

22. SV, 1881, letters 10, 20, 56, and 84; letter 83; letters 21, 27, 34, 53, 55, 72, and 75. On anti-Semitic measures that the government discussed and enacted at this time, see Louis Greenberg, *The Jews in Russia—The Struggle for Emancipation* (two volumes in one), vol. 2, ed. by Mark Wischnitzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 26-30. Over the years *Sel'skii vestnik* parroted the official anti-Semitic line that became so prominent during the reigns of Alexander III (1881-94) and Nicholas II (1894-1917). Anti-Jewish remarks occasionally appeared in feature articles. More often, however, the editors allowed peasant correspondents to utter such sentiments, as in the 1881 letters on rural alcoholism.

23. SV, 1881, letters 1, 10, 16, 18, 20, 23, 29, 31, 32, 41, 44, 48, 57, 58, 67, 69, and 71; letters 6, 7, 22, 43, 53, 70, 78, 79, 80, and 81; letters 6, 20, 65, 67, and 70; letters 3, 17, 22, and 32; letter 26; letters 42 and 49; letter 74.

tute for the tavern was the tearoom. Writers suggested that it serve non-alcoholic beverages and snacks, allow smoking, and make available the "publications for the people." The tearoom, they hoped, would in time altogether replace the tavern as a new and far more edifying center of conviviality for rural Russia.²⁴

The 1881 letter-writing drive enabled *Sel'skii vestnik* to incorporate the *narod* into its temperance campaign from the outset. But it was only the opening volley. When a letters column became a regular feature of the newspaper in the middle of 1882, alcoholism retained its prominence. In fact, throughout the 1880s and into the following decade, correspondents raised that issue more often than any other. While no evidence suggests that the editors fabricated the missives, obviously they selected those that best served the themes and purposes of the newspaper. The letters lent themselves particularly well to this task; their authors often were peasants, they used a peasant idiom (something that the stuffy authoritative material sorely lacked), and they addressed their peasant audience directly, in the first person. "Perhaps many of our readers have not believed us," the editors said with reference to the letters, "but they will believe their fellow peasant."²⁵ Those who commented on the drinking issue over the years dwelt on the same phenomena as the writers of the 1881 proposals. Like the authoritative writers, they were quick to castigate the peasants' slavish devotion to the tavern for the pleasure and profit it brought, never mind the negative consequences. Correspondents also singled out the familiar types for special blame—the greedy liquor merchants who held entire villages in their thrall, the crafty Jews who sold vodka without a license, and the lazy peasant elders who resisted any attempts at reform. The letters contained good news, too—about individuals who had gone on the wagon (sometimes thanks to *Sel'skii vestnik*'s sermons), villages that had set up temperance societies, and peasant officials who had celebrated their election with a prayer service instead of a drinking party.²⁶ In sum, these letters conveyed the same general impressions about rural alcoholism as those of the 1881 campaign: peasants were concerned about the problem but more often confused and unable to deal with it in any effective or permanent

24. SV, 1881, letters 10, 18, 30, 47, 52, 57, 59, and 63; letters 52, 57, and 63; letters 1, 28, 31, 33, 43, 49, 51, 52, 61, 66, 67, 69, and 80.

25. SV, 28 Aug. 1883, 361.

26. SV, 5-12 May 1885, 216-17; 6 Oct. 1885, 441; 16 Sept. 1884, 409; 17 March 1885, 137; 21 Sept. 1886, 415; 4 Nov. 1884, 470; 17 Jan. 1888, 34; 17 Dec. 1889, 558-59.

way. They needed outside help and direction of the kind that only the state could provide.

Important as they were, the letters were not the only peasant material keeping readers aware of the drinking problem. In 1882 (at the same time that the letters column got under way), the newspaper introduced another feature called "Measures Against Alcoholism." It printed the resolutions (*prigovory*) of communal assemblies held at the village and township levels. Through these decisions peasants recorded their opposition to renewing the license of the local taverner and to granting anyone else such permission. Or they took a collective pledge, swearing off vodka and visits to the saloon. The editors hoped that these declarations would inspire inebriated communities to follow suit. Unfortunately, many of the *prigovory* appear to have existed only on paper. From time to time correspondents found gin mills thriving in allegedly dry villages. As one writer summed up the situation: "Promises are promises—and drunkenness is drunkenness."²⁷ "Measures Against Alcoholism" lasted only two years, perhaps because its orientation toward total abstinence did not accord with either the drinking habits of the *narod* or the alcohol policy of the government.

Another section, called "Various News" (*Raznye izvestiia*), played a larger part in the crusade against excessive drinking. This column was an informational potpourri that drew its brief, paragraph-long stories from all over Russia, sometimes via other newspapers. They may have lacked the immediacy and personal touch of the letters, but they helped reinforce the themes and lessons presented in other parts of *Sel'skii vestnik* by casting them in the form of stories, allegedly factual and often dramatic. Some items offered grotesque morality plays about the dangers of drinking. According to one, a man who had just consumed two bottles of vodka fell into a watermill located near the tavern and was crushed to death by the water wheel. In another case, a drunken laborer who wanted to sober up mistakenly poured kerosene over himself. When he lit a cigarette, his head went up "like a torch." Tavern owners read that the omnipresent vapors from vodka and wine could create an irreversible attachment to liquor in their children. Tables based on "the observations of ex-

27. Letter of a peasant from Saratov Province, SV, 13 Sept. 1892, 414.

perienced doctors" showed that tipplers were reducing their life expectancy by up to sixty years.²⁸

In addition to scaring readers with bad examples, "Various News" tried inspiring them with good ones. Two Tatars from Kazan' Province, it was reported, persuaded their *zemstvo* to ban the traditional month-long Islamic holiday because of its wastefulness. If readers failed to get the point, an editorial conclusion drove it home: "Orthodox Russian villagers ought to examine their own holidays, as they observe them no better than the Tatars and suffer just as many material and moral losses from them." A village official (*mirovoi posrednik*) in Kiev Province kept local army recruits sober on the Sabbath by requiring them to attend church services and then practice small arms drill. The Lithuanian diocesan office issued a decree forbidding priests to accept gifts of vodka. In Kiev Province again, a local landowner built a tearoom, whose beverages and live music made it popular with peasants. Those already in the grip of demon rum could check themselves into a colony for alcoholics in Novgorod Province. Or they could take turpentine, five drops before breakfast and five before dinner, adding a drop every day until they reached fifteen drops (in extreme cases, thirty). The newspaper assured readers that this cure "cannot cause any harm."²⁹

In the years after the debut of *Sel'skii vestnik*, the government reformed the liquor business in minor ways; in 1885, for example, it ordered taverns selling vodka for on-the-premises consumption to serve food with the alcohol. In 1894, however, a major turning point in Russia's drinking history occurred with the introduction of the state monopoly over the liquor trade. This change had its origins in Alexander III's desire to curb drinking. However, Finance Minister Sergei Witte (1849-1915)—who had been entrusted with instituting the reform—soon realized that the monopoly was considerably more profitable than the old system and was helping to bankroll his recently initiated industrialization program. In short, the state liquor monopoly mixed al-

28. "Smert' guliaki," SV, 27 June 1882, 270; [item from Tauride Province,] SV, 13 Jan. 1891, 27; "Roditeliam kabatchikam . . .," SV 23 May 1893, 233; "Veroiatnaia prodolzhitel'nost' zhizni p'ianits i trezvykh liudei," SV, 17 Febr. 1885, 84.

29. "Tatary podaiut khoroshii primer," SV, 7 Dec. 1886, 533; "Dlia otvlecheniia molodezhi ot kabaka," SV, 19 May 1891, 227-28; "Durnaia obychai i poleznaja mera protiv nego," SV, 13 Dec. 1887, 522-23; "Chainaia v sele," SV, 22 Oct. 1889, 471; "Koloniia dlia p'ianits," SV, 7 Dec. 1897, 616-17; "Sredstvo ot p'ianstva," SV, 3 July 1888, 313.

truism with greed.³⁰ As might have been expected, *Sel'skii vestnik* stressed the first of these motives and ignored the second.

This attempt is being undertaken to improve the *narod's* way of life, and especially to protect the morality and health of the *narod* from those corrupting influences of drinking establishments, which cause the *narod* incalculable material harm. . . . At the same time, it is necessary to inspire in the population the desire for sobriety and abstinence so that they can more easily resist the temptations held out by the tavern.³¹

The newspaper also assured its readers that the government did not fear the drop in income that would result from reduced consumption under the new arrangement.

If people consumed fewer strong drinks, their working capacity would increase, which would yield big profits and big savings, and these savings could be put toward other needs, toward other, more useful goals, and the population would be able to pay its taxes more promptly. Therefore, if liquor income went down as a result of a decline in liquor use, the state treasury would receive income in other forms.³²

Initially tested in four of the country's fifty provinces, the state monopoly was extended to all of European Russia by the early years of the twentieth century. Under the new system the government distilled vodka in its own factories, stored it in state warehouses, and sold it in state liquor stores. All privately owned liquor shops were closed down. Salespeople in the government stores received their salaries from the state treasury and thus had no incentive to encourage drinking. At the same time, the new outlets strictly observed regulations that parallel some of the suggestions made by contributors to the 1881 letter writing campaign. For instance, the stores sold liquor only for takeout and only in

30. Volodimir Pechenuk, "Temperance and revenue raising: the goals of the Russian state liquor monopoly, 1894-1914," *New Zealand Slavonic Journal*, no. 1 (1980), 35-48; Theodore H. Von Laue, *Sergei Witte and the Industrialization of Russia* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1963), 102-4.

31. "O kazennoi torgovlom vina," SV, 8 Jan. 1895, 10.

32. Ibid.

stamped and sealed glassware; salespeople accepted only cash for purchases, not credit or goods, and never from children or drunks; business was transacted only during advertised hours, and it ceased altogether while church or the village assembly was in session. In addition, the government severely punished law-breakers. *Sel'skii vestnik* explained all of these changes in great detail.³³

The newspaper also trumpeted another government reform that accompanied the introduction of the liquor monopoly: the creation of the "guardianships of popular sobriety" (*popechitel'stva narodnoi trezvosti*). These agencies, set up at every level of state administration, monitored compliance with the new liquor laws and reported any irregularities to the authorities. They performed temperance work among the population, too, by distributing readings and organizing discussions on the harmfulness of alcohol. Finally, they provided alternative forms of socializing and entertainment, such as tearooms, libraries, games, songfests, and plays. Any concerned and upstanding Russian subject could become a "guardian" and contribute to the cause in whatever way possible. The government allocated funds to committees that oversaw the work of the guardianships and distributed the money among them.³⁴ *Sel'skii vestnik* published progress reports on some of the more active guardianships, proudly citing statistics that attested to their growing activity.³⁵ It also noted that the success of the new organizations had distressed one group in particular: "The Jews, accustomed to living off the *narod*, were extremely upset by their withdrawal from the liquor business and regarded the activity of the guardianships with alarm."³⁶ The account went on to report that Jews who had been asked to rent their homes as meeting places for the guardianships either turned down the request or demanded an exorbitant fee.

The state liquor monopoly achieved at least one of the government's two goals. By 1914, receipts from it accounted for an unprecedented 28 percent of all state revenue. It was the largest

33. "Kazennaia prodazha pitei," SV, 26 April 1898, 204-07.

34. Ibid.

35. See, e.g., "Popechitel'stva o narodnoi trezvosti i ikh deiatel'nost' protiv p'ianstva," SV, 14 June 1898, 293-95; "Popechitel'stva o narodnoi trezvosti i ikh bor'ba protiv p'ianstva," SV, 4 Oct. 1898, 526-28; "Permskoe popechitel'stvo o narodnoi trezvosti," SV, No. 119 (1910), 4.

36. "Popechitel'stva narodnoi trezvosti," SV, 26 May 1902, 373.

single item of income.³⁷ When the new system was instituted, *Sel'skii vestnik* reacted in typical fashion, publishing letters from grateful peasants who sang its praises. Consider, for example, the observation of a resident of Perm' province in 1895: "Unlike before, drunkenness is not constant. This is due to the fact that sales are conducted by true and honest clerks."³⁸ The same writer also noted that the state brew was "more pleasant to drink, but still must be consumed moderately."

With regard to the other goal of the state liquor monopoly—the reduction of excessive drinking—the government had no apparent success. Letters to *Sel'skii vestnik* on the subject of alcoholism declined in number with the installment of the new order in the mid-1890s, that is, once correspondents had sufficiently thanked the government for the reform. Even this official "publication for the people," however, could not hide so serious a phenomenon as rural alcoholism. Nor could it pass up the opportunity to continue excoriating the peasants for their inability to take care of themselves. So, for more than the next two decades, drinking remained a common topic. In fact, as *Sel'skii vestnik* began to diversify its contents (especially after 1905), the editors explored new aspects of the problem. For example, a Viennese doctor explained the dangers of drinking by pregnant women. Another article urged that "women who hold their husbands and the happiness of their children dear to them must rise up, as one person, and declare war on 'alcohol'." They could join an international temperance society or simply maintain the happy home environment that would not drive their husbands to drink. The clergy could play a role, too, like the priest who persuaded his parishioners to refrain from drinking on public holidays. The newspaper shared the anti-alcoholic *bons mots* of "great thinkers, writers, statesmen, and doctors," a collection that managed to bring together Socrates, Tolstoi, and William Howard Taft. It also offered homegrown wisdom in the form of Russian peasant sayings critical of drinking, which the *narod* "apparently had forgotten."³⁹

37. Michael T. Florinsky, *Russia—A History and An Interpretation*, vol. 2 (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 1,210.

38. SV, 18 June 1895, 276.

39. "Detskoe p'ianstvo," SV, 29 June 1903, 472-73; "Zhenshchiny v bor'be protiv p'ianstva," SV, 24 Aug. 1903, 607-8; "Sviashchenniki v bor'be s p'ianstvom," SV, 5 Sept. 1904, 713; "Chto o p'ianstve govoriat velikie mysliteli, gosudarstvennye liudi i doktora," SV, 9 Nov. 1910, 1-2; "P'ianstvo v narodnykh poslovitsakh," SV, 13 Oct. 1902, 709-11.

After the government instituted the monopoly, however, most of the news about alcoholism was simply old vodka in new bottles. Boozy village holidays, new draftees on a binge, a medical warning, another cure—all of it was very familiar. Once again the editors held up the example of sober non-Russians—the Poles and Americans among them—as though to shame their readers into moderation.⁴⁰ Correspondents continued to sound off about potables, offering an entire array of reflections and remedies. In 1913 the newspaper's most frequent writer on drunkenness remarked: "The number of letters we receive from rural folk on the major question of alcoholism and on the struggle with this evil increases with every passing day." Later that year he noted that letters on the subject were pouring in by the hundreds and thousands.⁴¹

In advancing solutions to this chronic problem in the early twentieth century, the rural organ often sounded a favorite nineteenth-century theme: self-help.

This is the gist of the matter. We ourselves do not want to lift a finger to make our lives better. . . . We even refuse to help the authorities, our defenders. . . . We must get used to taking care of ourselves.⁴²

Sel'skii vestnik encouraged readers to inform the police about illegal liquor trading.⁴³ It also linked the alcohol issue with current state economic policy, urging peasants to embrace the post-1905 land reforms of Premier Peter Stolypin that sought to replace communes with individually owned farms.

The peasant farmsteads undoubtedly will become "sober settlements" because there will be no place in them for the pernicious influence of the drunken neighbor or of

40. "Sel'skie prazdniki," SV, 1 Nov. 1898, 586; M. Domanskii, "Novobrantsy i p'ianstvo," SV, 2 Nov. 1913, 3; "Kakoi vred prinosit zdorov'iu cheloveka vodka i drugie spirtnye napitki," SV, 20 Sept. 1898, 500-02; "Oдно iz sredstv protiv p'ianstva," SV, 29 Aug. 1904, 692; "Zheleznodorozhnaia trezvosť v Amerike," SV, 24 Nov. 1902, 827-28; A. Marchenko, "Trezvosť u poliakov," SV, 16 Jan. 1911 (Sunday supplement), 1-2.

41. N. Dmitriev, "P'ianstvo v derevne," SV, 10 Jan. 1913, 2; Dmitriev, "Krest'ianskie dumy i mneniia," SV, 25 July 1913, 2-3.

42. N. Dmitriev, "P'ianstvo v derevne," SV, 10 Jan. 1913, 2.

43. N. Dmitriev, "Krest'ianskoe ponimanie shin'karstva," SV, 10 May 1912, 2.

the drunken crowd on the person who does not want to drink. . . . It already is apparent from the brief history of the farmsteads that alcoholism among the farmstead people is markedly diminishing and that in this respect the farmstead economy will further not only the material improvement of the peasants but also their moral rebirth.⁴⁴

Sel'skii vestnik noted the involvement of new forces as well, although only up to a point. In December 1909 the All-Russian Congress on the Struggle Against Alcoholism held its first meeting in St. Petersburg. While according it a laudatory write-up, the newspaper made no mention of the scathing criticism hurled at the liquor monopoly, especially by workers' delegates. It also kept mum about the rumor that police stood ready to prevent the reading of scholarly papers about the monopoly. Yet these and other details unflattering to the government merited full coverage even in staunch journalistic defenders of the autocracy such as *Novoe vremia* and *Gazeta-kopeika*.⁴⁵ Clearly the government's newspaper wanted to emphasize that, if the liquor trade needed reform, the government itself would introduce it. This dictated the respectful coverage of official deliberations about new measures designed to curb drinking that took place in the months prior to the First World War. One story reported the strong opposition of the Ministry of Finances to any change that diminished the liquor monopoly; such a reform threatened only to reduce state income without discouraging alcohol use. Nevertheless, it seemed as though something more had to be done, for the situation was deteriorating. Toward the end of this period one editorialist lamented: "We Russians, who managed to save Europe from the vainglorious encroachments of the proud Napoleon, have still been unable to achieve victory over our true enemy—alcoholism."⁴⁶

When Russia entered the First World War in the summer of 1914, the government abolished its monopoly over the liquor business and initiated strict prohibition. The great national crusade

44. "Posel'ski trezvosti," SV, No. 100 (1912), 2.

45. "Pervyi s'ezd o bor'be protiv alkogol'izma," SV, 31 Dec. 1909, 1-2; "Pervyi s'ezd o bor'be protiv alkogol'izma," *Novoe vremia*, 31 Dec. 1909, 5-6; "Pervyi s'ezd o bor'be protiv alkogol'izma," *rom.*, 3 Jan. 1910, 4; "S'ezd po bor'be s p'ianstvom," *Gazeta-kopeika*, 31 Dec. 1909, 3-4.

46. N. Dmitriev, "Ministerstvo finansov o bor'be protiv alkogol'izma," SV, 14 Sept. 1913, 2; "O bor'be s p'ianstvom," SV, 21 April 1911, 2.

against the Kaiser required morally purer combatants. As the Ministry of Finances had predicted, however, the new policy incurred a huge financial loss. Nevertheless *Sel'skii vestnik* chose to emphasize its idealism. In an October 1914 article entitled "The Sober Countryside," the newspaper rejoiced that "The impossible has become possible!" Everywhere the new sobriety was evident—at rural weddings, on village holidays, and even among young people, who no longer "waste their time parading around town in their fancy clothes, making noise and causing trouble." Parents with single sons began trying to marry them off, if the newspaper is to be believed, not in an attempt to avoid military service but because the cost of weddings—now dry affairs—had plummeted.⁴⁷ Similar reports continued to appear during the following year. A correspondent from Iaroslavl' province, for instance, described the countryside as "unrecognizable."

Above all, the change is noticeable on the exterior: homes have been tidied up, clothing looks presentable, in place of vodka on the table peasants have white bread and rolls. . . . Instead of trips to the tavern for vodka and with vodka, people and their guests stay home, read newspapers, peacefully stay up until midnight, discussing military affairs. . . .⁴⁸

By the middle of 1916, however, these accounts no longer were so optimistic. In a piece called "The Voices of the Countryside," rural correspondents complained that some peasants had begun reverting to their bad habits, including the manufacture of moonshine from ingredients such as varnish, lacquer, wood alcohol, and vinegar. One peasant commented: "We boil honey with tobacco, and anybody in poor health dies from it." In another case, home-brewed beer caused the deaths of two men. On the basis of these observations, the author of the article concluded that "the drunken smoke still has not been put out. It still stirs and sticks to the most unstable part of the population."⁴⁹

47. [Sluchainyi], "Trezvaia derevnia," SV, 30 Oct. 1914, 3. When Nicholas II announced prohibition, the newspaper explained that the government would have to make up the lost revenue by means of other taxes. N. Dmitriev, "Voina, trezvost', i finansy," SV, 27 Aug. 1914, 3.

48. SV, 18 Febr. 1915, 4.

49. Nik. Berezhanskii, "Golosa derevni," SV, 28 June 1916, 3.

In short, drinking remained the scourge of rural Russia throughout these years. *Sel'skii vestnik* covered the topic in characteristically official fashion. Holding the peasants entirely responsible for their misery, the newspaper admonished them to overcome it on their own. The editors lauded the government's meager attempts to alleviate the problem and then exaggerated their beneficial results. As the failure of state policy became obvious, *Sel'skii vestnik* resumed its attack on the *narod* for their unwillingness to improve themselves. If the newspaper did not decisively or consistently help its peasant readers to break long-held drinking habits, that is only because the government did not do so, either. State liquor policy tried serving two masters, temperance and profit. A revenue-hungry government customarily gave the edge to profit, just as an official "publication for the people" tended to side with its publishers instead of its public. Perhaps the autocracy had forgotten that "the wealth of the State Treasury is in the wealth of its subjects."

John Carroll University